



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



### **MailCall No. 2439**

March 29, 2020

*517<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment  
460<sup>th</sup> Parachute Field Artillery Battalion  
596<sup>th</sup> Parachute Combat Engineer Company*

### *MailCall News*



Remember the day.

Remember the veterans.

Respect their service.

Hand salute.

**RE: Pfc Edward R Ryan**

Dear Sirs,

I have been going through my grandfather's old pictures and found the same photo as what is shown on your website. Are there relatives of PFC Ryan that might want the photo? An archive that you might want the photo for?

Let me know if it is something that would be of interest to your group.

Best Regards,

**Tom Wittick**



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Hi Tom,

Thanks for writing in. Which photo are you referring to? (Send me a scan if you can.)

What is your grandfather's full name? Do you know which Company they were with?

Thanks,

Bob Barrett

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



### *THE COMBAT INFANTRY BADGE*

#### *The Most Prestigious Warrior Badge*

*Honoring combat infantry men  
They faced enemies of the United  
States of America  
Protected our families  
Safeguarded our freedoms,  
communities, and nation  
Trained for combat - Tested in  
Combat - Proven on the battlefield  
  
Freedom has a price the protected  
will never know*

This plaque is at the Veterans Memorial at Gage Park in Topeka Kansas.

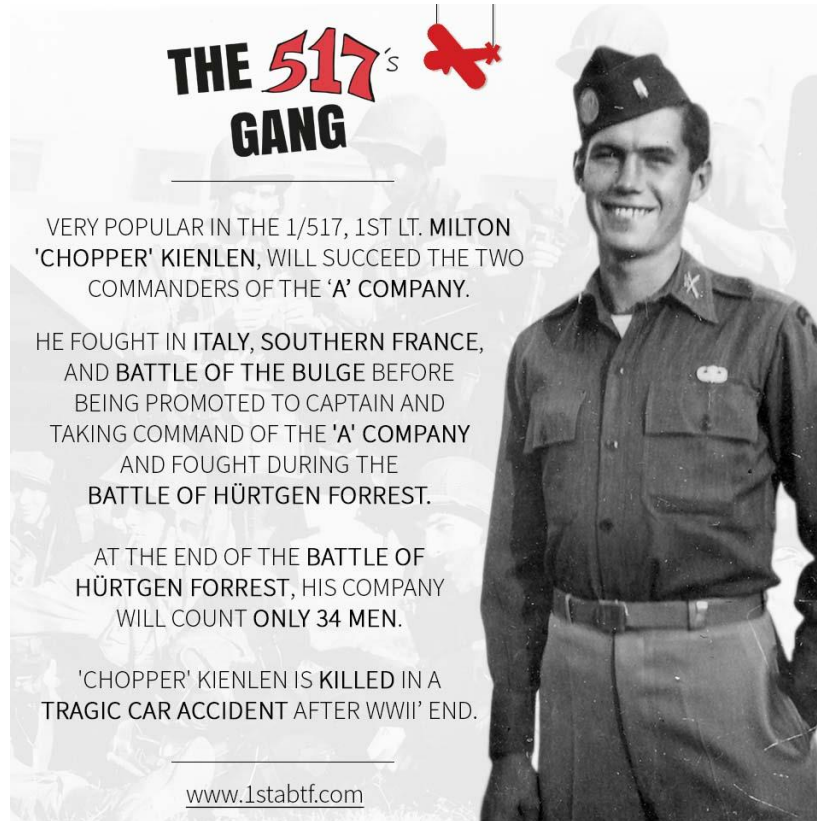


My Dad, **Ben Barrett** (H Company), always said that the CIB badge was that one decoration that he was most proud of. It reminded him not only that he served his country, he did it in wartime and he was on the front lines directly in the line of fire. Like plenty of other men of that generation, and all of the 517<sup>th</sup> PRCT, he volunteered to serve (several times before he was accepted), and even after he was promoted to Staff Sergeant with the 515<sup>th</sup> PIR, he took a demotion in order to be transferred overseas and fight with a team in combat.



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From *The 517<sup>th</sup>'s Gang*:



**THE 517<sup>s</sup> GANG**

VERY POPULAR IN THE 1/517, 1ST LT. MILTON 'CHOPPER' KIELEN, WILL SUCCEED THE TWO COMMANDERS OF THE 'A' COMPANY.

HE FOUGHT IN ITALY, SOUTHERN FRANCE, AND BATTLE OF THE BULGE BEFORE BEING PROMOTED TO CAPTAIN AND TAKING COMMAND OF THE 'A' COMPANY AND FOUGHT DURING THE BATTLE OF HÜRTGEN FORREST.

AT THE END OF THE BATTLE OF HÜRTGEN FORREST, HIS COMPANY WILL COUNT ONLY 34 MEN.

'CHOPPER' KIELEN IS KILLED IN A TRAGIC CAR ACCIDENT AFTER WWII' END.

[www.1stabtf.com](http://www.1stabtf.com)

Loïc's new book is available and waiting for you order.

<https://1stabtf.com/en/boutique/the-517ths-gang-us-eng-version/>

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To put it in perspective for those of us feeling a bit stir crazy already -- Anne Frank and 7 other people hid in a 450 sq. ft. attic for 761 days, quietly trying to remain undiscovered to stay alive. We can all do our part to keep everyone safe and spend a few weeks at home.

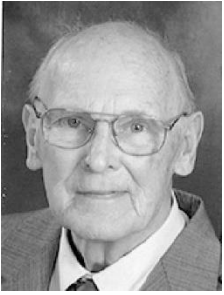
(Anne Frank died in a concentration camp in February or March 1945, at age 15.)

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### *In Memorium – Ray Helms, E Company*



Ray Valentine Helms, 92, of Kannapolis, went to be with the Lord on Wednesday, Aug. 9, 2017 in the presence of his family to whom he always gave his love and devotion. Ray was born Nov. 19, 1924, the youngest child of the late Thomas Valentine and Alice Jordan Helms in Cabarrus County. He served in the US Army during WWII with the 517th Airborne Infantry. He saw combat duty in Italy and France and received a Purple Heart. After the war he returned home, married his love and companion of a lifetime, Willie Payne Hartsell and they began a lifelong journey of building a home and family. They spent 67 years together as one until Payne's passing in 2013. Ray was a long time member at Brookdale Baptist Church in Kannapolis. He was employed at the VA Hospital in Salisbury until his retirement in 1983. Through the years Ray enjoyed stamp collecting, sports, wood-working and gardening. He liked working with his hands and helping others, but the real passion of his life was family. He loved being surrounded by his family and always had a kind word and smile for everyone. He is survived by two sons, Glenn Wayne Helms (Diane) and William Dale Helms (Teresa); two grandchildren, Dewey "Sonny" Privette (Toni) and Connie Lynn Schram (Duane).

I have some information for Mail Call. I'm sad to report that my dad, **Ray Helms**, passed away in 2017 at the age of 92. He was a member of E company of the 517<sup>th</sup>.

Since discovering the 517<sup>th</sup> web site I've been gradually reading old Mail Calls. In the June 3, 2018 issue (#2389) I came across a photo submitted by Thomas Hertzell, the nephew of **Paul Craig**. Thomas mentioned the photo was taken in southern France in 1944. It caught my attention because my dad had the same photo in an album that included photos from his time in the 517th during WW2. On the back of the photo he wrote "Camp Mackall, N.C., March 1944" and the names of several people in the photo, so I know it was not taken in France. The names he listed were (back row, left to right) **Stan Zyloski**, **Cashmer Lesiak**, no name for the next person, and then he listed **Gene Brissey**. I don't know why he didn't list everyone in the photo. My dad is not in the picture, so I wonder if he might have been the person who took it.

I recognize **Gene Brissey** because my dad maintained contact with him during the years since the war and I met him several times. At some point my dad marked an "X" on the men in the photo who were killed during the war (I recall him telling me that). Their names are **Roger Bender**, **Max Kersey**, **Paul Craig**, and **Charles Lemen** based on the photo submitted by Thomas.

I'm attaching my dad's copy of the subject photo as well as another photo that includes my dad, also taken in March of





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1944 at Camp Mackall (notice the similar background). The men in this photo are identified as **Bob Morris** (standing on left), **Cashmer Lesiak** (standing on right), and my dad, **Ray Helms** (on the ground). I have other photos from Camp Mackall, Camp Toccoa, and Europe that I will send later, along with more information about my dad for your web site.

In the same Mail Call ([#2389](#)) I also saw a note from **Jean-Loup Gassend** about **Paul Craig** and the action at La Roquette on August 28, 1944. A couple years before my dad passed away I was helping him with some papers in his desk and came across a letter he had received from Gassend dated March 5, 2008. The letter referred to a phone conversation they had earlier about La Roquette. He was requesting X-Rays of the shell fragment my dad still had in his chest as a result of wounds he received at La Roquette from an exploding mortar shell. He also mentioned the book he was planning to write. My dad had never mentioned talking to Gassend, so I went to the internet to see if he ever published a book. When I discovered he had in fact published a book about Operation Dragoon I ordered it and gave it to my dad. I have it now. I suspect **Gene Brissey** gave Gassend my dad's name since they were both quoted in the section of Gassend's book that discusses La Roquette.



Thanks for the great job you're doing with Mail Call.

**Glenn Helms**

A couple of stories about **Ray Helms** from **Gene Brissey's** wartime bio, ["What Did You Do In The War, Daddy?"](#)

Christmas 1943 was a few days off, and I was facing my first Christmas away from home. There was no chance of going home, so all that I and the many others who were a long way from home could do was look forward to a turkey dinner in the mess hall and a lonely time in the barracks. I sat there on my bunk looking kinda sad no doubt, nothing to do but get used to the fact Christmas away from home just had to be. It did have to be, but it didn't have to be all that bad because I had already received an early Christmas present. Well, maybe not a Christmas present really, but I had been promoted to Corporal. The Lieutenant who had bet me two dollars that I couldn't throw those hand grenades into all those targets had promoted me. I wondered if my baseball ability had made any difference.

Anyway, as I sat there in gloomsville, Ray Helms, whom I really didn't know very well, came up to me and asked if I would like to go home with him for Christmas. With some reluctance I accepted. This was the beginning of a lasting friendship. Only a few guys really become friends in



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the service, but Ray, along with Roger and to a lesser degree C. B. Jones, were to become closely related to my brief Army career.

Christmas 1943 was one of the most enjoyable ones I ever had. I went home with Ray, and his older brother, Troy, who was an invalid, and his parents who obviously were relatively "poor" people treated me as one of their own. I fell in "love" with the whole family. They gave me presents and lots of good North Carolina type food. I had also bought small presents for the family, and the Christmas cheer was all around the house. Christmas away from home was not bad at all.

Troy Helms, though paralyzed from his waist down, could move around the house with ease. His arms and shoulders were very strong and his mind was sharp and his attitude was the greatest. That boy, a little older than Ray and he was a joy to be with. He enjoyed life and seemed to be dedicated to helping others do the same. Mr. and Mrs. Helms were not far behind in this respect, and I was always welcome in their home after that beautiful Christmas and spent many nice weekends with Ray and his family.

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We pitched our tents in an olive grove and started working and playing. The playing was the most memorable, and the opportunity to see such historic places as the Vatican City, the Colosseum, the Victor Emmanuel monument and drive a jeep along the Apian Way was almost worth the trip. I didn't seek an audience with Pope Pius XII, though some of the guys did. Rome was great, and C. B. Jones and I visited some of the more interesting spots. Also, Ray Helms and I went to a sweet shop occasionally. We liked ice cream, especially when it was served by two of the most beautiful dolls in Rome. Unfortunately, those dolls had a very protective dad who watched us like a hawk. Oh well, we enjoyed looking anyway.

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But that's ahead of the story. We are still lost back in the new jump zone and very disorganized. Still unaware of where we were. Those of us who had managed to find each other were following the compass. In total darkness we ran head on into an area filled with foreign voices. We backed off not knowing at the time whether they were French or German. We staggered around under the weight of our over-loads until daybreak and then threaded our way through Germans, French and farm animals. We could not find an officer or sergeant of any kind. As a corporal, I was the senior to the others, so I took over and started searching for familiar faces. Shortly after daylight we found a captain and a group of men. We thought we had found a leader. But soon found that he was a mess officer and didn't know beans about leading troops in combat. After being under enemy fire for a few minutes and seeing this captain in panic, my little group decided to get the heck out of there. We finally discovered a large group of men in a wooded area. These were our outfit and soon most of us were together. I learned that Ray Helms had landed on top of a French farm house and went through the roof. He was knocked out and came to in the company of a startled family of Frenchies. Roger Bender and his squad, who were in charge of our mortars (mortars are rather large guns that shoot bomb-like shells), were unable to find the darn things after they landed. The mortar packages had lights on them but somehow could not be seen.



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Roger and his boys went back to look for them and managed to locate them an hour or so later. By this time we were knocking off a few "krauts" and taking over large areas of farm land near the jump area. I used some of my explosives to blow a bunch of trees off the road. I was glad to get rid of some of the weight, because my legs still hurt from the impact with the ground.

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Though we could not hear their guns we knew where they were. They were in this small town which was situated on a cliff overlooking the river. A beautiful place to be. Unfortunately for the Germans, we were behind them and even though they had fired at us they didn't seem to realize the fact that we were there. They might have thought we were French. Whatever their problem, we sneaked in behind them and from cover of trees and grapevines we watched them milling around the town. As we watched, more of their troops marched into town.

They assembled in the court yard and some were lying around on the grass when we opened fire with all the guns we had. Those Germans were in panic. Some fought, some ran inside buildings, and some jumped over the cliff. One of their mortar shells landed in our squad.

The shell fragments flew in all directions hitting Ray Helms and one other man. Ray was the squad leader, and I was the assistant. We did what we could for Ray and Private Duncan and continued toward the city.

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Finally, we got word that we were being relieved the next day. I think we were actually sorry to leave. Our last night on that hill was one to remember, and it changed our minds about being sorry to leave. Rain poured down all night. My "house" was flooded to the point that my straw mattress floated. The next morning that place was a muddy mess. I felt so sorry for the troops who had come to take our place. But, thirty days was long enough to live in one hole. We went back behind the hill for a couple of days and then moved further back to a small town.

It was a real thrill being back in an area where people lived. Unfortunately, we were not allowed to go into town. We moved into some old shacks and barns. Sleeping in a barn is great after sleeping in a hole for much too long. The move back was made more interesting by the return of my friend, Ray Helms. He still had a piece of the shell in him, but feeling ready to go again. Although I had gotten along OK as squad leader, I was glad to have Ray back to take over the squad. We had a nice visit while some of the boys sneaked into town. One squad in our Platoon was especially bad about doing things they were not authorized to do, naturally they went to town. The next morning someone rushed into our area with the word that one of this squad was lying in a creek nearby. Our Platoon leader, Lt. Brearley, charged to the creek with several of us following. He jumped a wall and rushed down a dangerous cliff to reach this boy in the creek. It was too late, he was dead. Lt. Brearley was a fine compassionate man, and this really hurt him. To see a man die this way after going through so much war was hard to accept. Lt. Brearley immediately removed the squad leader and put me in charge of the squad. I expected all kinds of trouble from this bunch of goof-ups, and didn't much want the job even though I never said so. I talked with the men of the first squad, and from that day they became a different bunch of guys. After a few days rest, we were back on the front lines living in holes or small "forts" that we built with sand bags.



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The situation was still bad up there because the Germans were in big concrete bunkers, and we could not get them out. The bunkers had big artillery guns in them. The guns were built on elevators. They could be raised and fired a few times and then lowered before we could hit the guns to knock them out. Our side fired thousands of big shells at those bunkers, or forts, but did almost no damage.

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The short vacation from the fighting was a welcome one which gave us an opportunity to relax and get reorganized. We had received some replacements for the men who had been killed or wounded. Most of the old timers were still with the outfit, including C. B. Jones, Ray Helms, Roger Bender, and former Sergeant, now Lieutenant, Craig. Ray was the leader of the second squad, Roger the leader of the third squad and I was the leader of the first squad. We made up the Third Platoon of E Company. Lt. Craig was our platoon leader. The first squad had changed a lot since the death of the boy in the creek. They, or perhaps I should say we, were being watched by the officers of the outfit because of the action of those who had gone into town against orders which resulted in the death of the guy who evidently fell over the wall into the water. I was glad we were being watched because I knew all the boys did a great job of fighting after I was assigned as squad leader. I don't mean to imply that I caused the change, but that they were the best. I recall one night when most of us were sleeping the men on guard started firing at approaching Germans. The men of the first squad were out to their holes and in fighting position in seconds. Most of them were bare-footed, but didn't seem to notice. They were ready for anything and soon chased the bad guys away. During the rest period near Nice, the Colonel who was in charge of the Battalion asked me how my squad was making out and what my opinion of them was. The only thing I said was, "They are the best damn squad in the outfit, Sir." I meant it; and since we had to go fight some more, I was glad to be a part of the first squad.

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Here is a question: In **Gene Brissey's** biography, he mentions that he and **Ray Helms** were both in hospitals in England after the war. Gene was sent there after he was wounded near Bergstein in the last battle of the 517<sup>th</sup>. So how is Ray in the E Company photo in Joigny?

This photo below shows the "survivors" of E Company who started in Camp Toccoa and made it all the way to the end. This was taken on June 27, 1945 in Joigny, France. You'll notice on the left side, **Ray Helms**. If he was a "survivor", how did he end up in the hospital later?



I re-read Gene's notes, that Ray was wounded in the shoulder near La Roquette on August 28, 1944. Nonetheless, he re-joined the 517<sup>th</sup> on September 12<sup>th</sup>: *"He still had a piece of the shell in him, but feeling ready to go again."*

I found some details of Ray's wound from **Jean-Loup Gassend's** book *"Operation Dragoon"*:



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*“We stayed behind la Roquette until morning, and then we started to move into the village that the Germans had occupied. We got a portion of the way down the hill towards the village when a mortar shell was fired in our group and all of us hit the ground. One shell fell maybe 20 or 30 feet behind us and then another shell fell just about that distance in front of us. Knowing how a mortar works, we expected the next shell to be right on us, which is what happened.*

*We had hit the ground. I had the butt of my rifle on my right side and the shell hit on my right side. A pretty good portion of the shell hit me in the right shoulder and it lodged just short of my lung. I was stunned, and it appeared that everybody that passed by me gave me a shot of morphine. I wasn't feeling much pain at all after that. The piece of shrapnel is still there in my chest real close to the lungs and it's never given me any trouble. On an X-ray it looks like a star. My group continued to go into la Roquette, and they came out with a number of prisoners; they had given up. I faintly remember when the German prisoners were marched through the area where I was laying. I could hear then walking on the pavement, and that was just sort of a dream, but it was really happening.”*

So Gene was in the hospital in England from February to June 1945. I suspect that **Ray Helms** must have shipped to England sometime after VE Day, probably to look after his shoulder. Then rejoined the 517th back in Joigny by June.

At the very end of Gene Brissey's [autobiography](#), he tells about returning to France in 1990, meeting a Frenchman who has found his dog-tags, and visiting the Chateau St. Roseline. You can read it for yourself, but I read much of it again and was amused by this comment from Gene:



Gene: “The wording on the plaque reads something like this: ON AUGUST 15, 1944, SAINT ROSELINE and this region were liberated by Colonel Rupert Graves and his 517th parachute outfit after they jumped in here at about 4 o'clock in the morning and beat the hell out of the Germans.”

Now that reminds me – I have a very nice bottle of 2016 Château Sainte Roseline Rosé, that **Allan Johnson** and **Claire Giblin** brought back from France. Glad I found it. Could come in handy during this quarantine. - BB





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## *Administrivia*

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- At any time, if you want to be added or removed from the MailCall list, just let me know, or just click on the unsubscribe link on the email.
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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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"Expectin' rain?"