



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



PARACHUTE REGIMENTAL COMBAT TEAM

## MailCall No. 2153

April 7, 2013

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

Website

[www.517prct.org](http://www.517prct.org)

Send Mail Call news to

[MailCall@517prct.org](mailto:MailCall@517prct.org)

Mail Call Archives

[www.517prct.org/archives](http://www.517prct.org/archives)

2013 Roster (updated!)

[www.517prct.org/roster.pdf](http://www.517prct.org/roster.pdf)

Thunderbolt (Winter 2013)

[www.517prct.org/archives](http://www.517prct.org/archives)

## MailCall News

Please do not send me the quarterly Thunderbolt by regular mail. I have my own computer and I go to the "mail call" archives weekly to read the latest weekly mail calls. I'll be able to read the "Thunderbolt" on my Computer.

**Nolan L. Powell**

The top picture is **Nolan Powell** in **Roland Orengo's** Jeep, with **Roland and Patricia** in 2002. In Sospel, of course.



Another view of Sospel, from last week, from **Roland and Patricia Orengo**. Looks like the snow has finally melted.





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From: Ellenberg, Lisa  
Sent: Tuesday, April 02, 2013 12:58 PM  
To: MailCall@517prct.org  
Subject: **Gene Brissey**



Hello,

I am Gene Brissey's middle daughter. He served in WWII in the European theater of operations with the 517th. I know how much Mail Call meant to him when he could be involved with it. Perhaps someone reading this remembers something about my father. John Krumm still sends newsletters to him, but it is difficult to tell how much he can understand what it is. Last year I read one of the stories to him and it seemed to resonate on a deep level.

He is now under Hospice care at home and has lost all of his daily functions due to PSP (progressive supranuclear palsy), an uncommon condition which is under the Parkinson's umbrella but has no treatment. It is very rough on all of us, especially my mom, who remains his primary caregiver. I have just returned from helping my mom and sisters as much as I can. Dad turned 88 on March 23 and we had a nice family dinner to celebrate him. I think he knew what was happening on some levels. We all really want to honor him the best way we can, now and when he passes.

I just wanted to reach out.

Sincerely,

**Lisa Brissey Ellenberg**

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Lisa,

I remember Gene well. I never met him in person, but my father, Ben Barrett, spent time with Gene at several reunions and communicated with him often. I helped Ben create the 517 website and start the MailCall newsletter back in 2000, and Gene was always sending us material and stories. You can find lots of those stories in our MailCall archives. One important and wonderful thing that he sent us was his wartime biography, which is on the website at: <http://www.517prct.org/bios.htm>

I know that Gene has been struggling for some time with his eyesight, and wasn't able to contact us much over the last few years. I can empathize with your caregiving to Gene. My father died of multiple causes in 2010, and my mother died in 2011 of Alzheimer's/dementia. It was especially difficult to watch her condition worsen over several years. But like you, we felt that she was aware and appreciative of her family's presence to the end.

With your permission, I'd like to include your letter in the next weekly MailCall, since Gene has lots of friends and admirers who would appreciate the information, and will be certain to say a few prayers for him.

God bless Gene.

Bob Barrett



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Lisa,

I knew it -- I did meet Gene once, back in 2003. I found this picture from the Oklahoma City reunion, which was the first reunion that I went to with my dad. I remember Gene looking very snappy in his uniform.

Bob B.

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Hi Bob,

Thank you very much for this photo. Yes, it was amazing that he could still wear that uniform so well in 2003, considering he was a skinny teenager when he served. I will keep you posted.

Sincerely,

Lisa Brissey Ellenberg



Gene Brissey at the  
Oklahoma City Reunion 2003

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Thank you for your prompt and thoughtful reply. It is wonderful to hear that you remember my father, his writing, and his activity on Mail Call.

My sisters and I each have an original copy of his story. I have spent some time looking at the archives and it is a very special collection of memories. Please do include my letter in the next Mail Call.

If anyone wants to send a note to my dad and mom (**Edie Brissey**), their address is  
7401 El Morro Rd NE  
Albuquerque, New Mexico 87109

We are grateful that dad does not seem to be suffering physical pain, but he often seems sad to be trapped in a body that does not work. His cognitive functions are also impaired and muscular rigidity does not allow him to move well or speak much. But knowing how much he cared about the 517th, he might understand that a note came from someone who remembered him, and certainly my mother will be cheered by any communication. I am so sorry about the loss of your father and mother, especially when imagining the tough circumstances you all endured in their final months.

Sincerely,

Lisa Brissey Ellenberg

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**The Thunderbolt is into the printer and should be sent out next week. – Lory Curtis**



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

Occasionally, I do a random search of the internet for new info about the 517<sup>th</sup>. Sometimes I find interesting stuff being sold on eBay. Other times I find articles about the 517<sup>th</sup> from people who ran into a trooper or heard about a reunion. Here's one I ran across on a personal blog. I'm still having trouble figuring out whose blog this is. It appears to be written by Becky from California, and her granddad was in the 517<sup>th</sup>. Last year she wrote this entry on her [blog](#). Anyone want to claim credit for this? -- BB

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**Monday, July 16, 2012**

### **The 517th Reunion**

(I got this email this morning from my Dad and I wanted to make sure I recorded his experience of this reunion he went to with my grandpa).

Dear Kids,

I wanted to share with you the experience of attending the 517th Airborne Regimental Reunion with my Dad in Kansas City while it is still fresh in my mind. It's been quite a remarkable few days. I have learned and observed a lot since arriving, discovering some things I didn't know about the 517th and deepening my appreciation of the sacrifice of these wonderful men.

We had 13 veterans that attended the reunion -- there are about 40 men from the 517th still alive, but only 13 were strong enough to travel here -- highlighting that fact, a 14th member died on the way to Kansas City. These men are between 88 and 94 years of age (interestingly, only 3 came with spouses -- the rest are widowers). It is pretty remarkable being in their company. Dick Seitz, the last surviving Battalion commander attended -- he is 95 years old. After serving as a Captain over the 3rd Battalion, he went on to become a Two-Star General in the army.

The first night of the reunion, I struck up a conversation with a tall, fit man in his early 20's who I assumed was a family member with one of the veterans. It turned out, he was an Army Ranger who was home on leave in Kansas City and had heard the 517th was having a reunion. I told him that it was nice of him to make the time to come to the reunion and that I was sure the veterans appreciated his willingness to be there. He responded, "No, you don't understand. Within the Army Special Services, the 517th is legendary -- it is the most decorated regiment in the Army -- we studied them at West Point. I couldn't pass up an opportunity to meet these men. They're heroes to me."

The first night, we watched a documentary on the 517th -- similar to the type of interviews that were done with the men of Company "B" after the Band of Brothers series. It was really moving.

A lot of us were excited to see the premier of the new Soldiers and Saints movie the following night, but for me, the highlight was this documentary -- I am bringing a copy of it home with me. The new Soldiers and Saints movie, by the way, was terrific -- much better than the first movie. It is about the 517th's jump into Southern France (Operation Dragoon). I can't wait for you to see it. It was not only about the paratroopers of the 517th, but actually about members of the First Battalion, which was my father's unit. It was very moving. But again, for me the documentary was the best. I was very moved when I saw the Soldiers and Saints movie, but wept when I saw the documentary. You'll understand when you see it.

#### Some observations --

I was touched by how deferential the other veterans were when they learned that Dad had been the Battalion Staff Sergeant for Captain ("Wild Bill") Boyle, who led the First Battalion (think Captain Winters in Band of Brothers). They were really close and Boyle was considered to be a legend in his own right (receiving the Distinguished Service Cross - the Army's second highest medal after the Battle of the Bulge). Boyle died 5 years ago, but his wife and five of his 10 kids were at the reunion. It was pretty



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emotional when Dad talked with Babbie Boyle and shared with her the admiration that he had for her husband and what they meant to each other. She responded that she had heard a great deal about Sergeant Kelley over the years, and how thrilled she was to meet the man who had saved her husband on more than one occasion.

The final night, our keynote speaker was the Lieutenant General of the Army over Special Services. I learned some things about the 517th that I hadn't known:

\* During operation Dragoon in Southern France, the 517th engaged in front-line combat for 93 consecutive days -- an Army record that to this day has never been broken.

\* The 517th had the highest "kill rate" among combat units.

\* The 517th's reputation was so lethal that the Germans simply referred to them as "Devils with Baggy Pants" or "Big Pocket Murderers" (referring to their jump suits and their practice of never taking prisoners -- Since the 517th always fought behind enemy lines -- they had no provision for taking prisoners. If you encountered paratroopers from the 517th, you were as good as dead). They were more feared by the Germans than any other Allied force.

\* The 517th was among the most highly decorated regiments in the history of the Army. Following the Battle of the Bulge, the entire regiment received a Presidential Commendation for bravery in the face of daunting risk (no, Dad never mentioned that to me).

\* The 517th suffered a casualty rate of 89.1% -- at the end of World War II, it was permanently retired (having literally run out of men) Despite that high casualty rate, eight of its members went on to become Army Generals (also a record).

The general told the story of the 517th's final battle in Belgium -- which was the battle in which both Dad and Captain Boyle were gravely wounded. In order to cut-off the retreat of the German Army, the 517th was ordered to seize and control a key position behind the enemy lines. Holding that position until the regular Army could relieve them. Despite being hopelessly outnumbered and outgunned, and squarely in the path of the retreating German Army, the 517th would not "quit" the field. In that last engagement with the Germans -- the 2nd Battalion was pinned down and nearly wiped out -- only saved when Wild Bill Boyle and the 1st Battalion's HQ Company (my Dad's company) flanked the enemy and drew their fire. At the end of that final day's engagement, over 500 men of the 517th were killed (about half the remaining regiment).

Unlike many veterans, Dad didn't stay in touch with many former comrades after the war. That had always puzzled me. I now appreciate the reason for that -- he lost most of his friends in the Bulge.

My Dad tells the story of how when the 517th returned home, Life Magazine flew the men back to Georgia where they had done their basic training and had them line up in the field where they had taken their original regimental photograph before shipping off to Europe -- with each man standing in the same spot as in the original regimental photo -- to demonstrate how many men the regiment had lost. Apparently, the resulting photo was so stark and bereft of men that the Army refused to let Life Magazine publish the photo -- it was just too painful to see it. I think I now better understand that decision.

This will likely be the last national reunion of the 517th Airborne -- the veterans are getting too old to make the trip. It was an honor being here. I fear that with the passing of this, the "Greatest Generation," we will not see their like again.

Love, Dad.

POSTED BY [BECKY, RYAN, OLIVER, AND AMELIE](#) AT [5:28 PM](#)



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From the Operation Dragoon Facebook page:

A video of 517<sup>th</sup> A Company on the plane during Operation Dragoon:

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?v=412404158856297>

See more photos and info at:

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Operation-Dragoon/117011588472008>



Dear Bob Barrett,

I have the pleasure to announce the first website dedicated to the paratroopers of the First Airborne Task Force in Southern France. This is my first try and it shall solely be published in French for the time being.

This site is intended to honor the men of the First Airborne Task Force who fought and liberated the south of France, the Var region, the Maritimes Alps, the French Riviera and the Hautes Alpes, often referred to as the "Forgotten Front".

Normandy was much publicized, and a lot of website exist about paratroopers in Normandy, but there's no website focusing only on Paratroopers in Southern France. Many people don't even know that paratroopers jumped in Southern France or know very little about it. They feel that the landings in Provence is less important compared to the Normandy landings, and that there was almost no fighting in Provence... This is totally wrong! They seem to ignore that in Southern France almost 10,000 American and British paratroopers jumped or landed by glider between 3 AM and 7 PM on August 15, 1944...

Some of these units are "unknown" such as the 602<sup>nd</sup> Field Artillery Battalion, or the 442<sup>nd</sup> Anti Tank Company or yet the 2<sup>nd</sup> Chemical Mortar Battalion...

There is almost no book about paratroopers in the south of France written in French language and this website is a way to go around this. Of course it is far from complete by now, but I won't publish everything at once. Over time, the "death link" will be blue, showing the updated site which will be shown in the 1st page "index".

Bob,

I search some contact with 517th Vet' Can you introduce me to some?

I'm a good friend of Michael Soldi and Eric Renoux of southern France.

I search too the listing of the 517th Pathfinder.

Kind regards,

Loïc.

**Visit: <http://1stabtf.com>**



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My computer has been on the fritz and finally got to read the last three Mail Calls. Was especially interested in #2150 and the article on **Joe David Brown**. I was born just 60 miles south of Birmingham, and Joe David, **Herb Jeff** and I all had a lot in common. On a 3-day pass from Camp Mackall to Southern Illinois to see my brother who was on leave (he was one of the first to be drafted), found out the train I was planning on using for the return trip only ran on every other day, so I had a total of 4 hours to visit with my brother. On the way back to Mackall, I had an overnight in B'ham where I stayed at the USO. There I met a lovely young lady, who just happened to live across the street from Herb!! I knew that Joe David....a southern boy always had two names and used both of them!!!....was a little older than most of us, but was not aware that he had been in the Air Corp...not sure that he did. Joe David had been working in the publishing business in New York prior to induction. He had family connections in the New York Times.

[In 1957-1958] I was Personnel Officer of the 501st Parachute Infantry, a part of the 101st Airborne in Ft Campbell when a bug push was made to make our troops ready to go anywhere, any time. With the blessing of my regimental commander, Colonel Harry W O Kinnard, I devised a regular assembly line to get our troops ready. We had the S-2 checking out our famed "loyalty statements", S-3 checking out all required training qualifications, (the S-4 conducted clothing and equipment requirements before the soldier entered the assembly line), the medics were there to check physical qualifications and give required shots, the dental clinic brought in a dental chair, and everyone was checked out and appointments made if necessary, a dog tag machine was in place to make dog tags if required, and we had an addressograph machine to make a manifest plate to be placed in his first aid pouch. The S-3 was also there and each driver of a vehicle that could be loaded on the aircraft was given a plate listing the vehicle, weight, etc. An observer from the Adjutant General's office was there, who liked the project, took it to General Westmorland and had the whole Division done the same way. (Incidentally, he got the Legion of Merit for my idea!!)

Back to my story...I was the last in line to check over everything, and a tall, lanky red-headed lad stopped in front of me with his records....**Joe D Brown!!** I asked if his dad was a big red headed guy from Birmingham who had lost his hand in WWII. He replied, yeah, that's my dad, but he didn't lose his hand....it was injured, wore a brace for a while but is okay!! It turned out Joe David had married his nurse in England, and this was their son! Although I didn't make contact with Joe David, and only made contact with **Herb Jeff** shortly before his death, it did bring back lots of memories.

I did become engaged to that lovely young lass from B'ham, but after the war, with nothing to look forward to except the 52-20 club, we parted our ways, but she was never forgotten.

### **Phil McSpadden**

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In the last MailCall, **Dorinda Whitley** was looking for info about a large chateau in France that the 460<sup>th</sup> used. Her cousin, **Tom Buffington**, remembers seeing an oval portrait on the wall that looked amazingly like a member of his family.

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Bob,  
Could you forward Dorinda's email (or mine to her) as my dad was in B Battery as well. There are some photos on the website from **SGT Jack Harte** of King Leopolds' summer palace where they stayed.  
Many thanks!  
**Steve Gomez**



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Dori, Steve might have a clue for you here. It's still a long-shot, but one nice chateau that did house the 460<sup>th</sup> for a while was a very large villa in Nice during the "Champagne Campaign" in the fall of 1944. It was the summer home of King Leopold of Belgium. (In 2008, there were reports of this being the most expensive home in the world. See: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Villa\\_Leopolda](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Villa_Leopolda) . So good luck trying to get into that house to poke around.)



There are a number of photos of this place on the website. Here are a couple.

Bob Barrett

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Oh, and here's another interesting fact I found from that Wikipedia article about the Leopold villa. Boston-based architect Ogden Codman purchased the Leopold estate and owned it from 1929 to 1951. There are lots of photos of the mansion in the archives collections of the [Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities](http://www.historicnewengland.org/search-results/search?SearchableText=leopold&hnesl=1&includecap=on). You can find the pictures at: <http://www.historicnewengland.org/search-results/search?SearchableText=leopold&hnesl=1&includecap=on>

Lots of oval portraits in there. Here are a couple of examples:



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Here is one more story about the Leopold estate from **Merle McMorrow's** bio:

"We were given three-day passes frequently to spend time in Nice. The Army had obtained the winter home of King Leopold of Belgium for our battalion's use when on leave. A dance had been arranged and local girls were invited. The mothers came with their girls and sat around the circumference of the large marble dance floor with a watchful eye glued on their daughters. Around 11 o'clock a lone German plane came over the city and all lights went out. When they came on 20 minutes later the mothers were still sitting there but most of the girls and their partners were gone. That was the last dance we were able to arrange."





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**Dorinda Whitley** had a question as to the location of Btry B-460th FA during the period of April-August 1945. I will precede my comments with some background information that will convey the uncertainty of events happening during that period of time.

At the conclusion of the war in Europe (known as VE-Day) it was a happy time; it was a sad time. May 7, 1945 was a time we had all looked forward to and had hoped we would be survivors. Our enlistment period was for the "duration plus 6 months". The excitement could only be described as unbelievable. However, we also realize it would mean we would no longer be a Band of Brothers.

The men in Europe then had some decisions to make. If one had enough points based on months of service, decorations, marital status, and number of children he would be eligible to return home for discharge.

If one selected the option to fight in the Pacific he could return home, enjoy a 30 day furlough and then be shipped to the Pacific Theater of Operations. Those selecting this Option got halfway across the Atlantic when the atomic bombs were dropped and the war ended.

The third option was to remain in Europe on Occupation Duty.

These three options totally destroyed the makeup of many units. The 82nd Airborne Division was selected to occupy Berlin. To fill the vacancies resulting in the 376 Field Artillery Battalion of the 82nd Division men were transferred in from other units. I was in the 463rd FA of the 101st Airborne Division in Bavaria. The men of the 463rd electing to stay on occupation duty were shipped to the 376th. Men from the 460th who were to remain on occupation duty also were shipped to the 376th. I met many of my buddies for the first time since being transferred out of the 460th 7 months earlier. The various units of the 82nd were billeted in various locations around Epinal prior to moving to Berlin. Many of the 376th were stationed in the area around Epinal and a certain number (myself included) were put up in a **large 4 story chateau near the Moselle River**. We remained there all through June 1945 and in early July we begin to move into Berlin. I would assume the members of Btry B-460th were in Epinal during June.

I, along with 698 other 376th members, was shipped to Camp Lucky Strike near Le Havre, France. We boarded the SS Walter Forward on December 3, 1945 and headed out into the Atlantic. After passing through a 3 day storm we ended up in New York on December 16th. It was one year to the day after the Battle of the Bulge had started.

Hope this clears up some of the uncertainty about B Battery's location at the conclusion of hostilities in Europe.

**Merle W. Mc Morrow**

Good Day,

My grandfather's name was **Bluford Leon Upton**, Company H, 517 PRCT. He is located 2nd from the right, back row in the photo of the Company H on the website. I'll try, at some point, to get you more info. I appreciate the site and the memory...and the ability to know more of him, my family is proud.

Chad Upton  
Assistant Principal  
C.A. Erwin High School





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### *POW/MIA Table Ceremony*



The Missing Man Table is a semi-official place of honor in some dining facilities of the U.S. armed forces in memory of fallen, missing, or imprisoned military service-members. The table serves as the focal point of ceremonial remembrance, originally growing out of US concern of the Vietnam War POW/MIA issue.

This ceremony is done during formal events and ceremonies. There are several different variations to the ceremony. The table should be placed somewhere alone, away from other tables. The ceremony is narrated.

Moderator:

Those who have served and those currently serving the uniformed services of the United States are ever mindful that the sweetness of enduring peace has always been tainted by the bitterness of personal sacrifice. We are compelled to never forget that while we enjoy our daily pleasures, there are others who have endured and may still be enduring the agonies of pain, deprivation and internment.

Before we begin our activities this evening, we will pause to recognize our POW's and MIA's.

We call your attention to this small table, which occupies a place of dignity and honor near the head table. It is set for one, symbolizing the fact that members of our armed forces are missing from our ranks.

They are referred to as POW's and MIA's.

We call them comrades.

They are unable to be with their loved ones and families tonight, so we join together to pay our humble tribute to them, and bear witness to their continued absence.

This table, set for one, is small, symbolizing the frailty of one prisoner, alone against his or her suppressors.

The tablecloth is white, symbolic of the purity of their intentions to respond to their country's call to arms.

The single red rose in the vase, signifies the blood they many have shed in sacrifice to ensure the freedom of our beloved United States of America. This rose also reminds us of the family and friends of our missing comrades who keep the faith, while awaiting their return.



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The vase is tied with a red ribbon, symbol of our continued determination to account for our missing.

A slice of lemon on the bread plate is to remind us of the bitter fate of those captured and missing in a foreign land.

A pinch of salt on the plate symbolizes the countless fallen tears of families as they wait.

The Bible represents the strength gained through faith to sustain those lost from our country, founded as one nation under God.

The candle is reminiscent of the light of hope, which lives in our hearts to illuminate their way home, away from their captors, to the open arms of a grateful nation.

The glass is inverted - they cannot toast with us this night.

The chair is empty - they are not here.

Let us pray to our Heavenly Father that all of our comrades will soon be back within our ranks.

Let us remember and never forget their sacrifices.

May God forever watch over them and protect them and their families.

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[The note below] was written by my Uncle Mike!

### **Rick Sweet**

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Date: Sun, 31 Mar 2013 20:06:21 -0700

Subject: Fw: Removal of Bible from POW/MIA Table

I would like to express my deep concern about the removal of the Bible from the POW/MIA Memorial Table at the Dining hall at Patrick AFB Florida. As far as I can remember the table has always had a Bible on it, until about three or four weeks ago. It has always been a tradition that the bible be on the table. I have ask about why the Bible was removed and was told that one person had said that the Bible offended him. So the Bible was removed. Well I would like to say that removing the Bible has offended more people than not. The Bible represents the strength gained through faith in our country, founded as one nation under God, to sustain those lost from our midst. Our money says in God we trust and even our President places his hand on the Bible when being sworn into office. So if we are not one nation under God just what are we?

Our Brothers and Sisters that are missing cannot be here to speak for themselves, so it is our responsibility to speak for them. We pray that all of them be returned to our great nation and their families. We ask that you return the Bible to the Memorial Table and put this matter to rest.

Thank You  
Michael D. Tarter  
USAF Retired  
VFW Post 3954 Life Member  
Vietnam Veterans of America Post 649 Life Member  
Vietnam and All Veterans of Brevard Life Member



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Good news! The bible has been returned to the table. It was an atheist CO who removed it in the first place but it has been returned. My Uncle Mike said to thank everyone who was concerned. For now the battle is won!

**Rick Sweet**



### *The Story of Corporal Sean Stokes, USMC*

From **Frank Ramos**:

I am forwarding this interesting story because of **Patrick O'Donnell**, a friend, military author and historian. He has written a number of books from WWII II, Korea, Viet Nam and the Iraq war where he was imbedded with the First Marine Division. I met Patrick at my brothers 517th Parachute Combat Regiment Team Association dinner where I arranged to have the Vice President Cheney salute their WW II accomplishments as the Keynote Speaker in Washington, D.C.

Later, Patrick calls me to tell me that the Marine Corps are a screwing over a Marine Private of his Bronze Star after he was killed in Iraq during his third deployment. Sean Stokes, from Auburn, CA, was demoted from Sgt. To a Private when he went AWOL to remove his is mother from an abusive domestic situation. He never said why during his demotion hearing. He was killed in Fallujah dying in commanding officers arms saving his squad in a IED trap.

Patrick contacted me to see if I could help. Long story short, I contacted my colleague Barney Barnim, Asst. Secretary in the Office of the SEC of the Navy. Barney is a Marine *Medal of Honor Recipient*. He contacted Marine General Matthis in Iraq and was told he would look into it. Patrick excitingly called me to tell me the Marines are not only is to receive the Bronze Star but was to be posthumously awarded a Silver Star to his mother in a ceremony at Camp Pendleton. He is the first Marine Private to receive the Silver Star since Viet Nam!

Patrick attended the ceremony and met the mother who told Patrick that she had regretted having Sean when he was born. She now realized what an exceptional son she had and how much he meant to his fellow Marines as they told her how special he was to them as a person and a Marine. The CA Governor ordered the lowering the Flags at Half Staff for Sean's funeral.



Patrick O'Donnell

Patrick told me when I met him that he believes in *Serendipity*. He, in this story, is asked again to help another military hero. And he did. Serendipity?

In the email Patrick alludes to our Sean Stokes venture.

Frank

You can Google Patrick O'Donnell to see his books and the *Sean Stokes USMC* story.



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Excerpt from *We Were One*, by Patrick O'Donnell:

### CORPORAL SEAN STOKES

While eating dinner on a cold February night this year, I received an impassioned phone call.

“Pat, this is Stokes. You know my dream has always been to be a Marine. I need your help on something. I found out this week The Corps doesn't want to extend my enlistment -- they are going to kick me out. Can you write letter of recommendation for my career placement officer? He said it might help, but I'm still probably going to get kicked out.”



Dumbfounded, I said, “This is crazy. You were one of the bravest Marines in 1st Platoon. Sean, of course I will write something for you. I'll put a few calls in and see if there's something that can be done.”

When I hung up the phone I was furious. This Marine risked life and limb countless times, deployed to Iraq twice, single-handedly killed nine insurgents, was twice combat wounded (and those are just the ones documented in his record). Sean Stokes was one of the finest Marines I'd ever known, I personally witnessed his heroism. Now he had to beg and use every contact he had to just to stay in the Marine Corps? My anger drove my calls.

That night I called all the officers who I met as an embedded combat historian during the epic Battle of Fallujah in November 2004. A few days later, I was informed by one of the officers who was with me in the Third Battalion, First Marine Regiment (3/1), “The Thundering Third,” that Stokes could stay on for another ten months. He would have to deploy with the Thundering Third, which was sure to go to Iraq, but once the deployment was over so was his career. So for at least ten more months Stokes would remain a Marine.

I met Sean in combat over two years ago while interviewing the men in his platoon for my book, “We Were One.” Standing about six feet tall, blue eyed and resembling Luke Skywalker from the movie Star Wars, the young Marine had great personal presence and above all, courage. His peers confirmed my initial impression and what I saw first-hand on the battlefield, that Stokes was a natural leader and fearless. Oddly he was a private, the lowest ranking member of 1 st Platoon. I wondered why.

Other men in the platoon explained that prior to 3/1's second deployment to Iraq in the summer of 2004, then-Lance Corporal Stokes was court-martialed for leaving Camp Pendleton without permission. Stokes's motivation for going AWOL was pure: he was trying to help a family member escape domestic violence.

Caught between a rock and a hard place, Stokes put at risk his dream and career, to be a Marine, in order to protect his loved one. After moving her to a new residence, he returned to Pendleton and asked for a second chance. He was demoted to Private, the lowest rank in the Marine Corps, and he was allowed to stay in the Corps on the condition that he join Lima Company, 3/1, and deploy to Iraq.

Before going to Iraq in 2004, Marines knew from Corps scuttlebutt and the headlines in the news that a major battle was looming. Word was, “this is going to be a tough one, you might not come home.” Stokes understood the risks of heading to Iraq, but rather than dread the deployment, Stokes embraced it. “3/1 gave me another shot.”

The Marine Corps he loved so much gave him a second chance, and Stokes responded by becoming a model Marine during the following three years. The story should have ended here, but Stokes's AWOL would continue to haunt him.



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On November 8, 2004, the Thundering Third assaulted the main defenses of Fallujah. Throughout the battle the 1,000-plus battalion was outnumbered at least two or three to one. Stokes's 1 st Platoon was often pitted against multiple platoons of Al Qaeda fighters in deadly urban combat. The Marines had to clear a seemingly endless string of houses; Marines kicked in doors, room by room, hoping they wouldn't find a machine gun pointed at their faces. "At each house I said a prayer," said Stokes. "Please God get me out of this one.' When I come out of the house, I thank Him, light up a cigarette and move on to the next one." The fighting was room to room, often hand to hand, against enemies who were hoping to be killed and only wanted to take an American with them. Stokes's 1 st Platoon dropped from 46 Marines to 14 in less than two weeks.

On the second day of the battle, grenade fragments ripped into Stokes's arms and legs, but he was still able to function and he wanted to remain with his buddies, so Stokes hid his wounds to avoid mandatory evacuation. Over the next nine days he led the fight through the endless rows of houses and bunkers.

"Stokes was always the first into the house for my team. I cannot say for sure the number of enemy combatants Stokes eliminated but there were many," recalled Lance Corporal Heath Kramer, Stokes's fire team leader.

On November 17 th Stokes, along with most of 1 st Platoon, was lured into a sophisticated ambush in a couple of adjacent houses. One member of the platoon was killed, Lance Corporal Mike Hanks. Inside one of the houses, Stokes was thrown back six feet by an enemy fragmentation that detonated next to his body. He was trapped alone in the ambush house with the jihadists. "As I got up, rounds started impacting near me down the hall. They fighters kept coming closer, closer...I was firing at the Chechens who were getting closer (foreign fighters in Fallujah hailed from at least 18 different countries; the Chechens were the best trained, most deadly Islamist fighters in the city) ...then my magazine went dry! Everything I did was by instinct, so I pulled out a grenade to frag the Chechens. I thought I was going to die; I was out of mags and they were just about to peek around the corner."

Before the insurgents could kill Stokes, Lance Corporal Kramer bull-rushed a padlocked steel door and burst into the house, guns blazing. Kramer grabbed Stokes and carried him to safety. The Marines destroyed the house with explosives and tank fire, killing the Chechens. Suffering from a concussion, yet lucid, Stokes refused to leave his fellow Marines:

Kramer said "He begged me not to let him be taken out of combat. This is the kind of Marine I wanted beside me during a time like this. In my four years I served, Stokes was the best Marine I served with. Through all of the hard training we had, sleep deprivation, and having to serve under me as his fire team leader, (I was very tough on my fire team) he never complained and only wanted to learn more and make himself a better Marine."

Stokes snuck out of the field hospital so he could rejoin his buddies as quickly as possible. A week later, Stokes found himself in hand-to-hand combat with an insurgent, whom he dispatched with a trench knife.

In January 2005, 3/1 returned home. The war took a heavy toll on Sean. I remember how he told me all he wanted to do was work out and kick box. "I need to keep busy." To take his mind off the war, I recommended he read Meditations by Marcus Aurelius and get some counseling. Many members of 3/1 suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. To survive on his paltry 13K annual salary, he took a job at a local cellular phone store. He was determined to stay in the Corps.

A year after Fallujah, Stokes returned to Iraq with 3/1 for his second tour. He volunteered to be a scout and lead Lima Company into battle again. As usual, Stokes was out front.

After returning from Iraq from his second tour, Stokes spent the next few months at Pendleton preparing for his next deployment. Since fighting in Fallujah, he had been promoted to Lance Corporal, and again to the rank of Corporal, with Sergeant right around the corner. He was devastated when he was informed that his enlistment



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would not be extended. While he debated leaving the Marine Corps and taking a real-estate job, he called me and told me his heart was in the Marine Corps.

I was told flatly by several officers that Stokes's chances of staying in the Corps after the temporary ten month deployment to Iraq were practically nil. The Commandant of the Marine Corps would have to approve it, and Marines with similar incidents to Stokes's AWOL were being let go.

One officer stated bluntly, "His only chance is if we get him the medal he deserves from Fallujah. With a combat decoration in his file, there's a tiny chance he might be able to stay in." In my 15 years of conducting interviews with more than 2,000 WWII and Iraq veterans, I've never seen a stronger case than Sean's for at least the Bronze Star. The combat version of the medal is awarded to servicemen who distinguish themselves by courage under fire. Stokes clearly went beyond the call of duty and the requirements for the medal, so I wrote a four-page letter detailing Stoke's actions in Fallujah and why he merited the Bronze Star. It also included a reference for his second Purple Heart, which he should have received for the wounds he hid at the beginning of the battle.

Initially, I never told Sean about the medal recommendation. I did not want the members of the medal committee to think Stokes was in some way trying to influence his own award. As the *USS Bonhomme Richard* was pulling out of port with the Thundering Third on board, bound for the unit's fifth combat deployment to Iraq, Stokes called me on his cell phone. "Hey Pat, How are you? We are pulling out. Hope everything is going well with you. By the way, did you ever get a chance to send that letter to the career planner?" I said, "I've done something better, something you deserve." Cryptically, I left it at that. In a final act of selflessness, to spare them the anguish of deployment, he never told them he was heading to Iraq.

Weeks passed and nothing was happening on the medal. I found out that the "award authority" had expired, so the battalion was highly unlikely to approve it. Though the medal was going nowhere, one officer suggested I persevere, in order to create a paper trail. Sean emailed me to let me know he was moving from Kuwait to Iraq the next day, and asked whether I or any of the officers had written on his behalf to the Marine career planner. Out of frustration and because I did not want him to think I failed him, I emailed him Bronze Star recommendation letter I wrote. Stunned, he wrote back:

"Wow, i don't deserve that...i just got off a four day training op in Kuwait so sorry its taken so long to respond but here i am. i can't thank u enough for that but i don't deserve it. The guys who deserved medals got them and i got to live on...that's my medal."

While leading 3/1's personal security detachment on a combat operation outside Fallujah, an honor reserved for the most elite Marines, Corporal Sean Stokes died in his battalion commander's arms on July 30, 2007. He will be a Marine forever.

\* In the coming weeks, Corporal Sean Stokes will be awarded the Silver Star posthumously.



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## *An Invitation from Southern France*

**Looking for a volunteer.** We need a 517<sup>th</sup> trooper who is in good health, willing and able to travel to France for two weeks in August to participate in Operation Dragoon ceremonies, and to be treated as a returning hero. Preferably someone who has not be back to Southern France since 1944. All expenses paid! **Are you interested? Or can you suggest someone for us?**

### **MVCG SUD-EST CÔTE D'AZUR**

Mercredi 20 Février 2013



Monsieur le Président  
du 517 Parachute  
Régimental Combat Team

#### **FINE alain**

Vice-Président du  
M.V.C.G.S.E.C.A  
2 avenue Charles Baudelaire  
06340 LA TRINITÉ  
Tel : 06 15 26 73 56

In 1984, you will remember, the MVCG (Military Vehicules Conservation Group Cote d'Azur) had welcomed you in Nice to celebrate the 40th Anniversary of the liberation of the South of France (see account of this period).

Today in 2013, we remain attached to the memory of these events which will link us forever.

For our 69th Anniversary, we would like to share with your elderly the souvenir of these glorious moments.

We would therefore like to propose that one of you comes to the South of France on this occasion, in August of this year.

We would be happy to cover all the transportation and accommodation costs in order to ensure that our veteran is welcomed in the best way and commemorate with him all these wonderful historical moments.

It would be preferable if the person that you elect has never been to this region since 1944 and that he/she is in good health and autonomous.

The hand-over should take place in Houston (Texas). We think it is necessary to envisage a two-week stay in France in order to be able to participate fully in all these events.

We look forward to what we hope will be a positive reply and we wish you our kindest regards.

Yours faithfully,

**le Vice-Président  
du MVCG Sud Est Côte d'Az  
Alain FINE**





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From 1984:

### **MVCG SUD-EST CÔTE D'AZUR**

Commander of the American Legion, Post #5 of Nice, France  
in his yearly report of 1984

from Joseph Tucci

Aug 15th – A group of Legionaries with colors and caps accompanied the 517th on their all-day tour commemorating the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of this area. There were four large bus loads of 517th Paratroopers and their families plus about 35 US military vehicles belonging to Alain Fine and Louis Mazzioline, a group which were smartly dressed in combat fatigues. The vehicles were decked out with French and American flags and some of them were equipped with sirens so as to dress and whoop up the occasion. There were very impressive and emotional ceremonies at Le Dramont, Square, St Raphael, Draguignan, and Le Muy where we visited a beautiful large estate which centuries ago was the property of a Roman Catholic Pope and now belongs to a French Baron. We were invited to a sumptuous reception and were served some wonderful wines from his vineyards. It was indeed a long and wonderful day. The undersigned left his home at 0600 hours and did not return until 2200 hours. One of the most interesting and emotional events during this very memorable week occurred on 16 August. It perhaps can best be summarized as follows: Sometime in July our Post had been contacted by Floyd Polk, a 517th Paratrooper who had lost his right leg a few days after his outfit had liberated Sospel. His desire was fourfold, [1] to locate a certain individual who had treated him royally right after the liberation of Sospel but before his unfortunate loss of leg, [2] to personally spend a day in Sospel carefully visiting the rugged terrain in the Col de Braus where his outfit had engaged in fierce battle, [3] to locate the place where he lost his leg, and [4] to retrieve pieces of shrapnel as souvenirs from Hill 1098. We contacted Alain Fine who maintains a supply of US Army World War II vehicles and combat equipment in excellent shape and he graciously agreed to assist us. As a result of our contact with the Mayor of Sospel, they were able to determine that the individual [Mr Agnetti] whom Floyd Polk was looking for had died but his brother would be most happy to meet Mr Polk. Early the morning of 16 August Mr and Mrs Polk, Alain Fine, and his friend Louis Mazzolini, and myself proceeded in a command car with a mine detector in our possession. We tried to traverse the exact route which Floyd Polk and his outfit had passed by foot with full packs and gear 40 years ago. We passed St Roch's hospital in Nice where Floyds leg had apparently been amputated. We then proceeded into the rugged hills above Sospel. It was unbelievably remarkable to note how well Floyds memory was of every nook and corner he had fought in 40 years ago: likewise how capable he was of getting around that rugged terrain with his one leg. We were successful in locating [1] an important site where Floyd and his outfit had fought and slept in foxholes and [2] an important machine gun position that had been established to hold off the enemy. He had pictures taken at the site 40 years ago that attested to the correctness of our find; this in spite of the 40 years lapse of time involved. Obviously there has been very little if any change in that part of the world since that time. Likewise with the aid of the detector and otherwise we were successful in finding a lot of



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shrapnel which Floyd greatly cherished. Furthermore with the aid of the Mayor of Sospel and some of the older natives in the community we were able to locate the hotel where Floyd had stayed for a couple of days right after the liberation of Sospel. We were then later able to find the location where Floyd had lost his leg and in which five of his buddies were killed and several wounded when the inn they were billeted in was completely demolished from a delayed action time bomb. A new inn very similar in style and appearance as the original [with the exception that it is one storey lower] now stands in its place. Floyd met the owner and after going through the rooms, indicated that it was practically the same as the one blown up 40 years ago. It was indeed a most emotional experience for all of us, particularly Floyd. It is most difficult to find adequate words to describe such emotion. The nearest similarity I can think of to

describe Floyd's emotion when he had located the exact area where he had fought and slept and was now running around in and over the place with one leg [in and out of the areas of the foxholes] is that it was somewhat reminiscent of the joys and emotion of a child at one of his first Christmas mornings. That is, of course, with the exception that such emotional joy was intermingled with much sadness because of the great losses that occurred 40 years ago.

Later that day the Mayor of Sospel, Mr Gianotti, and his adjoint, Mr Domerego graciously entertained all of our group plus certain other distinguished natives of Sospel [including Mr Aggnetti] to a wonderful luncheon with all the trimmings including Franco/American flags setting on the tables. It was indeed a fantastic day and one that will always be remembered.

Aug 16th – At the initiative of Marius Tappia, President of Union National Paratroopers we contacted Dr Charles Pugh and arrangements were made for a wreath laying and vin d'honor ceremonies given by Anne-Marie Dupuy, Maire de Cannes, in honor of the 517th Parachutist Regimental Team Ass'n at the Monument aux Morts and the Hotel de Ville du Conseil at 1900 hours. Several Legionnaires attended these ceremonies.

Aug 17th – We accompanied the 517th group to commemorating exercises at Roquebrune cap Martin and Sospel. We awarded the Legion Bronze Medal of Merit to Mayor Giannotti of Sospel for his contributions to the Franco/American cause.

Aug 18th – Several Legionnaires were graciously invited to the 517th Paratroopers farewell dinner reception, where a wonderful time was had by all. This is where unfortunately we had to bid farewell to our paratrooper friends from the USA. Hopefully it will not be too long before we see them again. On this occasion we awarded American Legion medals as follows in recognition of valor and/or service to their Country and/or the American Legion:

Floyd Polk, 517th Paratrooper, Medal of Valor

Ted Lobur, 517th Paratrooper, Bronze Medal of Merit

Alain Fine, Bronze Medal of Merit



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## Camp Toccoa 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary



This Month marks the 70th anniversary of the activation of the 517th Parachute Infantry Regiment at Camp Toccoa, GA.

I have made arrangements with Brenda Carlin, the director of the Camp Toccoa/Currahee Museum to have **a 517th Get-Together on Friday, May 31, and Saturday June 1st.** Everyone is invited to come. There is no registration, (because this is not a reunion), but please come and celebrate the activation of the 517th. I know our President, **Allan Johnson** is planning on attending along with many others I have spoken with.

As you know there is no National Reunion this year and our organization is having two great mini-reunions, one in Florida that was held in January, and the Palm Springs California Reunion this month Mar 11-15th. Thanks to all who are putting these reunions on, I know what that is like.



On the weekend of June 1, 2013, the Camp Toccoa/Currahee Museum will be hosting a D-Day fun run up and down Mount Currahee on Saturday morning.

(see [http://www.toccoahistory.com/2013\\_D\\_Day\\_Run\\_form.pdf](http://www.toccoahistory.com/2013_D_Day_Run_form.pdf)) I'm not sure how much fun that will be, but I and Brenda are planning some fun activities for the 517<sup>th</sup> while we are there. Brenda has recommended that we stay at the Country Hearth Inn, 302 W Savannah St Toccoa, GA 30577 (706) 297-7799, or the Toccoa Inn and Suites, 106 Stephen Cir Toccoa, GA 30577, (706) 886-1048 <http://www.toccoainn.com/Home.html>

Brenda is expecting a large group to these events so I recommend making your motel reservations soon. I am excited to return to Camp Toccoa to see where our fathers trained. I hope to see you there Airborne All the Way!

**Lory Curtis, son of Bud Curtis, HQ, 1st BN**



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Here's a photo of an exhibit at the Stevens County Historical Society (Camp Toccoa). The middle section is mostly 517<sup>th</sup> memorabilia.

Here's another photo from the [Operation Dragoon Facebook page](#):

The 51st entering the Marketplace in Les Arcs



### *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 new Association Treasurer: Identify the purpose of any donation (Annual Donations, In Memory of... etc.) and make all checks payable to:

**517 PRCT Association, Inc.**  
c/o Joanne Barrett  
70 Pleasant Street  
Cohasset, MA 02025