

After several days the ship pulled into Panama City where it took on the 501st Parachute Infantry Battalion, which was later merged into the 503rd as its Second Battalion. The Poelau Laut didn't let any sea weeds grow on its keel at Panama and by the end of a day for loading the 501, it resumed its voyage.

The Commanding Officer of the 501 was Lieutenant Colonel George M. Jones. The Commanding Officer of the 503 was Colonel Kenneth Kinsler, who had preceded the outfit by flying to Australia. LTC Jones was the ranking Lieutenant Colonel on the ship so became the troop commander.

By the time the ship left Panama the Poelau Laut held about 1700 Paratroopers and another 300, or so, other people such as Air Corp, Quartermaster and Anti-Aircraft Artillery troops. She was very near her stated capacity of about 2100 troops.

Being limited to a speed of 15 knots the ship had not been able to keep up with the other ships in the convoy out of San Francisco. We were destined for a solo crossing of the Southern Pacific Ocean to Australia (as it turned out). Our voyage took place not long after the first Battle of the Coral Sea and it was feared there might be damaged Japanese warships which had headed South to "lick their wounds". They would not stand a chance against American warships but could easily sink the Poelau Laut which had only a few small guns aboard. Consequently, our course took us well to the South of the great circle route and actually below the Antarctic circle.

Our voyage was, eventually, to take 43 nights and 42 days. Paratroopers were not noted for going long periods without any alcoholic beverages. There was a good deal of discussion between the troops about how nice it would be to have a "nice cold beer", a "gin and tonic", or whatever. Having some 2,000 men crammed into a relatively small ship it was, reasonably, decreed that there would be no alcohol of any kind allowed. Everyone understood the reason for such prohibition but would have taken a chance to get their hands on something, if they had the opportunity.

Sometime, after being at sea for a little over 30 days that opportunity presented itself one night. One of the junior officers in the "stateroom" I'd been assigned to, managed to make contact with one of the Malay waiters from the "Officers Mess" and talked him into getting cases of beer for us.

A collection was taken up and the man delivered several cases of Dutch beer to the "stateroom". We set out to guzzle the beer as fast as the bottles could be opened. After more than a month of enforced prohibition the officers became quite mellow very fast.



**Col. Jones ("The Warden") on the roof of Mile Long Barracks, Corregidor. In the mid-distance is the post hospital, and Bataan is across the North Channel.**

Someone suggested, perhaps, our man should be contacted to see if he could get us something more substantial, like bourbon, scotch or gin. The man was easily bought and soon he returned with several bottles of Dutch Gin.

The party, then, began to get a bit rowdy. The singing and shouting made quite a bit of noise but with the overriding noise of the ship, all the merriment should not have been heard outside the "stateroom", but it was. Someone had heard all the noise and squealed on us, probably because he had not been invited to participate.

The Troop Commander, a Quartermaster Major, was informed and he soon entered our "stateroom". To say he was shocked is to put it most mildly. He nearly had a stroke seeing all the beer bottles rolling around the deck and the canteen cups of gin being nursed. He said *"I am going to get your Commanding Officer and he will certainly court martial the lot of you!"*

*(continued...)*



We recognized this threat as a real possibility because we were defying direct orders prohibiting drinking. We made fast work of dumping all the bottles over the side. This action in itself could have had us all court martialed since we were under very strict orders to throw nothing overboard. Debris tossed overboard could be found by Japanese submarines and used to determine our course. But we were desperate by that time and disobeyed another direct order.



**To the victors go the spoils. Col. Jones welcomes Gen. MacArthur to Corregidor on 2 March 1945. Later he will present "Fortress Corregidor" to the General, and in return will be presented with a DSC.**

After all the bottles went over the side we all jumped into our bunks and tried to look innocent.

LTC Jones arrived after 15 or 20 minutes and was somewhat shocked at what he saw. Having been a Parachutist for several years he survived the shock somewhat better than the QM Major.

One of the "casuals" in the "stateroom" was a Quartermaster, Captain Jones, who was an expert in unloading ships. He and his assistant, a 1st Lieutenant, were on their way to Australia to organize the unloading of American ships with war supplies which began to pour into Australia. LTC Jones asked for the Senior Officer Present. This happened to be Captain Jones. Captain Jones was a tall fellow, about six foot four. He had, of course, been imbibing as much or more than the rest of us.

Colonel Jones, who was not a short man himself, stepped in front of the taller man and, looking up, said "Captain, you have been drinking". Captain Jones, whose speech slurred at the wrong time, said "No Sir, I haven't been drinking".

Captain Jones' assistant's bunk was right below mine. About this time he stuck his head out of his bunk and said "I think I'm going to be sick". I whispered down to him "Not now you bum, not now". Luckily he didn't get sick or we'd been in worse trouble than we were already in.

There was no question. We would be punished. Would it be a court martial, or what? About the tamest punishment available was restriction to quarters. Colonel Jones chose to restrict the whole cabin to quarters for the remainder of the voyage. Thus Colonel Jones became the Warden and I became one of the Wardees.

At the time we had no idea how long the voyage was going to last. The days would dawn and here we were confined to quarters. The exception was the two meal times when we were allowed to make our way to the dining room. After a day, or so, we got sick and tired of being cooped up with only the other Wardees to look at. After you have had a day, or so, of reading or rereading your books, you really long to spend your time watching the sea. But we were not allowed to do that.

When we were placed under confinement we had no inkling of how long our voyage would last. The reasoning must have been that we might have passed word to the Japanese so they could find us as hit us with a torpedo. It is a bit hard to figure how we could do that but we didn't know where we were.

Fortunately, it turned out we were only about 4 days out of Brisbane, and when we pulled into the entrance to the harbor we were released from confinement.

Our experience as Wardees of the Warden was not as long as we had feared it might be.

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[Source: 503<sup>rd</sup> Heritage Battalion website]



# Captain Thanks Girl For Sending Doll to War

*Washington Star*  
23 Feb 1966

GREENSBORO, N.C. (AP) -- Little Jenny Scarborough, who sent one of her dolls to Viet Nam as a gift, has received a letter from a U.S. Army officer thanking her for "spreading the feeling of American friendship to the Vietnamese people."

"I realize you are only 5 years old," wrote Capt. John. E. Dunlap, Jr., commanding officer of Company D, 16<sup>th</sup> Armor, 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Brigade, "But I write this letter with the thought that you may read it again when you are 10, or maybe 18."

"Grownups know it's not easy for a little girl to part with one of her dolls and send it on a long journey to a strange land. So in your very kind and gentle way, Jenny, you made a great sacrifice and done a great deal to spread the feeling of American friendship to the Vietnamese people."

Dunlap told Jenny that a little Vietnamese girl named Nguyen Thi Le Thay received the doll.

"Le Thay is a 5 year-old girl, too. She has no mother or father...and has lived at the Ke Sat Orphanage four years now," Dunlap said. "But because of you, Jenny, she is a much happier little girl...And like all little girls, when she says her prayers and goes to sleep her doll will be there beside her."

"Though you are too young now to know all the reasons why American soldiers are here, you and your gift has helped us all to realize that even more than love, kindness, freedom and the smile of a young child's face when she sees a new doll, are basic ingredients of the happy, peaceful life we are trying to preserve for these people," the letter said.



Orphaned girls, Vietnam, 1966

# Who Dat?



Who recognizes this 2/503d Trooper keeping up with current events in the middle of a war? Musta been hard dirt, that's not a very deep trench. Ummm, pound cake.

# ~ Honoring our Medics ~

We put out a request some time ago asking for stories, recollections and photos of 173d medics for special coverage in our newsletter. Please take a moment to send in something to [rto173d@cfl.rr.com](mailto:rto173d@cfl.rr.com) so we can honor these men who did so much for so many of us.



2/503d Medic Jerry Levy, KIA 2 Jan 66 during Operation Marauder in the Mekong Delta, providing medical care to indigenous kids in 1965.



# The 82nd Airborne during World War II

## Campaigns – Rhineland



The young and brave loading up for Holland.

**A**fter a foothold was gained in France, the Allies reorganized their airborne divisions. In August, 1944 the First Allied Airborne Army (FAAA) was formed under the command of Lt General Lewis H. Brereton. It was composed of the U.S. XVIII Airborne Corps, the IX Troop Carrier Command, and the British I Airborne Corps. The U.S. XVIII Airborne Corps consisted of the 82nd, 101st and 17th Airborne Divisions. It was commanded by General Ridgway while General Gavin now assumed command of the 82nd Airborne Division. The new airborne army's first operation would be Operation Market Garden.

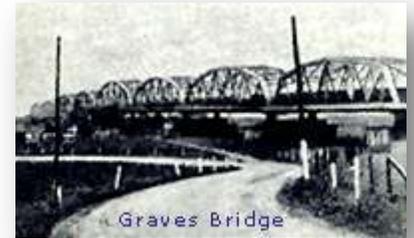
## Operation Market Garden



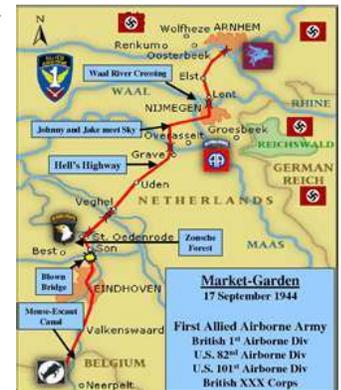
The jump during Operation Market Garden.

This was a plan concocted by British Field Marshal Montgomery that would be the first major daylight air assault attempted by a military power since Germany's attack on Crete. Similar to the Germans assault of four years earlier, the Allies initial plan for September 17, 1944 was to use the paratroopers and glidermen of the 82nd and 101st U.S. Airborne Divisions and England's First Airborne Division in a daring daylight drop into Holland. The airborne Allied troops were to seize roads, bridges and the key communication cities of Eindhoven, Nijmegen and Arnhem, thus cutting Holland in half and clearing a corridor for British armored and motorized columns all the way to the German border.

This would be the fourth and final World War II combat drop for the All-Americans of the 82nd Airborne. The word came on 15 September for the 82nd to jump in ahead of the Second British Army, 57 miles behind enemy lines in the vicinity of Grave, Holland with the objective of capturing and holding the key bridges at Grave and Nijmegen as well as some subsidiary bridges over a canal to the east of Grave.



The 504th was given the objective of seizing the longest bridge in Europe over the Maas River and several other bridges over the Maas-Waal Canal. Because of previous cancellations the men of the 82nd were doubtful that the mission would go especially when told that the planned flight was through the Scheldt Estuary (nicknamed "Flak Alley" by Allied bomber pilots) and that they were reportedly outnumbered by 4,000 of Hitler's Schutzstaffel (SS) troops and an unknown number of German tanks.



No cancellation was received, however, and on 17 September at 1231 hours, the pathfinders landed on the drop zone, followed thirty minutes later by the rest of the Regiment and C Company, 307th Engineers, to become the first Allied troops to land in Holland as part of Operation Market Garden - the largest airborne operation in history. By 1800 hours, the 504th had accomplished its assigned mission (although the enemy had managed to destroy one of the bridges). In just four hours, the Regiment had jumped, assembled, engaged the enemy, and seized its objectives.

*(continued....)*



Meanwhile, the 508th was under heavy enemy fire from the German paratroopers of the 3rd Fallschirmjager Division. The enemy continually counter attacked. The fight was intense at times but the 508th held the high ground on a place that earned the nickname "Devil's Hill."

For two days, the 82nd held its ground and conducted aggressive combat and reconnaissance patrols until the Irish Guards made the ground link-up, spearheading the advance of the 30th Corps of the Second British Army. However, the Nijmegen road and rail bridges, which were the last remaining link to British Airborne forces in Arnhem, remained in enemy hands.



**German troops counter-attack during Market Garden.**

While the 508th maintained the eastern flank, the 2nd Battalion of the 505th and tanks from XXX Corps attacked the south end of Nijmegen and the railroad bridges on September 20th. Again the 82nd encountered stiff resistance from the Germans as the fighting moved from house to house. At the same time a German Panzer-Grenadier division was being dispatched to Nijmegen to bolster the vital span. An assault crossing of the river was necessary but it was a seemingly impossible task because it required moving in boats across the 400-yard wide river against German 88's, flak wagons, 20mm cannons, machine guns and riflemen. Nonetheless, the crossing was ordered.

On September 20, in order to support the 505th attack and secure the bridge at Nijmegen, Major Julian Cook was ordered to cross the rushing Waal River in daylight with his 3rd Battalion and the support of Company C, 307th Engineer Battalion. In 26 canvas boats Major Cook and his battalion performed the death-defying feat of securing the north side of the bridges. Casualties were high and only thirteen boats returned to carry the second wave of the assault. But the 504th found the intestinal fortitude to persevere and triumph.



**SGT Robert B. White**  
**82 ABN veteran of**  
**Normandy and**  
**Holland jumps.**

The British General, Sir Miles Dempsey, after witnessing the 504th crossing the Waal, characterized the attack with a single word as he shook his head and said, "*Unbelievable.*"



**Two soldiers of the US 82nd Airborne Division watch as Cromwell tanks of the Guards Armoured Division of the 2nd Armoured Recon Battalion the Welsh Guards cross Nijmegen bridge in Netherlands, Thursday, September 17, 1944.**

On the following day near Oosterhut, Holland, Pvt. John Towle of Cleveland, Ohio, Company C, 504th PIR earned the Congressional Medal of Honor. Armed with a rocket launcher, he single-handedly - and without orders - moved into an exposed position and broke up a German counter attack of 100 infantrymen, two tanks and a half-track. He was finally mortally wounded by a barrage of German mortar shells.



**Operation**  
**Market Garden**

Finally, on November 11 the 82nd was relieved by Canadian troops after 56 days of combat. The division moved to camps near Rheims, France and placed in reserve along with other airborne units.

[Source: <http://www.ww2-airborne.us/division/campaigns/holland.html>]

(Photos added)



*The President of the United States  
in the name of The Congress  
takes pleasure in presenting the  
Medal of Honor  
to*

TOWLE, JOHN R.

*Rank and Organization:* Private, U.S. Army, Company C, 504th Parachute Infantry, 82d Airborne Division.

*Place and Date:* Near Oosterhout, Holland  
21 September 1944.

*Entered Service at:* Cleveland, Ohio.

*Birth:* Cleveland, Ohio.

*G.O. No.:* 18, 15 March 1945.



***Citation:***

For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of life above and beyond the call of duty on 21 September 1944, near Oosterhout, Holland. The rifle company in which Pvt. Towle served as rocket launcher gunner was occupying a defensive position in the west sector of the recently established Nijmegen bridgehead when a strong enemy force of approximately 100 infantry supported by 2 tanks and a half-track formed for a counterattack. With full knowledge of the disastrous consequences resulting not only to his company but to the entire bridgehead by an enemy breakthrough, Pvt. Towle immediately and without orders left his foxhole and moved 200 yards in the face of intense small-arms fire to a position on an exposed dike roadbed. From this precarious position Pvt. Towle fired his rocket launcher at and hit both tanks to his immediate front. Armored skirting on both tanks prevented penetration by the projectiles, but both vehicles withdrew slightly damaged. Still under intense fire and fully exposed to the enemy, Pvt. Towle then engaged a nearby house which 9 Germans had entered and were using as a strongpoint and with 1 round killed all 9. Hurriedly replenishing his supply of ammunition, Pvt. Towle, motivated only by his high conception of duty which called for the destruction of the enemy at any cost, then rushed approximately 125 yards through grazing enemy fire to an exposed position from which he could engage the

enemy half-track with his rocket launcher. While in a kneeling position preparatory to firing on the enemy vehicle, Pvt. Towle was mortally wounded by a mortar shell. By his heroic tenacity, at the price of his life, Pvt. Towle saved the lives of many of his comrades and was directly instrumental in breaking up the enemy counterattack.

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## A Rose Bush named Dale

In 2001, good friend Dale Olson (A/2/503) and I, along with a group of other Sky Soldiers returned to Vietnam. During our week-long visit, an afternoon was spent at a high school near Saigon where we participated in a



dedication ceremony of a dormitory built by Mike Thibault (A/2/503) for needy kids. Dale, at great risk, had smuggled into the country a fledgling rose bush which he presented to the kids of the school that day, and he had each of his Sky Soldier buddies water the flower to start it on its way. It was a kind gesture by a kind man. We lost Dale on October 22, 2011, and this world lost a good man, husband, father and granddad. In memory of our friend, my wife and I planted the rose bush seen here in our back yard and gave it the name, Dale. We walk past it every day and think of our friend.  
Ed



**Dale Olson  
1943 - 2011**

*The best of all good men*



## New Procedures Ensure Benefits Delivery to Veterans in Need

WASHINGTON, July 11, 2012 – The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced today it is deploying a new model for processing compensation benefits claims at 16 VA regional offices. The new model is part of a comprehensive transformation plan designed to yield an estimated 150,000 to 200,000 additional compensation claim decisions annually, while ensuring Veterans most in need receive priority attention.

*“This new model is a part of our comprehensive plan to eliminate the compensation claims backlog,”* said Under Secretary for Benefits, Allison A. Hickey. *“Our redesigned model follows comprehensive planning and testing to ensure we have the right recipe for success.”* The new organizational model involves special handling of claims from Veterans who are facing the most serious injuries or illnesses or experiencing financial hardships or homelessness, and therefore need immediate attention. Through a new “intake processing center,” claims are routed to one of three segmented lanes:

**Express:** Claims that have only one or two medical conditions, or have all the supporting documentation, medical evidence and service records needed for an expeditious rating decision—referred to as “fully developed claims”.

**Special Operations:** Claims requiring special handling because of the unique circumstances of the Veterans. These include financial hardship; homelessness; serious wounds, injuries or illnesses; Post Traumatic Stress Disorder associated with military sexual trauma; and former prisoner of war status.

**Core:** Claims with more than two medical conditions, or those that will need additional evidence to make a compensation decision.

The segmented-lanes approach helps increase speed and accuracy because the claims specialists become familiar with processing claims of similar complexity. Veterans and their Veterans Service Organization representatives are encouraged to provide all the needed evidence along with their application in a “fully developed claim” in order to expedite the process.

Sixteen regional offices have received the new organizational and process model, including Huntington, WV; Hartford, CT.; Portland, OR; Houston, TX; Cleveland, OH; Des Moines, IA; Boise, ID; Phoenix, ArZ; New Orleans, LA; San Juan, PR; Atlanta, GA; Indianapolis, IN; Wichita, KS; Milwaukee, WI; Newark, NJ and Fort Harrison, MT. These offices will also receive new technology systems and software upgrades

over the next 3 months. All 56 VA regional offices will have fully implemented all of the people, process, and technology initiatives in VA’s transformation plan by the end of 2013.

To learn more about how to file “fully developed claims” using VA’s new Disability Benefits Questionnaires (DBQs), visit <http://benefits.va.gov/disabilityexams>



Sky Soldiers & family members visiting 173d Memorial at Fort Benning, GA.

### *~ The Sky Soldier Exchange ~* *Troopers helping Troopers*

If you served or are serving with the 173d or one of our attached units (i.e. RAR, Kiwis, 75<sup>th</sup>, Cowboys, Caspers, etc.), don’t forget to send in by September 1st to [rto173d@cfl.rr.com](mailto:rto173d@cfl.rr.com) your 1/2 or 1/4 page *free advertisement* of something new or used you want to sell. *The Sky Soldier Exchange* publication with your ad will be sent to upwards of 2000 troopers on October 1<sup>st</sup>, in time for the holidays.

Space is not available to advertise stuff sold by an employer unless you are the business owner, and no real estate, auto, personal guns or investment/financial services ads will be run. Any ad the editor deems inappropriate will not be included. One ad per trooper, please. Half-page ads are subject to reformatting to 1/4 page at editor’s discretion.

If we receive enough submissions we’ll consider running this special publication of free ads once yearly. *ATW!*



# Tribute to Lt. Billie D. Harris

The 62-year search by Peggy Seale Harris for her husband, Lt. Billie Dowe Harris, who was listed as missing in action in France during World War II.

By Joyce Ann Ashley



When Billie Dowe Harris and Peggy Seale married on Sept. 22, 1943, they were like most young couples of that time – young, in love and full of hope. Despite the fact that the United States was fully involved in World War II, and lives were being changed daily, the 2nd Lt. and his bride were full of confidence in the future as they said their vows. Little did they realize how very different that future would be.



Peggy and Billie Harris

“We actually met through the mail,” Peggy Harris recalled. She was working as an electronic instrument mechanic at Altus Air Force Base at the time. A daughter of Mr. and Mrs. W.P. Seale of Vernon, Harris commuted each day to her job in Altus where she spent her time climbing in and out of airplanes, checking and replacing instruments.

“Billie’s father and I both worked at the base, and he kept telling me about his son, who was stationed in San Antonio. He wanted us to meet,” Harris said. A son of Virgil and Nell Harris, Billie D. Harris was an Army Air Corp flying cadet at Brooks Air Field in San Antonio where he was undergoing flight training. He and Peggy Seale corresponded for several months, and shortly after meeting, the handsome lieutenant proposed to the pretty Texas girl. He was 21 and she was 18. The couple was married in Florida where Lt. Harris had been sent to undergo advanced training prior to being shipped overseas.

“I didn’t even have money to buy him a wedding ring,” Harris said. “I used my Vernon High School class ring instead, and he wore it as his wedding ring.” Although the couple was expecting to have two weeks leave for their honeymoon, their time was cut short when a troop ship of pilots was torpedoed in the Atlantic.



Lt. Harris at A-2, an advance landing field near Criqueville, France, June 1944

Lt. Harris’ group was tapped to take their place. “His group was all taken to Tallahassee, and the wives were taken there to a huge hotel. When the men were called up, the wives were told to go home and not tell anyone that their husbands had been sent overseas until they had arrived there safely.” It was October 1943, and unbeknownst to Harris, it would be the last time she would see her husband.

Lt. Harris was assigned to the 355th Fighter Squadron/ 354th Fighter Group, stationed in southeast England. During the next few months, he would fly bomber support missions into Germany in the P-51 Mustang. After the invasion of Normandy, France, the attacks changed to ground targets with Lt. Harris flying multiple daily missions across the English Channel. During this time, he would earn two Air Medals with 11 oak leaf clusters and the Distinguished Flying Cross. “He told me very little about what he was doing,” Harris said. “There was a lot of censoring of the mail, but I knew he was flying missions.”

(continued...)



By July 1944, Lt. Harris had completed over 60 to 100 missions and was eligible to be sent home. *“He wrote to me that he would soon be home. In fact, he had been assigned a place on a returning troop ship only to learn that wounded had priority, and he would have to wait for another ship. I thought it was only a matter of time until he would be able to come home.”* The date was July 8, 1944.

In late July, Harris received a telegram stating that her husband was “missing in action” as of July 7, 1944. The telegram would be the first mistake in a long series of errors that would interweave itself into Harris’ life for the next 62 years. *“After I got over the shock, I went to the telegraph office and told them there had been a mistake,”* Harris said. *“I told them I had a handwritten letter dated July 8, so he couldn’t have been missing on July 7. I didn’t know if the telegraph operator had made a mistake or if it was a mistake at the war department.”* Harris subsequently received a second telegram correcting the missing in action date to July 17, 1944.

She was in Colorado at the time, having been convinced by friends that she needed to get away from her job and take a rest. *“I was working at the air base while Billie was overseas, and one day, I was taking an instrument panel out of an airplane in which someone had been killed. There was dried blood still on the panel. I just couldn’t do it anymore after that, so I went up to Colorado for a while.”*

Later, an official military release was sent to Harris from Supreme Headquarters in Allied France (SHEAF) asserting that Lt. Harris had returned to the United States on leave. But none of the family had heard from him. Not convinced that her husband was in the United States and with no further information on his whereabouts, Harris appealed to the Red Cross for assistance. *“I was told not to be concerned, that no doubt he was being ‘processed,’ possibly at some military hospital,”* Harris recalled. Lt. Harris’ wife and family were hopeful that would be the case. *“Billie’s parents and I chose to believe that he was back in the United States. We were hoping that he was in a hospital somewhere, and maybe just didn’t know who he was or had lost his memory. We had heard of cases like that.”*

By March 1945, when no further word came concerning Lt. Harris, his wife again went to the Red Cross and asked if the military hospitals could be contacted. *“I was told it was too expensive to launch a search, and they were sure Lt. Harris would soon*

*appear.”* Harris next contacted Congressman Ed Gossett in Washington D.C., who in turn sent the information to the International Red Cross in Switzerland. Thereafter began a long series of conflicting reports, including notification that Lt. Harris was missing in action, then killed in action, then again missing in action. It appeared no one could agree on what had happened to the young pilot. In fact, no one seemed to know what had happened.

In 1948, Harris received a government form requesting her to indicate where Lt. Harris’ remains should be interred. *“I really didn’t believe they were talking about Billie because we still didn’t know where he was,”* she said. In fact, Lt. Harris’ father had been told by a friend in California that he was certain he had spotted the young airmen on an elevator in California. *“Mr. Harris quit his job and went there in hopes that he would find his son. Our thought was maybe he was out there somewhere and had lost his memory.”* However, on advice of a lawyer, Harris signed the papers from the military, and this eventually allowed her to receive military benefits, something she had not been able to do until that time. She did not, however, believe that her husband was dead.

*“Until his parents died in the 1980’s, they also continued to have hope that their son was alive,”* Harris said. And the story might have ended there with Harris never knowing what had happened were it not for a cousin of Lt. Harris who had become intrigued with the situation.

*“Billie’s cousin, Alton Harvey, had heard the story of Billie all of his life. He was born after Billie died. He wanted to know what really happened, and after he retired, he began searching for the truth.”*

During his extensive research over the past few years, Harvey found that some pilots had been buried in France, and he discovered that files were now being made available from the Department of the Army. Initially, however, he was told it would be difficult to access the files because of limited staff.



**Jim Maloney (nephew) and Peggy Harris at Billie’s grave. Buried at Normandy American Cemetery St. Laurent-sur-Mer, France, 2008.**

(continued...)



A few days after his inquiry, however, he received a call from Washington D.C., informing him that a Frenchwoman had also been inquiring about the same files some six months earlier. The files had been pulled and were available.

The Frenchwoman, it turns out, was Valerie Quesnel of Les Ventés, France. Quesnel was a board member of the little French town, which in 2004 decided to observe the 60th anniversary of the French liberation. It was during these preparations that the complete story regarding Lt. Harris would come to light.

Representatives from the French Embassy in Canada were invited to attend the ceremony, which paid tribute at a war memorial to citizens who had been killed in an air raid on the town in 1944, to those who had fought in the French resistance, and to a pilot whose plane had been shot down in the nearby woods - a Canadian named Lt. Billie D'Harris. However, an article detailing the 2004 ceremony caught the attention of a Mr. Huard, president of the Normandy Association for the Remembrance of Aerial. Huard wrote to the town council that he believed the pilot in question was not Canadian, but an American. It was also noted that the pilot's body had been moved from the town in 1946, although a large marker remained there, and had been temporarily buried in another cemetery, then later permanently transferred to the Normandy American Cemetery at Colleville-Sur-Mer.

Quesnel made a trip to the cemetery and confirmed the information. It was then that she began her research through the Department of the Army in Alexandria, Va. In September 2005, Quesnel received over 200 pages of information concerning Harris. It was about this time that Harvey's research had led him to the same department, and he also was able to obtain the information.

Harvey and his wife drove from Austin, where they currently reside, to Harris' home in Vernon to personally present her with the documentation and perhaps the last piece of a puzzle that had gone unsolved for over 60 years. Among the information was the name and address of Quesnel. Harris immediately wrote a letter expressing her appreciation to the small town of Les Ventés for their original burying of her husband there and the subsequent years of tribute they had paid to his honor. Thereafter a correspondence began between the two women, and Harris was able to finally learn what had happened on that July day in 1944.

Peggy Seale Harris makes a trip to a small town in France to discover the fate of her late husband. In 2004, when the small French village of Les Ventés held a ceremony to observe the 60th anniversary of the French liberation, city councilwoman Valerie Quesnel learned that a gravesite in the town cemetery, which was said to have been the original burial location of a Canadian pilot shot down by the Germans during World War II, was actually that of an American fighter pilot from Altus, Okla., named Lt. Billie Dowe Harris.

Quesnel also learned that the pilot's body had been moved from the town in 1946, although a large marker remained there, and he had been temporarily buried in another cemetery, and then later permanently transferred to the Normandy American Cemetery at Colleville-Sur-Mer.

Quesnel made a trip to the Normandy cemetery and confirmed the information. She then began research through the Department of the Army in Alexandria, Va.



The community of Les Ventés in the Normandy region dedicated an area "Place the Billie D. Harris".

In September 2005, Quesnel received over 200 pages of information concerning Lt. Harris. It was about this time that Alton Harvey, a cousin of Lt. Harris who had been doing research on his fate for a number of years, contacted the same department, and also was able to obtain information.

(continued...)



Through records, documentations and eye-witness accounts, Harris learned that on July 17, 1944 around 7 p.m., Harris' plane had crashed in the forest outside the small village of Les Ventés, France, about 90 miles southwest of Paris. The plane did not burn, and French resistance members were the first to get to the aircraft and discovered the pilot had not survived. The men removed his handgun and codebook. They quickly left, however, when they heard Germans approaching the crash site.



Permanent granite marker on the original grave of Billie D. Harris in Les Ventés

**“Because his flight jacket bore the letters Billie D Harris, it was assumed it was D’Harris,” Harris said. “They thought from that that he was Canadian.”**

Among documents Harris received was a letter written on July 20, 1944 by the town’s mayor, a “Mr. Desfriches,” in which he stated that the Germans had removed an identification tag with the pilot’s name, identification number and his mother’s name and address, and a glass medallion containing a four-leaf clover. Found on the pilot was a ring with a “kitten” on it, bearing the inscription PLS, and Vernon HS 1941. This ring was actually Harris’ high school ring, placed on her husband’s finger on their wedding day in 1943 because she couldn’t afford to purchase a wedding band. The ring has subsequently vanished.

“He wore it as his wedding ring,” Harris explained. “I didn’t have money when we married to buy him a ring.” According to the mayor’s letter, the ring was kept by the mayor to be returned to the family along with two photographs also found, but somehow the ring disappeared while in U.S. military custody, Harris reported.

The townspeople retrieved the pilot’s body from the plane wreckage, and it was wrapped in a sheet given by a “Mrs. Frichot” and placed in an oak coffin. It was then buried at the cemetery at 9 a.m., July 19, 1944 in the presence of about 70 people. The coffin was covered with summer flowers brought by the townspeople from their own homes and gardens. The cemetery also contained the graves of others

considered to be “heroes” by the villagers, including those who had died assisting the French freedom fighters. In fact, each year since the country’s liberation, the people of the village had several times a year paid tribute to those buried in the cemetery, including the pilot that had been thought of as Canadian. Even after his body was removed in 1946 by the U.S. Army and moved to a temporary cemetery in Blosville, France, where he was listed as an “unknown,” the townspeople continued to include him in their tribute. “It was as if they adopted him as their own,” Harris said.

In 1947, Lt. Harris’ body was taken to a casketing point in Cherbourg where he was still listed as “unknown.” In September 1948, he was interred in Normandy American Cemetery as Billie D. Harris. The stark white stone cross bears his group and squadron numbers and “Oklahoma.”

*“When I received the information and files from Alton, I immediately wrote to Mrs. Quesnel to thank her for the kindness of the townspeople,” Harris said. In her letter, Harris wrote: “I was overwhelmed by the caring kindness of your townspeople and wonder if any of them are yet alive. I want to thank them for their tender care... I learned at last that caring hands took him from the wreckage.”*

As the women began to correspond and other town officials became aware of the situation, an invitation was issued to Harris from the current mayor, Christine Fessard, to visit Les Ventés. Meanwhile Harris’ story was reported in a French magazine and on French radio, requesting anyone with additional information to come forward.

With an emotional heart, Harris accepted the invitation to go to France, and on April 6, accompanied by Alton and Gaye Harvey, landed at Charles DeGalle Airport in Paris. The next morning, the group was met by Valerie Quesnel, who drove them to Les Ventés. On the way, they passed through the town of Vernon, France, a coincidence not lost on the travelers. In fact, on their return trip, they would spend a night at a hotel in the town.

In Les Ventés, the group was provided with a house in which to stay, where a hot meal was waiting upon their arrival. ..

(continued...)



... American and French flags had been placed by the front door. The kitchen was stocked, and each day, the group was invited to a home of a different councilman for lunch and dinner. *"It was just overwhelming, the way in which we were treated,"* Harris said.

On a trip to the nearby forest, Harris was at last able to see the site where her husband's plane had crashed. There she met Guy Surleau of Everux. *"He had been a young freedom fighter, and he had actually seen Billie's plane crash,"* Harris said. *"He told me he had run up to the plane, saw the pilot was dead and had run back into the forest because he thought the Germans were coming."*

Harris also met B. Frichot, the son of the woman who had given the sheet for Lt. Harris' burial. *"He told me it was only after he read the magazine article that he found out about his mother's involvement. She had never spoken about it."*

Harris also met a Madame Lorieux, who had heard about Harris through the radio broadcast, and wanted her to know she had been present on the day Lt. Harris was buried in Les Ventes. She gave Harris some small black and white photographs taken on the day showing the burial site piled high with flowers. Harris also received pictures of six young men who had served as pallbearers, and Surleau was able to identify them for Harris. Madame Lorieux also gave Harris a number of other photographs showing Les Ventes and the residents on the day it was liberated.

On Sunday, April 9, some 300 people gathered at a monument at the city hall, where Lt. Harris' name is listed among those martyred during the war. Mayor Fessard read aloud the names inscribed there. The group then made its way to the village cemetery for a ceremony similar to those that had been performed three times a year for over 60 years on May 8, victory in Europe; Aug. 22, the day Les Ventes was liberated, and Nov. 11, the end of the war. A number of local as well as national dignitaries spoke, and an Englishman named Bob Goodall, who lived in the town, served as interpreter. Harris was presented with a large bouquet, which she placed on the gravesite in an emotional moment.

Back at city hall, displays had been set up for public viewing, which included pictures and memorabilia from the era and also pictures that Harris had provided. An eight-course catered luncheon was held in Harris' honor after which she made a speech

thanking the people. In her words, Harris told those present how the actions of the townspeople so many years ago *"quiets and comforts my heart."* Certificates and proclamations from the Oklahoma Governor's office, the State of Oklahoma and the City of Altus were presented to Madame Quesnal and others of the city.

The next day, Harris and the Harveys, accompanied by Madame Quesnel, visited the Normandy cemetery. There they were greeted by Supt. Daniel Neece and his wife, Yolanda. Neece told Harris she was the first widow to visit the World War II cemetery in the past five years. *"It was very emotional for me,"* Harris said.



**At the Memorial - Peggy Seale Harris of Vernon (second from left) is joined by Texas Governor Rick Perry (fourth from left) at the memorial at Pointe Du Hock, Normandy, France during a visit Harris and her nephew, Jim Maloney, made in June. Others in the photograph are Jacqueline Pain, wife of Cricqueville, France mayor, John Chatel, translator, and Anita Perry, wife of Rick Perry.**

Harris visited the Normandy cemetery several times over the next few days. On one visit, she and Harvey were granted permission to sprinkle soil from Lt. Harris' parents' graves in Altus on their son's gravesite. She also has made arrangements for flowers to be placed on Lt. Harris' grave several times a year, including Valentine's Day, Easter, Christmas and on July 17, the date of the plane crash; Nov. 11, Veteran's Day, and Oct. 14, his birthday.

Harris never remarried. Billie, she said, was the most unusual person she ever knew. She recalled writing poetry in the letters she sent to him while he was overseas. Among the articles she received after Lt. Harris was originally declared missing in action was a page of poetry in his own handwriting, including the lines by a British Canadian poet, Bliss Carmon:

*(continued...)*



**“Lord of the far horizons, give us eyes to see, over the edge of the sundown, the beauty that is to be.”**

“We never talked about ‘what if,’” Harris said. “We had friends who got killed. We knew it was possible, but we never wanted to think about it. In his last letter, he was optimistic. He thought he was coming home soon.”

During the ensuing years, Harris lived for a while in Boulder, Colo., where she worked for a mining company, a mineralogist, a surveyor’s office, a savings and loan and the Boulder County Civil Defense as well as the Boulder Valley School District. She also wrote for several publications. She returned to Vernon, and in 1980 she graduated from Midwestern State University in Wichita Falls with a major in humanities and a minor in philosophy. She was librarian at Vernon College for a number of years.

As Harris reflected on the past months, she feels overwhelmingly grateful to the people of the small French village who adopted her husband without knowing anything about him, other than he was a young man fighting for freedom. “He is a hero to the people of Les Ventes,” Harris said. “He represents all the young men who gave their lives.” In fact, during the brief time he was in service, Lt. Harris was awarded two Air Medals with 11 Oak Clusters and the Distinguished Flying Cross. He was also posthumously awarded the Purple Heart.

Harris finds comfort in words penned in a memory book presented to her in Les Ventes and translated recently by Susan Coker and Mary Neuberger with Kent Butler doing the calligraphy. Many attending the luncheon wrote thanking Harris for her husband’s sacrifice, including these words signed by C. Hardouin: “I was seven years old in 1944. I was there to see the air battles. I now know everything that this young American’s sacrifice stands for, and I also understand in some small measure all the suffering endured by his young wife.”



**Peggy at the Texas Historical Museum in Vernon, TX, stands in front a special Billie D. Harris exhibit. The display of photographs are from her visit to Les Ventes and Normandy trip.**

The last months have been an emotional experience for Harris, who had preferred to bear her grief in private these past 62 years. “I don’t want to say this has been closure, because I don’t like that word,” Harris said. “I guess the best way to describe it is ‘relief’ to finally know the entire story, to be able to bring it all together, and to know what really happened.”

**Credits:** Billie D. Harris: Joyce Ann Ashley, Family Life Editor - The Vernon Daily Record. Alton and Gaye Harvey.

[Thanks to Bill Wade, CWO4, U.S. Navy, for bringing this story to our attention. Visit <http://wimp.com/missinghusband/> to view a video of the story]

## Lest We Forget

By Berton Braley

Our dead rest on the breast of France  
And all around the world  
Where by war's grim or splendid chance  
Our banners were unfurled:

So whether here or overseas  
Their bodies chance to lie,  
We pay full honour unto these  
Who did not fear to die.

Because they dared, because they died  
We and our nation live,  
Our liberty, our hope, our pride  
Were gifts that they could give:

And since for all these gifts the price  
Was life -- they held life cheap  
And blithely made the sacrifice  
And laid them down to sleep.

O, dead of many wars, who fought  
With spirit high and pure,  
The noble structure that you wrought  
Shall evermore endure!

You held your country's cause above  
All else: we, unafraid,  
Will keep your country worthy of  
The price you gladly paid.



# Dayton VAMC hosts 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Welcome Home celebration!

The week of August 20-25 is Dayton VA Medical Center's (VAMC) Operation Enduring Freedom/ Operation Iraqi Freedom/ Operation New Dawn (OEF/OIF/OND) 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Welcome Home week.

Activities kickoff on Monday, Aug. 20, with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Wounded Warrior Golf Tournament at the Dayton Country Club. This event will benefit Salute Military Golf Association, in cooperation with Dayton VAMC. This is the first year Dayton VAMC will be participating in the golf tournament.

Veteran Jim Fortune will be the keynote speaker at the luncheon. Jim is the Department of Ohio chairman, VA Voluntary Services (VAVS), chief executive officer of the Dayton National Cemetery Support Committee, a member of the VFW Post 9585 of Vandalia, Ohio, and Dayton VAMC's 2011 and 2012 Volunteer of the Year. All anticipate a good time.

On Saturday, Aug. 25, Dayton VAMC will hold its 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Welcome Home event, "A Night Out at the Ballpark," at the Dayton Dragons' stadium located in Dayton, OH. More than 700 Dayton VAMC Veterans are expected to attend.



Dayton VAMC will honor OEF/OIF/OND Veterans from the five branches of the military for their service to our country. The event is sponsored by Dayton VAMC and its supporters, including Montgomery County Veterans Service Commission, Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Kettering Health Network, Dayton VAWS, and Salute Military Golf Association.

Additionally, Dayton VAMC 2012 Welcome Home health promotion focus is "Be Tobacco Free!" Veterans are encouraged to make healthy choices.

Dayton VA Medical Center  
937-268-6511 | 800-368-8262

[Sent in by Sgt. Steve "Rock" Vargo, C/2/503d]

## Baby LRRP?



And in this corner, thanks to mom Susan and dad Charlie, is Declan (Deck-Lahn) Cundiff, weighing in at 6 lbs. 10 oz, born on Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>, July 2012. 173d LRRP Reed Cundiff and his bride Elaine, proud grandparents.

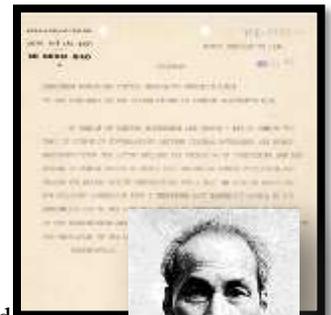
*"I wanna be an Airborne Ranger, I wanna live a life...oops, I think I just pooped my pants!"*

## From Ho to Harry

### TELEGRAM FROM HO CHI MINH TO HARRY S. TRUMAN

February 28, 1946

President Hochiminh  
Vietnam Democratic  
Republic Hanoi  
To The President of the United  
States of America, Washington, DC



On behalf of Vietnam government and people I beg to inform you that in course of conversations between Vietnam government and French representatives the latter require the secession of Cochinchina and the return of French troops in Hanoi STOP Meanwhile French population and troops are making active preparations for a Coup de Main in Hanoi and for military aggression STOP I therefore most earnestly appeal to you personally and to the American people to interfere urgently in support of our independence and help making the negotiations more in keeping with the principles of the Atlantic and San Francisco charters Respectfully HOCHIMINH

1946



## **“If You Don’t Write It Down, It Never Happened”**

**Jim Bethea  
HHC/2/503d, ‘65/’66**

Jim makes a lot of sense. Your newsletter is here to record your stories and recollections and photos for all time, while sharing memories with your brothers. In a hundred and more years from now these newsletters will be resting in some dusty old archive or still on the net, and historians and plain everyday people will actually read some of this stuff. Your time at war was important, not only to you, but to your heirs and for posterity. Send in a story; blood and guts stuff is o.k., but so are stories of the amusing kind, or, maybe you want to honor the memory of a buddy? Don’t worry about spelling and grammar, we’ll run it thru the washer to fix such mundane things. Plus, your kids and their kids might one day enjoy reading about their dad and granddad when he was *a young man, and a paratrooper.*

*All The Way!*

## **~ Harold W. Riley ~**

**War: World War I, 1914  
Branch: Army Air Force  
Service Location: France  
Rank: First Lieutenant  
POW: Yes  
Place of Birth: MN**



**1<sup>st</sup> LT Harold Riley, 1918**

***"It seems mine was the death room, each new patient brought in being very sick, no one surviving while I was there."***

When the United States entered World War I, Harold Riley wrote, *"I believed that the excitement and thrills of military action could be better appreciated from close contact, with real fighting."* Although his father had just been diagnosed with diabetes, Riley's family urged him to serve. He became a pilot in the newly formed Army Air Corps, dropping propaganda leaflets behind enemy lines and scouting for ground troop movements. In October 1918, his plane was shot down, and his observer, Sam Keesler, was killed. (Keesler Air Force Base in Mississippi was later named for him). Riley spent most of his brief time in captivity under medical care for his wounds; the war ended a month later.

## **The Combat Jumps They Made**



**The 503<sup>rd</sup> jumps on Noemfoor Island, July 3, 1944**

### **Unit: 503rd PIR**

Date: 5 September 1943

Operation: Alamo

Troopers: 1,700

Country: New Guinea

Drop Zone: Nadzab, Markham Valley

### **Unit: 503rd PRCT, 1st Battalion**

Date: 3 July 1944

Operation: Table Tennis (Cyclone)

Troopers: 739

Country: New Guinea

Drop Zone: Noemfoor Island

### **Unit: 503rd PRCT, 3rd Battalion**

Date: 4 July 1944

Operation: Table Tennis (Cyclone)

Country: New Guinea

Drop Zone: Noemfoor Island

### **Unit: 503rd PRCT**

Date: 16 February 1945

Operation: Topside

Troopers: 2,050

Country: Philippines

Drop Zone: Corregidor

