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Date: Thu, 31 Dec 1998 17:00:07 -0500
Subject: VIRTUALREUNION Digest - 30 Dec 1998 to 31 Dec 1998 (#1998-67)

There is one message totalling 256 lines in this issue.

Topics of the day:

1. THE DROP ZONE GIVES VOICE TO ORAL HISTORIES OF WWII

Date: Wed, 30 Dec 1998 17:18:00 -0500
From: patrick.k.odonnell@US.PWCGLOBAL.COM
Subject: THE DROP ZONE GIVES VOICE TO ORAL HISTORIES OF WWII

Enclosed is an e-mail copy of today's Chicago Tribune article forwarded to

Lucius Young.

Several units are mentioned including: the 503rd, 504, 194-193rd of the 17th, and 442nd.

Thanks once again for everyone's help on this project.

Pat

<http://chicagotribune.com>.

----- Chicago Tribune Article Forwarding-----

THE DROP ZONE GIVES VOICE TO ORAL HISTORIES OF WWII

By Charles Leroux

Toro Hirose has been dead for a few years now, but his memories survive on the Internet on a Web site that makes the computer, widely thought of as the device of the future, into a tool for discovering the past.

Hirose's and more than 100 oral histories of U.S. Army veterans who participated in the defining event of our century, World War II, can be found at www.thedropzone.org. The site is ~~truly~~ a virtual museum, with photo exhibits and a space for a "virtual reunion" where vets from the elite infantry units--glidermen, paratroopers and rangers--can reminisce via e-mail.

Named for a parachute jump target area, The Drop Zone is a 2 1/2-year-old pioneer in gathering and preserving oral histories on the Internet.

"The goal," said Patrick O'Donnell, who started and, with some volunteer help, runs the site, "is to create a mosaic of oral histories and photos and use the Web to get them out. It's kind of like prospecting for memory nuggets. The point is not to get their entire life histories, but just a most vivid memory of a specific jump or battle or incident in training or whatever. And it's not intended

to glorify war, just to tell what happened."

(After air and tank support was lost in attempts to take the bridge at Waal in Holland) they told us to get the boats and go across the river. The boat was like a canvas material with a wood frame to it, and it held about 12 men. We had to paddle to get it across. . . . At first it looked like rain in the water. Then we realized it was lead coming from the Krauts on the other side. . . . I'll tell you we were paddling like mad to get across. . . . I don't think any man that went across the river that day and was fortunate enough to get to the other side will ever in his life forget it. . . . I have had dreams that I was back in the boat, and I am paddling like mad.

Thomas Pitt, Third Battalion, 504th Parachute Regiment

O'Donnell is 29, not a WWII vet, obviously, but a volunteer historian who minored in history at American University in Washington, D.C., is a consultant in management and information technology and lives in Fairfax Station, Va.

His interest in the war came early. "When other kids were reading books on dinosaurs," he said, "I was reading about World War II." He built model warplanes, then graduated to dioramas of battle scenes, vignettes, for instance, of the D-Day invasion of Normandy. He started with paper clip armatures and built up tiny figures around those, all in perfect scale with their equipment and surroundings, which he also built. He entered competitions against dioramists from around the world. But he was becoming less interested in the models than the research that went into making them.

"And I started wondering," he said, "just who these people were."

After being in combat with the 442d (Regimental Combat Team composed of 8,500 Japanese-Americans, one of the most decorated infantry regiments of the war), we were given orders to withdraw from the front and move to a rear area near Rome. . . . We were told that we were there for glider training. We spent many hours loading and lashing down Jeeps, British 6-pound anti-tank guns, and Jeep trailers which contained ammunition for the anti-tank guns inside the gliders. We were constantly reminded that if we didn't tie the equipment down properly, it could break free and put our lives in peril. A Jeep or anti-tank gun that managed to break free could rip through the nose of the glider, killing everyone in its path.

Toro Hirose of the 442d RCRT

Seven years ago, O'Donnell started to telephone vets he knew of and gathered their stories, later augmenting them with face-to-face interviews and photos copied out of yellowing album pages. Continuing that with a growing network of veterans, he built a repository of oral histories of the airborne units. That repository grew greatly after O'Donnell started the Web site and now stands at about 600 with about

a sixth of that number posted.

"It's like a cascade effect," he said. "I'll post somebody's recollections of a particular battle, and soon we'll get what I call e-histories from others who were in that battle giving their points of view."

To be sure that those e-mailed remembrances come, in fact, from the people whose names are on them, O'Donnell and crew check with vets they know personally who may have served in the same unit.

"The whole thing is relationship driven," O'Donnell said. "That helps with the veracity, making it a peer review, if you will. Plus I've spent hundreds of hours in the National Archives and other repositories of data checking dates, map locations, etc."

We had already reached the bottom of the hill, whose taking had cost us so dearly, when a corporal named Bokenkamp, a long, lean, lank Texan, came running down the slope, and as he caught up to us, he said, "Wait for me. I don't mind dying, but I don't want to die alone." Early in the dark of the following morning, with the company on perimeter . . . the Japanese succeeded in entering one of the forward trenches, killing Sgt. Ciro and Cpl. Bokenkamp.

John Reynolds, 503d Regimental Combat Team, on the fighting on Negros in the Philippines

James Koch, president of Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Va., teaches a course there titled "The History of World War II: The War that Shaped the World We Live In." He differentiated textbook from oral history and said each has its place.

"I've seen The Drop Zone site, and it seems an interesting approach. In military history, you're always dealing with the forest or the trees problem. Some historians say 'this is what it means' after talking with individuals involved, but sometimes, especially for periods prior to World War II, not. This kind of textbook history is important, but, if you can go beyond that, it's not sufficient. You need to talk with the people in the trees, so to speak.

"On the other hand, the problem with just looking at oral history is that you can't see the forest. Optimally, history combines both oral histories and textbooks."

That's what Koch does in his class, frequently bringing in a former German soldier, for example, or a Holocaust survivor. "The nice thing about that," he said, "is that the students can ask follow-up questions."

I saw a man running up the hill and recognized him as my runner, Pat Casanova. I yelled at him to bring up the rest of the men in a hurry. His answer is something I'll never forget--'Sir, they're all dead.' . . . I started crawling back and found the reason for Casanova's response. The bodies of the men were all over the place, in all kinds

of positions. Some of the men were lying face up with sightless eyes, others face down, faces submerged in the snow. From my position, I could not be seen by the Germans, so I said a prayer to myself and got up and ran for the woods. I still don't understand how I survived that day."

Richard Durkee led the fewer than 50 men of A Company of the 551st Parachute Infantry Battalion on a diversionary attack on the Belgian town of RochelINVAL, where 500 German soldiers defended.

O'Donnell has turned away all offers from travel packagers and others hoping to place ads on the site. Instead, he pays the bills, about \$200 a month for phone calls, \$75 to maintain the site, and isn't keeping track of his time or travel expenses. "It's a labor of love," he said of the site that has won numerous awards both for its historical content and its design. Plans call for getting more of the histories on the site, adding newsreel sound and audio of those interviews that have been taped. And, just to try something really difficult, O'Donnell would like to start a repository of the memories of those soldiers, German and Japanese vets, who faced the glidermen, paratroopers and rangers.

O'Donnell is "stunned that more people aren't doing this. I know schools are using our site to teach about the war, and I'd hope that other people would pick up the lance on behalf of other military units I can't cover."

He also has been surprised that, despite being a population in its 70s and 80s and older, the vets aren't cowed by the computer. "They aren't Luddites," he said. "Maybe a nephew or somebody shows them how the first time, but after that they do just fine. I really admire these guys; and the thing I admire most is that they've done incredible things, yet none of them is pushy about getting his story on the site. They are low key people, truly humble."

Some things stick in the mind, embedded so that they never go away. . . I was sleeping in a hole in a patch of woods with about seven or eight guys from C company. . . . My very best friend, Richard Reed, a red-headed, good-natured Irishman from St. Louis, was huddled up next to me, and all of us were trying to keep warm out of the deep snow outside our foxhole. . . .

Just before daylight, my company moved up into position and I was sent out as forward observer with the Platoon Leader and Platoon Sergeant. . . . A few minutes after getting to the Battalion CP, our company commander came in asking for help for some guys back down the road. (They) were lying in the road, all wounded from 88 fire, and one of them had an arm hanging on by just a thin piece of skin. . . . It was the most ghastly sight I had ever experienced in my young life. I never knew the names of the guys on the road.

My best friend was killed that morning, and I never felt the same since. I saw a lot of dead bodies after that, but nothing ever affected me like that first day. Richard's wife had a baby while we were aboard ship going to England. His wife sent him pictures, and he was one proud father, but he never got to see his son. I know this

happened many times during the war, but I only had one best friend. I had every intention of going to see his wife and son after the war, but I could never think of what I would say, so I never did go.

I know this isn't much, but it is the thing that sticks in my mind and will until the day I die.

Huey C. McLain, HqI,

193d/194th Glider Infantry Regiments, 17th Airborne Division,
recalling a battle in Belgium along what came to be known as "Dead Man's Ridge."

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End of VIRTUALREUNION Digest - 30 Dec 1998 to 31 Dec 1998 (#1998-67)
