



517th Parachute Regimental Combat Team



MailCall No. 2406

February 10, 2019

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

MailCall News

[Loïc Jankowiak](#) shared a [link](#) to the group: [517th Parachute Regimental Combat Team - Families & Friends](#).

February 7 at 3:22 AM ·

We are now 3 months from the project ends!

You have already been very numerous to support the project to see it finalized. Other elements have been added since the launch of the crowdfunding and the book should be 312 pages long! Some items had to be removed to make space for others.

These items include artefacts from collections such as helmets, equipment and other items related to the 517th Parachute Regimental Combat Team.

6 to 7 collectors allowed me to photograph their collections and I thank them a lot. A large part of these pieces of collections are identified to different troopers, others were found on the various battle sites of the unit in Southern France, some of which, totally unpublished.

Do not hesitate to talk about it to your friends, families or acquaintances, interested in this subject.



GOFUNDME.COM

[Cliquez ici pour soutenir la campagne The 517th's Gang - Publication du livre organisée par Loïc Jankowiak](#)

[ENGLISH VERSION BELOW] VERSION FRANÇAISE C'est à l'âge de 16 ans que j'ai fait ma première reconstitution historique et commémoration sur le débarquement de Provence. Cette année, je vais avoir 26 ans et cela va faire désormais 10 ans que je suis fasciné par les unités aéroportées oubli...



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My father, **Robert W. McWaide**, was in the 517th (I have his lovely “yearbook” from the 50th reunion in Palm Springs)

The reason I am contacting you is that I am currently submitting an application to the VA on behalf of Robert for compensation.

Unfortunately, although in good physical health, his mental health has been diminished. Since 2010, he has not been able to live independently. Because of the recent awareness of CTE and military research which has demonstrated parachuting as a risk factor, I am hoping to get financial assistance from the VA. Frankly, he is almost out of money.

His doctor is willing to support the possibility but, as you probably know, until dead and an autopsy of the brain is made, no one knows for sure. The application takes about a year and the onus is on the applicant to prove the injury. At 94, I am sure the VA will attribute his mental decline to old age but his family is very long lived with full mental capacity to the end. His older brother is 96 and fine.

Basically I am seeking any information you may have regarding other 517th veterans with a similar decline or research related to the team’s mental and physical health long term.

Thank you. SHAWN MCWAIDE 530-748-8266

[Camp Toccoa at Currahee, Inc.](#) February 2 at 8:46 PM ·

The “Barracks Store” gift shop at Camp Toccoa at Currahee, took a step closer to becoming a reality this weekend. A big thank you goes to Seth Roesch for his hard work to help us with projects at the Camp. Seth and his brother Matt have been our primary contractor for several years.

The gift shop is on schedule to be open before the 75th Anniversary of D-Day Celebration starts on May 31st. The annual Banquet and Auction will be held on May 31st. at the Camp. The D-Day Run is on June 1st. Our speaker this year will be Steven Matchett from Oxford, England. Steven now lives in Charlotte, North Carolina where he is an author and news commentator. He had formally worked with the Italian automobile manufacturer Ferrari, where he was an engineer and mechanic with their Formula 1 race team. Steven will be describing what D-Day meant to his countrymen and what it means to him today. Please come join us for a very patriotic and meaningful evening at the historic Camp Toccoa at Currahee. For more details please visit our web site www.camptoccoaatcurrahee.com.

Currahee



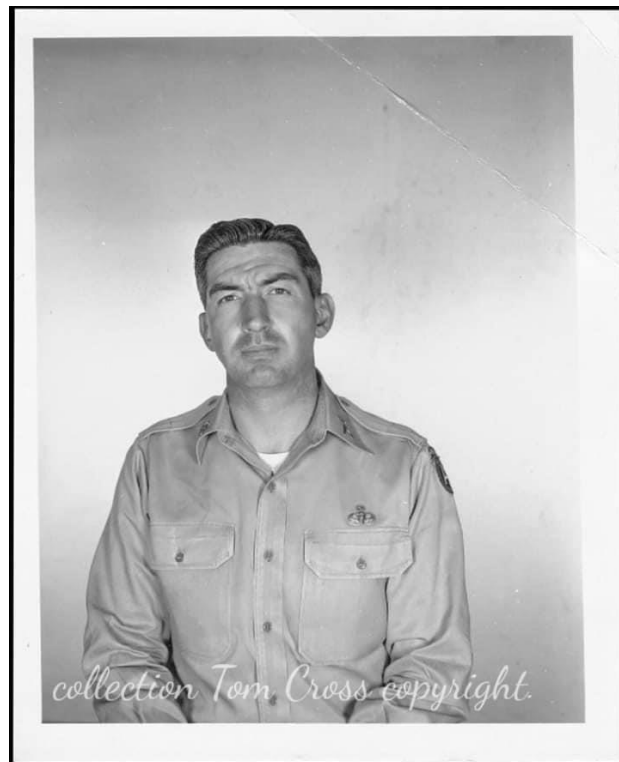
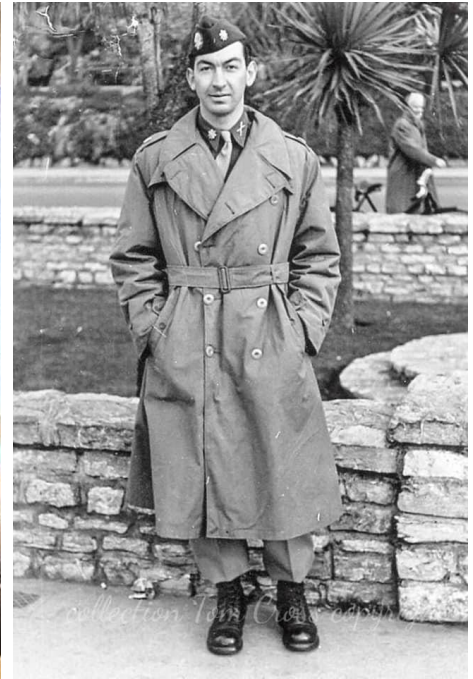


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From: [Operation-Dragoon "15 Aout 1944" museum](#)
February 1 at 6:05 PM ·

Happy 100 em birthday to one of the last hero of the battle of Provence. Colonel Thomas Cross. From The 517th U.S. Airborne Regiment. Parachuted with his men at la motte on the night of 14 to 15 August 1944. with all our respect. France doesn't forget you...! Happy 100 birthday one of the last hero of the operation dragoon. Colonel Thomas cross from the 517th Parachute Infantry Regiment of the us. Army..! with all our respect and admiration. Thankyou.





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[Loïc Jankowiak](#) Je dois avoir une photo ancienne, mais pas de photos récentes, hélas... [Bob Barrett](#) can you post a screenshot in the next mailcall to know who is this gentleman at 1:55 ? Thank you !



[Parachutisme du passé](#)

August 28, 2018 ·

Video Ina / fr3- web - veterans jump

1944-1994: 50 years ago the release

Video 06 June 1994

Fifty years after the landing in Normandy at Holy Mother Church, American Veterans jumped again in parachute. 17th Airborne Division Veterans Testimony.



Does anyone recognize this person in this video from June 1994 (I think)?

He's wearing a 517th patch. See the video at:

https://www.facebook.com/Cl.Courrieu/videos/539919726478082/?q=parachutisme%20du%20pass%C3%A9&epa=SERP_TAB



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Re: **Pvt. Joseph F. Van Ness**, Company B 517th PIR

Most of the research I have done was thru the few letters we have before he went overseas and what I have found on the internet. In regards to **Jean-Loup Gassend's** book, that information was provided by his Grandson who himself is a Paratrooper and a Chaplain in the US Army. That is the one book that I have not yet been able to see. I have sent all the stuff I have found on his Grandfather, {my uncle} but as of today have not heard back from him. His name is Jefferey Van Ness and he is on the 517 site as well.

My uncle led a pretty interesting life as I can deduce from the letters home to his mom and sisters. I have not seen any of the letters he sent his wife who was from Toccoa. It was from his letters to his sisters and mother that I found out he was getting demoted. He had been sending letters home which were both dated and addressed as he being a sergeant in the 517th. I have since found a letter from December 29th, 1943 where he mentions he really tied one on and is now a private. That possibly answers the question of what happened. The funny thing is this, on most of his mail he is still putting down the rank of Sergeant on his address, and we have later letters and a picture dated, in April of 44 where he is still a Sergeant. So, it is one of the mysteries left to life that may never be solved.

I have recently connected with another person on the site whose Uncle was killed at Sospel. His uncle died in the blast of the house on November the 4th, 1944 in Sospel. That is found in the "Paratroopers Odyssey". The reference I had for my uncle, that I said was on page 49 I deduced from what I saw on "Findagrave". The gentleman that put that info into "Findagrave" was Andy Anderson. He is the American director that is assigned to the Rhone American Cemetery in Drauginan, France. I think he got the 442 connection from my uncle's death record. I think after the big fire of 73 in Kansas City, the government has been able to scratch together partial information, especially death information for soldiers killed in WW2. I have sent off for that, but there is a delay as the records of last names from M thru Z I think are being redone now and should be ready sometime later this year. When I said page 49, it is the 49th page from the electronic copy if you try to print that off. I find that book to be EXCELLENT research! It only mentions that a patrol from the first Battalion was ambushed on the 31st of August. That is my uncle's official date of death. It does mention that Battalion executive, **Don Fraser** distinguished himself by going to the scene to rescue a wounded man. I don't know if that was my uncle or not, as the jeep was ambushed and three were killed and two wounded. I don't know if you have any information on Don Fraser, but if you do I would be very interested in what you have or if any of this family is still around.

When I mentioned he may have been to Toccoa twice, I thought at the time, he possibly went thru with the 506. As I told you before we have a document showing the boys of the 506th how to act while on furlough after jump school. However, since he was already in the Army in 1936 he had already attended Basic training, and volunteered for the Paratrooper's right after he reentered the Army in 1941. We know he was in Toccoa with the 517 for sure, and that he was in the PT test the Army gave as well as the Tennessee maneuvers. We have letters from Ft. Benning, Camp Mackall and Toccoa from him to home.

One last note. I did hear back from a surviving 517th Paratrooper. He is 95 years old and was in Headquarters Company. He said was in R Platoon. He spent time in the line at Bastogne with I company. His name is **Oscar Knerr**.

He did not remember my uncle but he still would like to hear from any surviving vets of the 517. Here is his email: oknerr09@comcast.net



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Thank you again for your help. As I learn more, I will let you know what I find out. Take care and thanks so much for the website!

Regards

Robert Van Ness

Thanks for posting the email in the Roll Call. Maybe we can hear more back from that. As for my last email to you in response to that first, no need to put that on Roll call. However, if you could put up the **Oscar Knerr** information I would appreciate that. Mr. Knerr might like hearing back from folks of the 517.

Regards

Robert

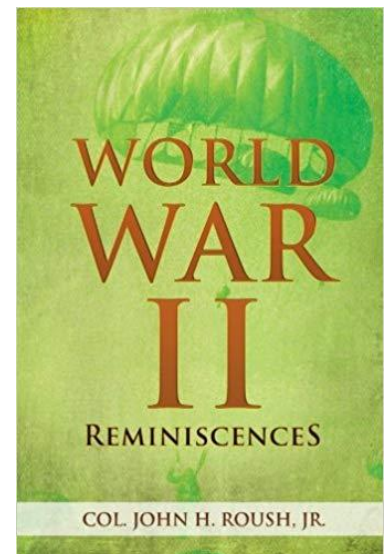
Oscar Knerr, Regimental HQ, used to be on our MailCall list, but he was unsubscribed back in 2014. Reason: "Spammy content". I am not allowed to re-subscribe anyone, they have to re-subscribe themselves. – Bob B

I just ran across this book listing on Amazon: It contains a chapter from **William Brannan**, A Company. It describe the battle for Hotton, and mentions **Bill Boyle, Don Fraser, Don Vaughn, Babe Critchlow, Dan Cook, Buck Balleat, Mel Biddle, Nolan Powell, and Harry Allingham**. Bill Brannan died in 2015. I have attached his story below – Bob B.

World War II Reminiscences – March 28, 2013

by [John H. Roush Jr.](#) (Author)

"This volume presents a dramatic collection of significant combat experiences of 79 men in WWII, as told from one combat veteran to another. In the 86 chapters are stories involving all the various branches of combat service and all of the various theaters of war. Within reminiscences, veterans of dangerous encounters are much more apt to open up with details in discussions with men who have also experienced combat. Many find it emotionally distressing to talk of the war with the general public or to recall the horrors of warfare. This is not a history book nor any attempt to tell the big picture of grand campaigns. Instead it is a collection of personal involvements in one-at-a-time incidents of conflict. Many ask what was it like in WWII, for our conflicts in recent years have been vastly different. It has been said that war has become and continues to be an intractable social phenomenon. While some say its elimination is necessary to the survival of mankind, we do not seem to have approached closer to that elimination in the sixty-seven years since WWII ended. Encounters of Warfare remain a stark reality within the present era. That being so, perhaps we should read of what happened as recalled in the most vivid memories of men involved in the most overpowering conflict of modern warfare. Sincerely, John Roush"





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Battle of the Bulge, Airborne Infantry

William W. Brannan, EM, AUS

Nine days before Christmas, 1944, German forces launched a massive last-ditch offensive against American and British forces in the Ardennes. At the cost of the lives of many thousands of young, brave men, the reaction demonstrated, once again, the heights to which men and women of the Allied Command could rise to force the Axis to its knees and bring the German catastrophe to an end. The following is an account of one of the actions that took place in what was to become known as the “Bulge.”

On December 23, 1944, the First Battalion of my regiment, the 517th Parachute Combat Team, had taken positions near Soy, Belgium, with the mission of stopping, if not, at least slowing that particular point of the German advance. We learned that we were facing elements of the 116th Panzer Division of the Fifty-Eighth Panzer Corps, Fifth German Army (the center army of the three German armies advancing westward), and the 560th Volksgrenadier Division. Our first contact with the enemy was late in the evening of the Twenty-third. Companies B and C, with support from tanks of the Third Armored Division, were given the assignment of meeting the 116th and 560th Divisions head-on. A Company, in which I was one of the scouts, was given the mission of relieving beleaguered American forces in Hotten, Belgium.

Unknown to us, during the night the Germans had made a sweep on our right flank and trapped A Company in Hotten. To break out, Colonel Bill Boyle, our battalion commander, decided that we would



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attack from inside Hotton, and that Major Don Fraser, our battalion executive officer, would lead the attack from the outside.

Part of the plan required my squad to advance behind a line of houses, with the first squad on the street side. I was the lead scout; Don Vaughn was my backup.



I had moved about fifty yards when, to my utter astonishment, a German officer jumped to his feet and began to run straight away from me. He disappeared around a shed before I could get off a shot.

I continued to move forward until I was stopped by a wire fence and a tall tree. I was between two chicken hutches. I had knelt on one knee so that I could evaluate my position,

when two German forty-two machine guns opened fire from my left and left front. My instincts were in tune at that moment, for I was already going down when the bullets slammed into the shed to my right. We also had a problem on the other side of the wire fence. A German sniper had dug a hole deep enough to stand in, with complete frontal coverage of anything that moved. I was his primary target at the moment. My concern was for the men in my squad, so I yelled a warning to them to stay back. However, Babe Critchlow, age twenty, our squad leader, decided to check out the situation and moved up to the same position as that from which I had first drawn fire. I yelled at him to get down, which he did just as the two machine guns opened fire at him.



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Battle of the Bulge, Airborne Infantry



*Douglas A. Riach (Chapter 22), Milton Anderson (Chapter 34),
John H. Roush (Chapter 39), and William W. Brannan (Chapter 31)*

I had decided that to continue our advance we would have to knock out the machine guns and then deal with the sniper. I told Critchlow to move back about twenty-five feet, where he could still hear me, so that I could give him the range to the machine guns for our platoon's mortar squads. After registering two or three test rounds, they knocked out both guns.

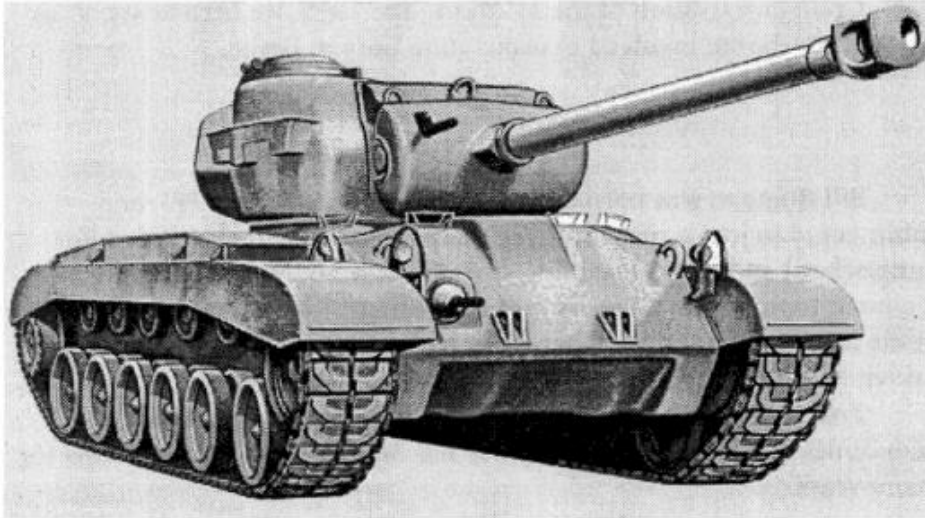
As for the sniper, it was obvious that to neutralize him, without casualties, we would have to devise an appropriate strategy. Since I could not move to my right or left without drawing fire, I decided to use a grenade. However, I had two problems: how to clear the fence to my front and how to time my throw so that the grenade would explode above his hole. There was only one way in which I could accomplish this. I would have to hold the grenade a few seconds after releasing the handle, then spring backward from a prone position in order to loft it over the tree.

Several thoughts coursed through my mind, considering how precarious my situation was. If the grenade did not clear the tree I could have become the casualty. Also, counting to three, after pulling the pin, was cutting it close. Reducing the count to two, I threw the grenade over the tree as hard as I could, but also with as much control as possible. Vaughn told me that it fell short by about ten feet.



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German Tiger Tank

Something else would have to be done. Major Fraser's group was meeting stiff resistance, so we had to get on with it and remove the sniper. It occurred to me that a left handed rifleman might get a clear shot from the far corner of the shed without exposing himself to return fire. I called to Critchlow to find someone who shot from the left side, and, to our surprise, we learned that Lt. Dan Cook, our platoon leader was left-handed. He took out the sniper with his carbine upon the signal of our BAR man, Buck Balleat. We cleared the rest of the houses and linked up with Major Fraser's force. Unfortunately, Critchlow was killed the next day.

I would be remiss if I failed to mention that as Major Fraser's men fought their way into Hotton, several soldiers displayed outstanding heroism. One of the men in B Company, Mel Biddle, engaged in action against a sizable German force, single-handedly destroying two German machine gun nests. Against great odds, armed with an M-1 rifle, he killed nineteen infantrymen of the 560th Volksgrenadier Division. He was causing the Germans so much distress that they mounted a counterattack which, in that case, was against one man. A following counterattack by B company facilitated his withdrawal. Subsequently he was awarded the Medal of Honor for his bravery. Earlier, in another incredible feat, Nolan Powell, of C Company, received the Distinguished Service Cross for gallantry in action when he took over leadership after their platoon leader, Lt. Harry Allingham,



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Battle of the Bulge, Airborne Infantry

was killed by attacking forces of the 560th Volksgrenadiers. There were many others that won or deserved to have won decorations, too numerous in number to mention in this space.

A few days after our engagement, the First and Third American Armies launched an offensive to cut off the Bulge, marking the end of Hitler's last gasp. Our experiences in Soy and Hotton were only a brief moment in the buildup which led to the Allied attack on January 1, a period of service of which I will always be proud to have been a part.

Upon deactivation of the 517th in June 1945, we became a part of the 82nd Airborne involved in occupation duty in Berlin.



Bill Brannan was born in San Francisco, drafted in 1943, and volunteered to join a parachute regiment that was being formed. After jump school and tactical training at Camp McCall, North Carolina, his regiment took part in an air assault in Southern France and then fought in the Battle of the Bulge, where they had substantial losses. Of his twelve man squad, six were killed in the two engagements.

Following discharge in January 1946, he completed a BA in economics at Stanford University. He has been a realtor in San Rafael for many years.



Editor's note: Several separate parachute infantry battalions and regiments were committed against the nose of the enemy thrust in the Battle of the Bulge, since the Allied front had no other reserves than the two airborne divisions and the separate parachute infantry regiments and battalions. Those small, light infantry units performed incredible feats of courage, for they were only lightly equipped and hardly suitable for combat against Panzer forces with heavy tanks. Nevertheless the brave men of the parachute infantry units accomplished a great deal, but at the same time sustained terrible losses. Of the 745 men in one battalion only 48 emerged. After the action, many of the units had to be disbanded due to losses. One of the men participating recalled it as a montage of misery: "No sleep, frozen feet, trench-foot, knee



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deep snow, cold food and hallucinations.” There were a great many acts of heroism by the light infantrymen who fought in the Bulge, so numerous that it was hardly possible to list them all.



The United States Army suffered more casualties in the Battle of the Bulge in the Ardennes Forest than were sustained during the entire Pacific Campaign. Historians say the Bulge was the greatest pitched battle ever fought by American armies.

The German code name for the bold attack by three armies was HERBSTNEBEL (Autumn Mist).





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Administrivia

If you miss any MailCalls, they are all available online at <http://www.517prct.org/mailcall/>

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- 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.

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Happy 100th Birthday!