

**\*35 Years of Outstanding Service\***  
**Kenneth J. (Rock) Merritt – Private to Technical Sergeant**

Kenneth J. (Rock) Merritt – Private to Technical Sergeant. Served with distinction in the Hq1 Light Machine Gun Platoon from October 20, 1942 to August 20, 1946.

Rock Merritt retired from the US Army on December 1, 1977, as Command Sergeant Major (CSM), XVIII Airborne Corps and Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

Rock is the only man to have served two tours as CSM of the XVIII Airborne Corps. Moreover, he is one of the very few soldiers selected to serve thirty-five years in the Army.

Rock Merritt is an exceptionally outstanding example of the "Greatest of the Greatest Generation."

Rock was born August 10, 1923 in Warner, Oklahoma. When he was 17 years old, Rock enlisted in the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) to help support his family.

The CCC discharged Rock five weeks after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. He immediately went to work building Camp Gruber, OK, and later Camp Hale, CO. Subsequently, Rock was employed in a Naval Shipyard in California.

In October 1942, Rock decided to join the US Marine Corps. While he was waiting to talk with the Recruiting Sergeant, he noticed a colorful poster on the wall showing a soldier with a submachine gun descending to the ground under a parachute. The poster contained the challenging words "Are You Man Enough to fill these Boots?" That was it! Rock knew that he wanted to be a paratrooper. The Marines lost an outstanding candidate, and Rock started a phenomenal 35-year career in the Army – predominantly in airborne units.

**Rock says.**

"I was sworn into the Army on October 15, 1942 at Fort Sill, OK and volunteered for airborne training. I was sent to Camp Blanding, FL. I was assigned to the 508<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment (508<sup>th</sup> PIR).

The 508<sup>th</sup> PIR was activated October 20, 1942. At that time, it had only enough officers and enlisted men to activate the Headquarters & Headquarters Company, a Service Company, and the First Battalion. During the activation ceremony, we recruits stood in the back of the formation.

However, a few days later, we were up front for arduous basic infantry and pre-airborne school physical training.

In February 1943, we moved to the Parachute School at Fort Benning, GA. Three weeks later I proudly pinned on my wings, I was a qualified parachutist.



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After a few days furlough, my first days off since October 1942, the regiment moved to Camp Mackall, NC for advanced infantry and airborne operations training. We participated in parachute operations and in largescale maneuvers in South Carolina and Tennessee. We also mastered the art of "beautification of the area" - picking up debris, cutting weeds, painting rocks, etc., skills we often used in Europe "beautifying" our tent camps in England and France.

After the Tennessee maneuvers and a short pass, the regiment packed up and moved to Camp Shanks, New York for overseas processing. On December 28, 1943, we sailed from New York aboard the USAT James Parker – bound for Belfast, Ireland.

In Ireland, we trained for a few weeks, and then moved by boat and train to England. We were lucky; the regiment occupied a tent camp only a short walk from the city of Nottingham.

After about 17 weeks of vigorous unit training, night parachute jumps and field exercises, we packed our equipment and moved to an airfield, and prepared for combat somewhere on the continent.

As a Corporal, LMG Squad Leader, I supervised my squad's preparations. Our light machinegun and ammunition was rolled into equipment bundles and parachutes were attached to them. These valuable bundles were dropped from pararacks under our C-47s, or pushed out the door as we jumped.

On June 5, we had a steak dinner and were watching a movie in the hangar, when we were told to fall out, and blacken our faces - - we were on our way!

We had a quick sand table briefing, said 'farewell and good luck' to our comrades, put on our gear and parachutes and marched to our designated airplanes.

Our planes had three large white stripes painted around each wing and the fuselage. Our officers had a 3" white vertical stripe painted on the back of their helmets. and the noncom's helmets had a horizontal white stripe.

Just before we boarded the aircraft, we were told our destination was Normandy, France, and each noncommissioned officer was issued a silk map of France; and everyone was given 5 - 10 dollars worth of francs."

[Note. Rock Merritt's entry into combat, his "first days" in Normandy and the heroic action in which he earned the Silver Star Medal is presented in Chapter II, Combat Operations along with his combat experiences in Nijmegen, Holland, and perilous fighting in Belgium.]

**Rock Merritt continues.**

"On September 17, 1944 we parachute d into Holland. I was the Hq1 Light Machinegun Platoon Sergeant.

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After weeks of fighting in Holland, we marched 22 miles carrying all of our equipment to Oss, Holland where we met trucks that moved us to Sissonne, France. Sissonne was great. We were billeted in an old French artillery post with warm dry beds and hot food.

Following a few weeks training replacements, we were alerted to prepare for a quick move to Belgium. The Germans had launched a surprise attack of 12 divisions (infantry and armored) through the lightly defended Ardennes.

Three American divisions tried heroically to defend the area, the newly arrived and untried 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division; the combat experienced 28<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, and the 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division.

In the morning of December 18, 1944, the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR loaded into large open trucks and headed for Werbomont, a small Belgian village located at the junction of the two main roads. A long cold ride with cold rations and very short rest stops.

In Belgium, we marched and maneuvered for several days while planners tried to find the best defensive positions from which to stop and destroy the rapidly moving German forces.

By late December 23, 1944, the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR was deployed in an eight-mile salient, stretching, from the main battle position to Vielsam.

The 508<sup>th</sup> PIR's mission was to provide a corridor to safety for the severely mauled and desperate survivors of the overrun infantry divisions and the hard-pressed 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division.

The nose of the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR salient rested upon the Salm River Bridge at Vielsalm. Our First Battalion, supported by my machineguns manned the tip of the salient.

By dawn of December 24, hundreds of vehicles (tanks, armored cars, command vehicles, jeeps) and desperate men fleeing destruction or capture by the Germans had transited the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR corridor to safety.

Hq1 machineguns were covering the Salm River Bridge – under continuous enemy artillery fire and strafing.

In the afternoon, a US fighter a P-47 dropped a bomb on our position and buried our assistant platoon leader. We managed to dig him out and get him evacuated. Concurrently the two Hq1 81mm Mortar Platoon forward observers were wounded and evacuated.

The 508<sup>th</sup> PIR's position was becoming increasingly perilous. It was vulnerable to being cutoff and destroyed by fast moving German armored forces supported with infantry.

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Late in the afternoon of December 24, the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR was ordered to withdraw to the main battle position. One platoon per Rifle Company would stay behind to provide a covering force.

We spent that Christmas Eve night executing the withdrawal, fighting strong German combat patrols, and traversing densely forested snow covered hills.

On Christmas morning, the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR was fully committed to developing a strong defensive position. For the next several days, we fought off strong German attacks.

Morale improved on January 7, 1945 as the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR went on the offensive. In a bloody and costly assault, the Their-du-Mont Ridge, overlooking the Salm River was captured. Thereafter, the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR fought through the heavily defended Siegfried Line, and the cold and deep snow of the densely forested Ardennes, all the way to the Roer River, and the end of combat for the regiment.

I missed the end of the Third Reich. On January 10, 1945, I was selected for a ten day furlough in the United States, and missed the terrible months Hq1 men and my platoon fought through the bitter cold, heavy snow, and the Siegfried Line.

On June 20, 1945, I returned to Hq1 in Hedderneim, Germany and resumed my position as the Light Machinegun Platoon Sergeant.

I served 35 years in the United States Army; and, during that time I served in many different units - the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR was absolutely the finest. It had the best officers, the best noncommissioned officers, and the finest men with whom I have ever served."

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CSM Kenneth Merritt served two tours as the Command Sergeant Major of the XVIII Airborne Corps and Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

He was nominated for the position of Sergeant Major of the United States Army in 1963, 1970 and 1973.

Rock completed 200 parachute jumps and in 1958 was awarded a "Gold" Century Parachute Badge by the Original Airborne Association.



Rock Merritt's numerous awards and decorations include:

- ?? Silver Star Medal
- ?? Legion of Merit Medal
- ?? Bronze Star Medal with two oak/leaf clusters
- ?? Meritorious Service Medal with two clusters,
- ?? Army Commendation Medal with three clusters
- ?? Combat Infantry Badge
- ?? Presidential Unit Citation
- ?? Masters Parachutists Badge with two combat jump stars.
- ?? National Defense Medal
- ?? European Theater of Operations Medal with Invasion Arrowhead and four battle stars
- ?? European Victory Medal, and the Occupation Medal with Germany Bar.
- ?? French Fourragere with Palm
- ?? Belgium Fourragere
- ?? Orange Lanyard of the Royal Netherlands Army.

In 1973, CSM Kenneth J. Merritt was selected as one of the five Command Sergeant Majors in the Army allowed to serve five years beyond the mandatory 30 years service prescribed by Army Regulations.

Kenneth (Rock) Merritt served five terms as President of the 508<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment Association.

On October 19, 2004, at Camp Blanding, Florida. Rock officiated at the formal retirement of the Association.

Rock also served three terms as Vice President of the Association, and many years as Association Parliamentarian.

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In August 1943, Rock Merritt married Sally (Hatley) of Stillwell; Oklahoma and they raised three children.

Over the years Rock and Sally Merritt sponsored 508<sup>th</sup> PIR Association and Hq1 reunions. Additionally, they provisioned and operated outstanding Hq1 hospitality suites (Command Posts) during Association annual reunions.



- ?? Sally went all the way with Rock, supporting his decisions, raising their three children, and sharing the joys and hardships of military life.
- ?? Our beloved Sally Merritt died at home July 11, 2004 in the arms of her family. We all loved Sally. We will miss her.

Kenneth (Rock) Merritt resides at 1517 Atwick Drive, Fayetteville, NC 28304-3901

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## **This Album is Not For Sale**

**T**his excerpt from the “We Served Proudly, The Men of Hq1” album contains the recollections of men who in their youth risked their lives in furtherance of our national interests. These memoirs are sacred to them – especially those events alluding to activities in which comrades lost their lives on the battlefields of Europe.

This album was prepared for perpetual residence in the archives of the Camp Blanding Museum complex, operated by the Camp Blanding Museum and Historical Associates, Inc. Starke, Florida. We are grateful for the support and assistance of the Camp Blanding Museum and Historical Associates, and for their kindness in having the museum make our album available to historians, students, researchers and others interested in our background and brief history.

No reproduction or distribution restrictions are imposed or implied for the album or pages thereof – providing such actions are not undertaken for profit.

Copies of the album have been presented to the Hq1 veterans or their survivors that contributed information for the effort. To facilitate reproducing copies of individual memoirs for relatives or friends, the memoirs have been developed as separate entities.

**October 19, 2004**

*George J. Stoeckert*

**Hq1 Album Collator**