



THE SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA SENTINEL

SPECIAL FORCES ASSOCIATION CHAPTER 78

The LTC Frank J. Dallas Chapter

NEWSLETTER OF THE QUIET PROFESSIONALS

VOLUME 8, ISSUE 4 • APRIL 2017



508th Parachute Infantry Regiment



3rd Battalion
LT Edward J. Czepinski
KIA 6 June 1944

1st Battalion
LT Elmer R. Stull
KIA 6 June 1944

1st Battalion
LT Robert J. Weaver

2nd Battalion
LT Elbert F. Hamilton
KIA 5 July 1944

2nd Battalion
LT Lloyd L. Polette, Jr.
KIA 22 Jan 1945

3rd Battalion
LT Gene H. Williams
KIA 20 June 1944



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Photos from Bruce Long, SFA Chapter 78 President

The Best Participation Trophy Ever!

Sentinel December 2015 Story Gains

Interest from Military Museums

The Last Pathfinder Company is History: Long Live History!

Army's Last Pathfinder Company Deactivates At Fort Bragg



SENTINEL

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From the Editor

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COVER: This is the only known picture of all six pathfinder officers from the 508th PIR, taken during training at North Witham Air Base, England, probably in early May, 1944. Each regiment had three pathfinder teams, one from each battalion.

Photo Credit: Lt. Gene Williams; recovered from film in his camera, which was sent home to his wife along with his possessions after he was killed in action in June 1944.



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Lonny Holmes
Sentinel Editor

82nd Airborne Division Deactivates Final Pathfinder Company

The 82nd Airborne Division deactivated the final U.S. Army Pathfinders in a ceremony at Fort Bragg, NC, on February 24, 2017. This ceremony was held in the hanger at Simmons Army Airfield where F. Company Commander, 2nd Assault Helicopter Battalion, 82nd Combat Aviation Brigade, Captain Steven J. Orbon and company 1SG cased the units guidon. The deactivation of all other pathfinder units occurred last year.

This deactivation of the **Pathfinders** coincides with the Army's changing concept and structure of our fighting forces. Recently the "long range recon" units were also removed from current structure.

LTC John Norton attending the event as the representative of the National Pathfinder Association said the deactivation was a "historical event." Norton's father, LT General Norton, as a captain serving under General Gavin in WWII prior to D-Day was tasked with the formation and training of Pathfinder Teams, thus beginning a long and storied career.

Jack Williams writes an original "chapter" in the formation and WWII D-Day parachute drop of the 82nd and 101st Airborne Division **Pathfinders** especially for the Sentinel. Jack along with his twin brother, Gene, have long researched the Pathfinders. This has included personal interviews with all living members of the elite Pathfinders and Paratroopers of 3/508th, recording their memories and collecting documents and photographs. To further enhance their knowledge they have walked and surveyed the entire D-Day Drop Zones of the Normandy invasion of June 6, 1944. A "tip of the Beret" to Jack and Gene Williams.

Lonny Holmes
Sentinel Editor



Capt. Steven Orbon (left) and 1st Sgt. Adam Herbst (right) of the Fox Company Pathfinders, 2nd Assault Helicopter Battalion, prepare to case the guidon during a deactivation ceremony at Simmons Army Airfield, Fort Bragg, NC, February 24, 2017.

The President's Page | April 2017



Bruce Long
President SFA 78

Our Chapter meeting for the month of March was held at member **Richard Simonian's** office.

Our business meeting started at approximately 0845 hours. The main discussion was expenditures for the year 2017. A total of twenty-four members were present.

Ray Estrella, founding President of Chapter 78 made a special presentation to **Richard Simonian** of an original 10 SF Group challenge coin.

Mike Pierson also made a presentation on the behalf of the Department of Veterans Affairs by awarding challenge coins to six Vietnam, and Vietnam-era Chapter members. Those included myself, **Mike Keele**, **Hammond Salley**, **Gary Macnamara**, **Jim Duffy**, and **Earnest Tchang**. Mike Pierson will award additional coins to those who served at our next Chapter meeting.

Interesting Note: There were four original Chapter members in attendance, they were **Earnest Tchang**, **Sal Sanders**, **Art Dolick**, and **Ray Estrella**.

I now have new Chapter 78 Challenge Coins.

CSUF ROTC Officer's Guide continues to be a work in progress by our Secretary **Gary Macnamara**. **Tom Turney** has developed a stick-on label depicting the SF patch and SFA Chapter 78 logo. The label will be placed on the inside cover of each Officer's Guide, depicting our Chapter as the presenter of the Officer's Guide.

Ed Barrett briefed the membership on the upcoming ROTC awards. Unfortunately, USC did not get their request to Ed in a timely manner, and their ROTC graduation ceremony was conducted on March 3rd of this year. This is the first USC Ceremony we have missed in nearly twenty years.

UCLA will be conducting their ceremony on April 11. **Mark Miller** and **Kenn Miller** will be representing our Chapter.

Claremont/McKenna and CSUSB have not submitted a date as of yet. **Mike Keele** and **Tilt Meyer** will be representing our Chapter.

CSUF will be conducting ceremony on May 5th. **Gary Macnamara** and I will be representing our Chapter.

LTC Mark Waters, Professor of Military Science (PMS) for CSUF, will be departing for his new assignment in late May of this year. The Chapter voted unanimously to present him with a plaque to recognize his service as CSUF's PMS and as the director of the CSUF ROTC Program. It was agreed that Gary would purchase and design the plaque to include two Chapter 78 Challenge Coins, and could spend a maximum of \$50.

Range day was discussed by Chapter membership and it was unanimous that the Burbank Rod and Gun Club was too far away. Other ranges were discussed. It was also agreed that July would be the earliest date, and would coincide with our Chapter meeting on July 15th.

Prado Dam is a consideration as it has overhead covering. **Jim Duffy** will contact Artemis Defense Institute, and see if they might be able work out a minimum use fee for a portion of the range as Artemis does all of their live fire at this range.

Tom Turney has pledged \$350 to the Chapter, and has asked the Chapter to make a contribution to the Vietnam Fund in support of the "Montagnards". Tom also plans on contacting all of the Chapters to make a contribution. An article is scheduled to appear in the next DROP magazine.

A discussion was held with regards to individual contributions, and the best way to do that is write a check for whatever amount, send it to the Chapter Treasurer and indicate where you want it to be sent. Richard also commented that the Green Beret Foundation does the best job in distributing money where it is needed.

Mike Keele made a personal pledge of \$350 to the Vietnam Fund.

The VFW and American Legion is sponsoring "An Evening of Recognition and Awareness" at the at the Marriott Desert Springs Resort & SPA on May 13th, 2017 from 1700 – 2000 hours.

I recently spoke with **Colonel Wise**, Commander of SOD/North and he informed me that he has just recently returned from Afghanistan after paying a visit to A Company. All is well with the ODA's, and the ODB.

The home coming for A Company is still a work in progress. COL Wise would like to have a BBQ at Los Alamitos, and would also include family members.

Lena Eylicio recently sent me a photo of her husband **SGM Hank Eylicio** and **Richard Simonian**. This photo was taken during A Company's deployment from Los Alamitos, CA.

Our next Chapter meeting will be held at Richard Simonian's office conference room on April 15, 2017.

0830 hrs. Breakfast / Meeting, 1000 hrs. Chapter Meeting
Address: 326 W. Katella Orange, CA 92867 Bldg. L4.

Feel free to contact me. Blong26774@gmail.com ❖

Bruce D Long
President, SFA Chapter 78
SGM, SF (Ret)

Photos from Bruce Long, SFA Chapter 78 President



SGM Hank Eylicio and Richard Simonian. This photo was taken during A Company's deployment from Los Alamitos, CA.



Four original Chapter members attended the March Chapter meeting; pictured above left to right, Earnest Tchang, Sal Sanders, Art Dolick, and Ray Estrella.



Colonel Wise, second from right, with SF A Company Troops in Afghanistan.

The Best Participation Trophy Ever!



By Mike Keele

When disparate people with a common goal come together, good things happen. Such was the case last Christmas season, when war correspondent Alex Quade was in town. She had been invited to speak at Chapter 78's Christmas party, and had accompanied Chapter Prez. Bruce Long, Jim Duffy and other Chapter members to the Artemis Defense Institute for a shooting experience—the day just before the big party. One of the members, Sgt. Robb, mentioned that he had put some care packages together for some of his buddies who were currently deployed, and when he went to the post office with the boxes, it was going to cost seventy-plus dollars to send them. Each. Unhappy with that, he left the post office in a huff, but before he left, he learned about the *Postal Service's Flat Rate shipping box, which is about \$17.95 to mail, no matter what it weighs.*

So the discussion turned to sending care packages to the deployed of A/5/19th SFG. Since the party was the next day, and Robb was available, he volunteered his time for the project. The party included a donations jar for Chapter functions, as well as a silent auction of donated items. The take totaled \$3,375, and the work began, with “care package” *Robb went looking for sale items of the type he most liked when he was on deployment. Stuff that couldn't be bought, since there are no stores in the Afghan outback. Things like snacks, toiletries, writing*

tablets. And speaking of writing tablets, Robb picked up boxes of crayons to give to the local kids, not to mention candy, something Afghani children don't see much of. This also puts a check mark in the “hearts and minds” box.

Robb said that since it is *winter in Afghanistan, he went on a search for thermal underwear and socks, turtle-neck long sleeve shirts and many other incidental things that a person doesn't think about until he can't get them.* Things like *skin lotion, deodorant and even shaving cream* for the occasional man who truly wants to stand out.

While at Artemis that day, Robb met a guy who had overheard the conversation and said he had purchased a building which contained a lot of what he described as “*handi-wipes.*” They turned out to be the Cadillac-pickup-truck of handi wipes, and the gentleman offered a pallet of them. They looked to be so useful that the donor, having been showered with praise, offered a second pallet. These wipes are the heavy-duty moistened type that mechanics and machinists use.

Not to be deterred by a hard-hearted postal system, Robb marched back to the post office and spoke to the post master, who volunteered enough Flat Rate Boxes to ship everything. While the small mountain of food stuffs and trinkets were piled in Robb's living room, Bruce Long made another great find, right at A Company's HQ in Los Alamitos. Seems they were loading a shipping pallet to be sent to the men, and Bruce saw an opportunity: Would we be able to stack our care packages with the official materials? Presto! A \$700 saving in mailing costs.

So, if you've ever wondered what somebody in the war zone might like, in addition to the cookies, chocolate and sunflower seeds we always craved in RVN, here are some examples. Now, get out there and stuff a box for the kids in your life who aren't watching *Ironside* reruns on TV.



Sentinel December 2015 Story Gains Interest from Military Museums

The December 2015 Sentinel cover feature “*Tracking down a Hero; The Story of SGM James O. Schmidt*” by Jack and Gene Williams has been picked up (from the Sentinel of course) and is included in the military history section of several Military Museums.

Most recently the article was mentioned by Fayetteville, North Carolina's Airborne & Special Operations Museum Foundation on their Facebook page (which was accompanied by the photo shown at left) in a post dated March 3, 2017:

We received an article about SGM James Schmidt, a WWII, Korea, and Vietnam Veteran, from his daughter along with this picture of SGM Schmidt at the museum. The article contains his incredible story from enlisting at 14, being injured in a combat jump by 15, serving with the 187th in Korea, and Special Forces in Vietnam. Thank you Ms. Schmidt for sharing your father's stories!

The Last Pathfinder Company is History: Long Live History!



Jack Williams

By Jack Williams

The announced end of the storied 82nd Airborne pathfinder company may have been long overdue given the technology (GPS) and the problematic usefulness of massed paratrooper drops on today's battlefield. Still, before the final rites are said and TAPS played over the pathfinder's demise, perhaps we should reflect

on who the original pathfinders were. Where, when, and why were they created? What is the source of the almost mythic lore that surrounds them, lending prestige to the pathfinder patch for almost 70 years?

In WWII, a crisis developed during the 1943 Sicily combat jump when 504th PIR and 505th PIR troopers were scattered all over the island. Despite the ultimate success of that invasion the airborne drop fiasco (*including many C-47s shot down by our own Navy on the run-in*) dramatically brought home the need to find a way to concentrate combat serials onto their intended drop zone.

Almost immediately after the campaign, (then) Col. Jim Gavin, 505th PIR, and Lt. Col. Joel Couch, 52nd troop carrier wing, created an experimental school in Sicily to train volunteers to jump moments before the main serials, set up homing beacons, and mark the DZ. This school was inspired in part by the recommendations of the 509th PIR who had experienced the issue twice in North Africa.



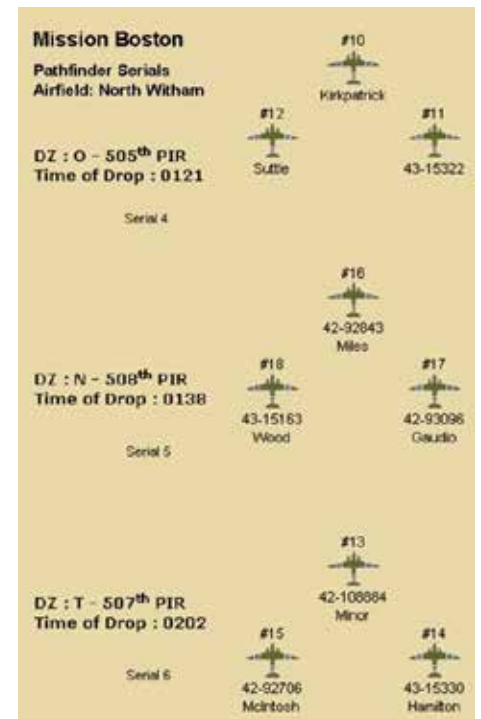
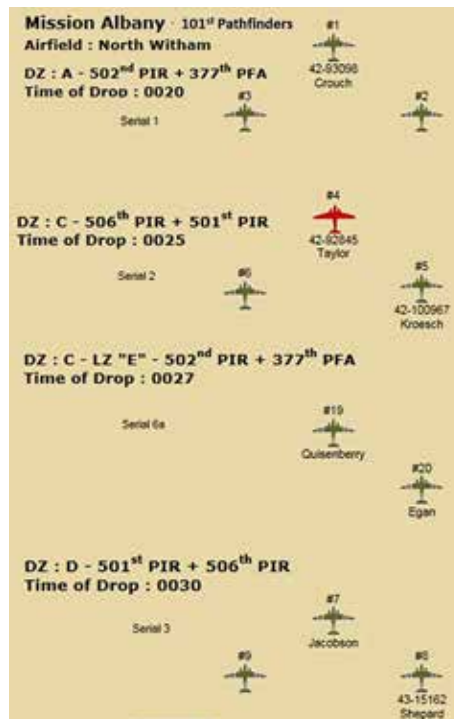
82nd Divisional Pathfinder Leader, Capt. Neal McRoberts, inspects Pathfinder team in England

In Sicily, nine-man proto-pathfinder teams were organized and then used effectively during the Salerno combat drop. But Salerno was a limited test because the jump was made behind American lines into a wide expanse of beach already marked by blazing 55-gal drums. Regardless, both regiments were quickly operational after the “oil drum jump” which was a positive for the pathfinder concept.

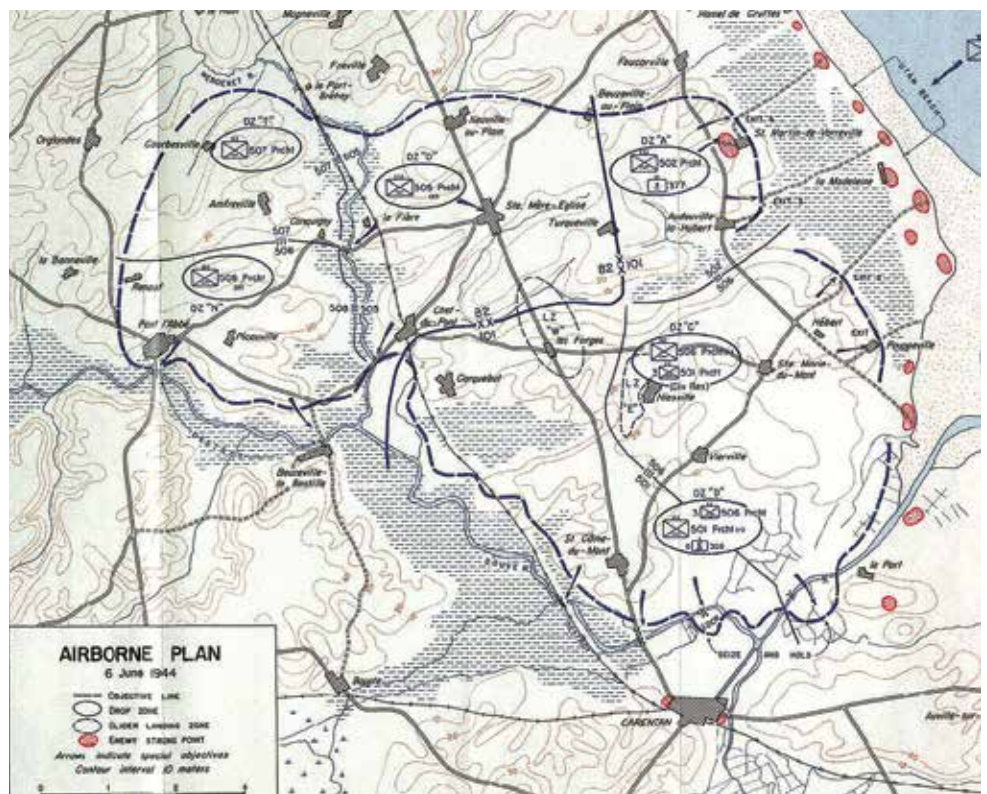
Though pathfinders first were used at Salerno, the 70-year storied reputation of the pathfinders rests almost completely on their signature deployment during the Normandy D-Day night-jump, 6 June 1944. After D-Day, pathfinder teams were used in the invasion of Southern France and some were used in the Pacific. But a few months later only five 9-man teams were dropped during Market-Garden in Holland which was the last combat jump for pathfinders in WWII. Though Pathfinders were used in Korea during the Munsan-ni drop, their role had changed and they were no longer a critical combat element in the success of the operation.

So to fully appreciate the moniker “pathfinder,” and understand the mystique of that very cool pathfinder patch, it is necessary to focus on the D-Day Pathfinders. To do that we must understand the plan for the Airborne Divisions during the invasion, the DZs that were to be marked, and what happened to the Pathfinders on the ground.

In March, 1944, the 82nd and 101st Airborne formed a Provisional Pathfinder Group at North Witham airfield in England and began the Pathfinder training for D-Day. The TO&E organization of a Pathfinder team was established to be two officers and twelve enlisted men. These included a Team Leader (officer), Assistant Team Leader (officer), halophane light Section Leader (EM), seven EM halophane light men, two Eureka set operators and two assistant Eureka operators (EMs). Additionally each team included a security element, usually at least four heavily armed troopers with the sole mission of protection of the Pathfinder team as they went about their mission.



From Patrick Elie web site: see reference http://www.6juin1944.com/assaut/aeropus/en_index.php



Assigned D-Day six drop zones. Source: http://www.6juin1944.com/assaut/aeropus/en_index.php

The key equipment for these original Pathfinders were two beacons: (1) a homing radar device called a “Eureka set” that broadcast a signal picked up at a range of 20-25 miles by a “Rebecca” tuner installed in an aircraft; (2) visual markers for the DZ including halophane lights (night jump) and/or large marker-panels (day jump). The Eureka - Rebecca homing systems were adapted from British RAF equipment that was perfected and used to guide bomber streams at night onto city-wide targets over Germany. Indeed the word “pathfinder” was originally used as a moniker for the few lead bombers that flew in first on bombing raids to mark the targets.



Pathfinders of the 3/508th commanded by Lt. Gene Williams; Back row : Lt. Williams, Pfc Jeffers, T5 Lamoureux, Pfc Rogers, Pvt Stott, Cpt Calvert, Pvt Parchman, Pvt Murdoc-504, Sgt Barbieux, Lt. Czepinski; Middle row: Pfc Stensky, Pvt Pawlings-504, Pvt Baldassar-504, Pvt Rigapoulos-504, Pfc Martin, Pfc Richardson, Pfc Harralson, Pfc Nicholson, Pvt Walker; Front row: SSG Barr, 2/Lt Hoffman – copilot, 1/Lt. Wood – pilot, 2/Lt. Gunn – nav., Cpl Camacho

Each paratrooper battalion contributed one volunteer Pathfinder team. As there were six US paratrooper infantry regiments (PIR) deployed in Normandy, each regiment having three battalions, there were 18 Pathfinder teams launched for the PIR DZs. Two additional teams flew with the 101st to mark the glider LZ “E,” so in total there were 20 Pathfinder teams dropped on D-Day.

All of these Pathfinder teams were later historically identified by the number chalked on the side of their planes; numbers 1 to 20. Actually, each airfield chalked a number on every plane to designate the order of flight. So there were many “chalk 18s” (for example); thirteen in the PIR serials and another ten in the glider missions flown later on D-Day. But the mythos of the D-Day Pathfinders has led history to uniquely recognize the “chalk” numbers of the Pathfinder sticks from North Witham. “Chalk 18” today almost invariably refers to the Pathfinder stick, while the numbers of the planes of the combat serials have faded from memory.

Each PIR’s three Pathfinder teams were targeted for one of the six DZs (see map on page four), and launched in three planes flying in a tight “V” formation. These “V” serials are shown in the graphics above, borrowed from Patrick Elie’s remarkable on-line site; see http://www.6juin1944.com/assaut/aeropus/en_index.php. Of note is “Chalk 17” flying in the 508th PIR Pathfinder serial. That very plane is now on display at the WWII Museum in New Orleans.

Contributing to the lore of the D-Day Pathfinders that has lasted to the present day were the pictures taken of all the sticks before

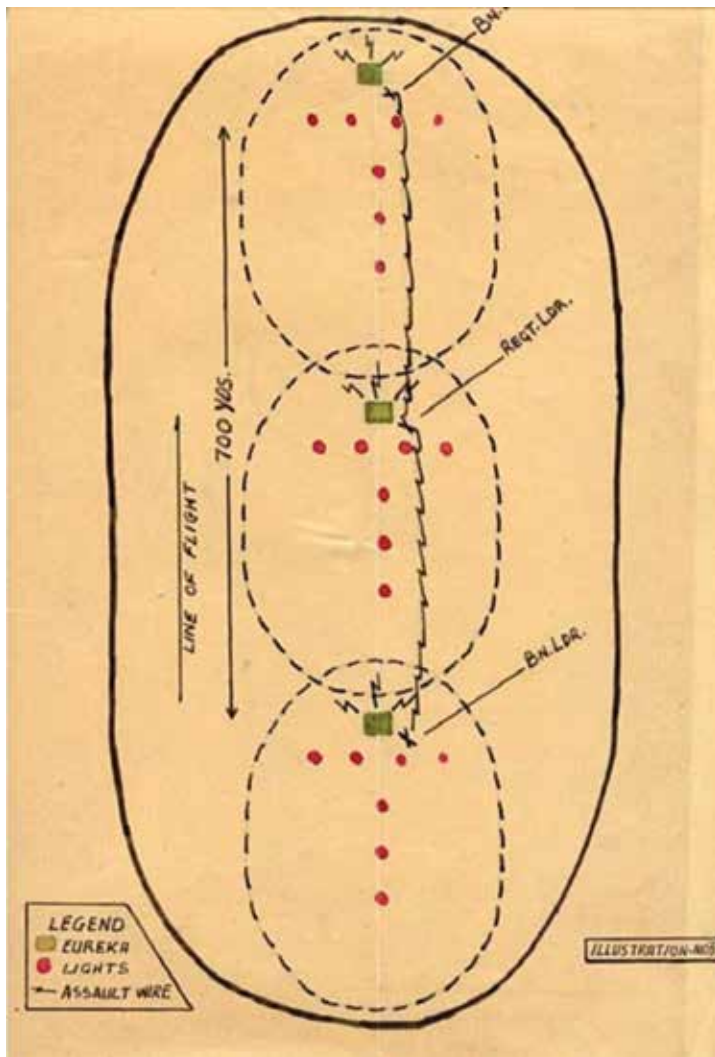
their departure for Normandy. An example (above) is a famous picture of “Chalk 18” Pathfinder stick of the 3/508th commanded by Lt. Gene H. Williams (top left), destined for DZ “N.”

In truth, these “stick” pictures were actually organized by the USAAF and were intended for the plane aircrews, not the airborne infantry Pathfinders. But because of their common training, the aircrews insisted their passengers, the Pathfinders, be included in the shot to the lasting delight of historians today.

The planned DZ for each regiment was approximately 2,000m long and each battalion was to jump into a 700-800m target within that DZ. This would require an entire stick to exit the aircraft in about 18 seconds, assuming a jump ground speed of about 110 MPH. This operational fantasy proved to be wildly optimistic in practice for both the Pathfinders and the combat serials.

It was planned that three “ts” of seven halophane lights, one for each battalion, would securely identify a regimental DZ. The homing radar Eureka sets were to be set at the top of the each of the halophane light “ts.” This arrangement was intended to permit the dropping of each battalion on different sections of the regimental drop zone thereby aiding assembly and deployment.

The plan rehearsed at North Witham during dozens of practice jumps called for the Regimental Pathfinder Leader to select the location of the middle halophane light “t” immediately after the team assembled. He was then supposed to send the two other teams



Regimental drop zone pattern adopted for Normandy invasion

to their locations, one forward and one to the rear of the base position. The distance between the "t's" was supposed to be about 700 yards which was the hoped for exit distance of a full stick of combat loaded troopers from a C-47 flying at about 110 MPH.

The combat serials were to arrive about 30 minutes after the Pathfinders jumped and activated the Eureka homing stations and lights. These beacons were supposed to operate for 15-30 minutes before and after the scheduled arrival of the combat sticks and then the pathfinder mission was effectively over. With the end of that mission, Pathfinder personnel were to rejoin their combat companies for conventional infantry operations.

But many of the assumptions by the D-Day airborne planners were faulty, negatively impacting the fate of the Pathfinders, and the even the overall success of the US airborne operation. The planners assumed that a full stick of 18 (or more) combat loaded troopers, including the Pathfinder sticks, could exit a C-47 at night in 18 seconds, or within about 800 meters when the plane was flying at 100 knots. In actuality, with heavy flak, cumbersome combat loads, bucking planes, chaos, exiting the plane in 30 seconds was more often the case for the Pathfinders and also for the following combat serials. Furthermore, many of the

planes exceeded their designated ground drop speed, possibly because of a 15-25 knot tail wind. This further spread out the individual sticks. It is documented that some Pathfinder sticks were dropped on a line over 3 kms long which made "rolling up" those sticks almost impossible.

The planning assumptions regarding the nature of the Normandy hedgerow terrain were also terribly deficient. The hedgerows were assumed to be similar to those of England, routinely jumped by horses and riders during fox hunts. As has been widely mentioned in many historical documents, this assumption was false. The hedgerows of Normandy were virtually impenetrable and the fields were so small that it made assembling a stick extremely difficult even if dropped within the planned 800m spread. The existence of a half mile wide flooded plain along the Merderet River was also totally overlooked.

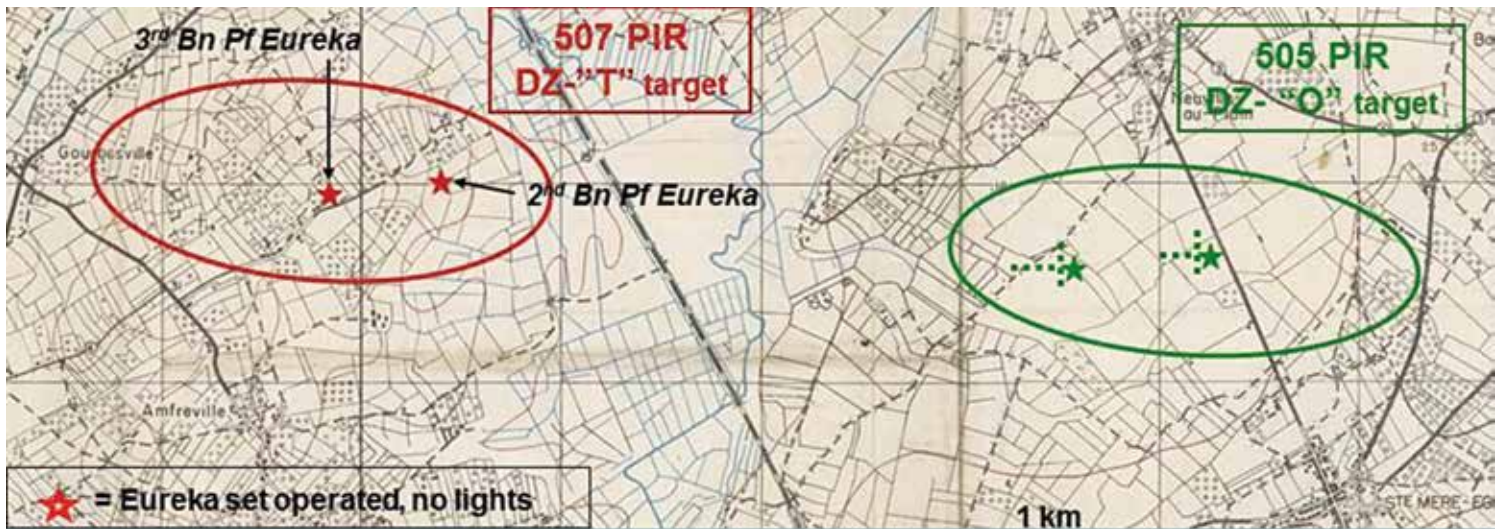
Finally, the Rebecca receivers in the incoming serials were distributed only to the leading planes of each "V." But, the pilots were told to limit the use of the Rebeccas because when many were operated in proximity, they could create interference on the run-in. This led some pilots to turn their Rebecca receivers off. Unfortunately, even if the Rebeccas were operative, if the formations were disrupted (which they were) visual identification of the proper drop zone was the only default for most pilots. Given the failure to set up lights on many DZs, this contributed to the mass confusion and wide dispersal of the paratroopers despite the best efforts of the Pathfinders.

The story of the experiences of the Pathfinders on each DZ is worthy of individual study. Suffice to say that the 101st Pathfinders had mixed success. On DZ "A", the Pathfinders were dropped together slightly off target, but the sticks were strung out over 3-kms. Three Eureka sets and one 7-light "t" was activated and the DZ set up as best as could be organized.

On DZ "C," one plane was forced down into the English Channel en-route. The other two Pathfinder sticks received moderate fire when dropped, but were able to set up one coded light and one Eureka slightly west of the intended DZ. The Eureka was in operation as scheduled, but the serial drops on this DZ were scattered.

On DZ "D" the Pathfinders were dropped slightly off target but immediately ran into intense fire. No lights or Eureka were set up on the DZ though one Eureka was put into operation on the glide path. Over half the Pathfinders were MIA after the drop. For the glider landing zone (LZ), "E," two sticks of Pathfinders, Chalk 19 and 20, jumped onto DZ "C." They then moved overland as planned to the LZ and were able to set up their systems properly by the time the gliders arrived.

For the 82nd, the pathfinder sticks of the 507th on DZ "T" ran into significant though sporadic resistance. But more importantly the geography of the DZ featured many tiny fields. Though two Eureka homing sets were placed in operation, no lights were set up partly because the halophane light men could not find the assembly point in the maze of the hedgerow terrain. This in



turn caused the main combat serials intended for this DZ to be dropped “long” landing in the flooded Merderet marshes. The complex of small fields enclosed by brown-marked hedgerow borders can be seen on the actual D-Day map at the top of this page.

The Pathfinders of the 505th all landed on target and faced almost no active resistance. They were able to set up their DZ as per SOP. Though one halophane light “t” and its Eureka set failed to function because of a battery wiring error, the others were fully operational when the main serials arrived. This helped the 505th combat serials to drop with reasonable accuracy, enabling speedy concentration and the capture of the key town of St. Mere Eglise.

Both the 505th and their Pathfinders have deservedly received generous credit for accomplishing the relatively concentrated drop of the regiment. But some of their success could also be ascribed to favorable geography. A quick look at the map will show that the 505th DZ “O” consisted of much bigger fields with fewer hedgerows obstructing assembly, than either DZ “T” or “N.” Also, DZ “O” had little or no armed opposition. Pure geography and the luck of the location of German troop deployment enhanced the assembly of the 505th Pathfinder teams. The subsequent drop of the 505th combat serials was therefore concentrated and effective, with a possibly decisive impact on the success of the entire 82nd Airborne mission. Such fortuitous events often accompany the fortunes of war.

Much is known about the drops and the actions of the pathfinders on each DZ in Normandy, with one exception. What happened on DZ “N” west of the Merderet is still shrouded in mystery. The 508th combat serials and the other units targeted for the DZ (including General Gavin and staff) were widely dispersed on the run-in, because of cloud cover and flak. It has been established that the



508th Pathfinder teams were mis-dropped about 1 ½ kms south-east of the intended DZ. This was fortunate in some ways because the intended DZ was virtually on top of the headquarters of the German 91st Division and was thus heavily defended. But little else is known about the events, forces and actions on that DZ.

There are strong indications that the Pathfinders landed in the location shown on the map (see map above). It is known that the three 508th Pathfinder teams for DZ “N” dropped into an almost instantaneous heavy firefight and about 50 percent of the three teams were lost in that initial contact. Chalk 16 carrying the 508th Regimental Pathfinder Leader, as well as the Division Pathfinder Leader, experienced a trooper-jam in the door of the plane. As a result, several members of that stick were dropped kms distant. Chalk 17 and 18 Pathfinder sticks were dropped close together, but were immediately caught up in the firefight. A fire line of Pathfinders was apparently formed to hold the enemy at bay while the rest of the team who could assemble attempted to set up the DZ.

One Eureka and an experimental BUPS homing system were set up and operating when the combat serials were scheduled to arrive. However, only two halophane lights were available and activated. Most of the light-men were toward the rear of the three



Lt. Gene H Williams, Chalk 18 leader in Normandy about 19 June, KIA 20 June 1944

sticks and were dropped 'long' into a bivouac area next to the Merderet River. Most of them were unable to fight their way clear to join the teams on the DZ.

Despite the ad hoc DZ "N" set up and with the fire fight raging, approximately 10-20 sticks, probably of the 1/508th from the 22th serial, dropped on the Eureka set (instead of the intended 132 sticks). The rest of the combat sticks intended for DZ "N" were jumped all over the Cotentin Peninsula. As an example, General Gavin and staff and the 508th Regimental commander and staff were dumped into the Merderet River near DZ "T" several kms north of DZ "N."

Adding to the fiasco, the 101st Pathfinder team on DZ "A" kept their amber beacon lights on for 2 hours after their jump instead of turning them off after 30 minutes as planned. This apparently confused some of the serial pilots carrying the 508th to DZ "N," which was also identified by amber lights. The confusion was likely enhanced by the similarity of Morse code "A" and "N" when broadcast. Several 508th sticks intended for DZ "N" dropped erroneously while flying toward the coded lights on DZ "A."

Just before morning on 6 June, the surviving Pathfinders on DZ "N" joined a column of troops and eventually coalesced with other forces under LTC Thomas Shanley on Hill 30 west of the Merderet. The four day stand on that hill by this body of 400 troopers is now recognized as one of the keys to the success



A pathfinder stick in England and with their equipment.

of the D-Day invasion at Utah Beach. That Hill 30 hedgehog diverted German defense forces from defending against the 82nd Airborne's famous 9 June frontal assault across the Merderet at La Fiere causeway. The Hill 30 position also controlled the west entry of the Chef du Point causeway partially shutting off that access route to Utah beach.

The Pathfinders of D-Day rejoined their airborne infantry units when their D-Day mission was completed. The recommendations from the D-Day after-action studies were that pathfinder teams be reduced to a minimum, and that night jumps be canned. Never again would such a large body of pathfinders be needed or employed. But the romance of their D-Day actions fed by the undeniable fact that they were the first US soldiers to touch ground in France has lived on. The mythos of their small special force unit has grown with time, memorialized by movies, TV documentaries, biographies, and the curiosity of the public.

With the demise of the 82nd Airborne Pathfinder Company, the last of the troopers who proudly wear that beautiful pathfinder patch will eventually be gone. Perhaps it is true that the training of modern day pathfinders has been archaic for some time. But the lore and heritage of the D-Day Pathfinders and the prestige of the pathfinder patch has not faded. It rests solidly on the foundation of the actions of twenty sticks of Pathfinders dropped into the night over Normandy in the early hours of June 6, 1944. RIP Pathfinders, you may be history, but your history will never be forgotten. ❖

About the Author

Jack Williams is the son of Pathfinder Lt. Gene H. Williams of the 82nd Airborne Division who jumped into Normandy on D-Day and was KIA. He is a former SF 05B4S (commo for the young SF) who served in II Corps Vietnam on several border A-Teams including Ben Het. He is currently a leading investigator for the Federal government's Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement of major offshore oil field incidents in the Gulf of Mexico.

Army's Last Pathfinder Company Deactivates At Fort Bragg

Images from 82nd Airborne Division's Pathfinder Company Deactivation Ceremony
February 24, 2017 at Simmons-Army Airfield, Fort Bragg, NC



1 Capt. Steven Orbon, the commander of the Fox Company Pathfinders, 2nd Assault Helicopter Battalion, 82nd Combat Aviation Brigade, salute during the playing of the American National Anthem during the deactivation ceremony.

2 Capt. Steven Orbon gives a farewell speech during a deactivation ceremony.

3 Guest speaker, Lt. Col. (Retired) John Norton Jr. gives a farewell speech. This tradition echoes the Pathfinder motto, "First in, last out."

4 Lt. Col. Travis McIntosh, the battalion commander of 2nd Assault Helicopter Battalion, delivers his farewell speech.

5 Capt. Steven Orbon (left) and 1st Sgt. Adam Herbst (right) command team of the Fox Company Pathfinders, furl the company guidon before casing. The casing of the colors symbolizes the deactivation of Fox Company and attribute to the legacy of the Pathfinders.

6 Pathfinders assigned to Fox Company, 2nd Assault Helicopter Battalion sign names on a V17 Panel after completion of their deactivation ceremony.

U.S. Army photos by
Sgt. Steven Galimore

