

Sgt. James Rayford Yates



Co G 505 Parachute Infantry Regiment
82nd Airborne Division

Presented by his son Frank Yates

Military History:

Dad enlisted in the Army Feb 15, 1942 and would report to Ft. Oglethorpe Georgia for basic training. On completion he would volunteer for the paratroops where in Aug 1942 he would enter the Parachute Jump School at Fort Benning, Ga and under go 30 days of intensive jump training. After successful Completion of the school, including 5 jumps, he would

be assigned to Company G, 505 Regimental Combat Team. Colonel Gavin Commanding.

Here at Fort Benning the 505 RCT would undergo more vigorous training, but now as a combat team. On Feb 12, 1943 after a brief stop over at Camp Hoffman, the regiment would continue on to Fort Bragg where it would become part of the 82nd Airborne Division. Leaving there on April 17th for Camp Edwards, Mass, three days later, again boarding a troop train down to Staten Island, loaded on a ship and the sea voyage over to Casablanca, North Africa, arriving May 10, 1943.

After the war dad spoke only briefly of his wartime experiences. What I will be relaying here is information received from a then Corporal Wheatley Christensen. Wheatley was not only a good friend of dads, but they would serve together in G Company 505 Parachute Infantry Regiment 82nd Airborne Division. Within the company they would both be in the 1st squad, 3rd platoon. Dad being the squad leader (Sgt.) and Wheatley his assistant. This relationship would extend from Sept 42 until the ill fated jump in Normandy June 6, 1944.

On leaving Casablanca we would journey across North Africa to Kairouan, Tunisia. From there we would spearhead the invasion of Sicily on July 9, 1943 and would be in combat 41 days.

The next combat jump would be Salerno, Italy on Sept 14, 1943. From here we would move north capturing Naples. This would be the first large city on the continent to be liberated. We would be in combat here 66 days.

On Nov 18 we would set sail from Naples and leave the Mediterranean Sea area and head for the United Kingdom. After a brief stay in Ireland we would move over to England where we would pick up more replacements along with undergoing more intensive training. When we began to be issued new equipment, you knew the long awaited invasion of Europe wasn't far off.

Sure enough on May 29, 1944 the regiment climbed aboard buses to their departure airport and would be sealed in until take off time. The original day for D Day was cancelled 24 hours, but when the next day, June 5 dawned clear, it was announced we would be definitely going that night, June 5-6, 1944.

Not long after our supper meal we would store all our personal gear that we wouldn't be taking and move out to our assigned planes. Our plane would be carrying 18-20 troopers, 2nd Lt Ringwald as jumpmaster and assistant platoon leader would be jumping first, Sgt Yates, squad leader second and I as his assistant jumping last. We would take off about dusk, 10:00PM (British Std Time) on 6/5/44 as the assembling of this huge sky train would involve a lot of time as well as skill and planning.

Our trip across the channel flying at about 200 feet to escape the German Radar was uneventful until we reached the French Coast line. Here we would be greeted by German A.A. Soon after our plane would start bouncing around and the red light would come on. This was the signal to stand up and hook up. At times this rough ride would make it difficult to hand on. Later it would be learned we would be flying through heavy storm clouds and evasive action was being taken. The tight formation this huge sky train had been flying would now be split. Nothing could be worse this close to the D Z (drop zone.) Few troopers would land anywhere near their D Z's.

Later on jumping which seemed a trifle low and shedding the jump harness I would move out gathering the men in my stick. This would be my first introduction to the Normandy hedgerows, as well as you now realized you had missed your drop zone. Sgt Yates at this time should be moving down, gathering our troopers and we should join up in the middle. This was not to be, I would later find Lt Ringwald and Sgt Yates down and hurt bad. You knew at first glance that neither of this pair would be going anywhere. We were able to drag them together as they were only a short distance apart. Here we would try to make them as comfortable as possible by placing both their canteens and first aid kits within easy reach.

Now I as the ranking NCO (Cpl) would have the unpleasant task of telling them we were going to have to leave them. This they clearly understood. On parting we would wish each other the best of luck.

Much later at the end of the war I would learn that both your dad and Lt Ringwald had been taken prisoners and would survive the war in a German prison camp. One would have had a broken back and the other two broken legs.

Stalag 4B POW Camp

(German prisoner of war camps were called stalag formed from stammlager. Camps for aviation POW were stalag luft, or just luft. You may see the relationship between the English word aviation, and the German words Luftwaffe and Lufthansa. Other types of camps were dulag (transit camp), oflag, marlag and jlag or ilag (civilian internment camps.)

On June 8, 1944 Dad was captured by the Germans. They were taken to a railroad yard to send them to Stalag 4B. The railway lines from Berlin passed within half a mile of the camp. The Germans issued them a loaf of bread and a 2 ½ size can of corned beef between seven men and crammed them into box cars with only room for about half the men to sit. The doors never opened. Stalag 4B was situated some 2 ½ miles north-east of the village of Muhlberg on the Muhlberg-Burxdorf road, on the east bank of the River Elbe. It was about 39 miles north-east of Leipzig and 34 miles from Dresden to the south-east and about 75 miles south of Berlin and 15 miles south of Torgau, Germany. The Stalag was on an open plain with patches of woodland. But the area to the north and east contained areas of forest. The prison camp was divided into ten compounds. Housing was wooden barracks. Bunk beds were in groups of twelve. Three levels with four bunks on each level. There was a washroom in the middle of each barrack. This washroom had concrete walls and a concrete basin. Cold water was piped to the large basin so it could serve several people at a time. The water ran most of the time. Clothes were never washed, since they wore everything they had to keep warm. Showers were not taken often. Prisoners were herded into large rooms where they undressed and hung their clothes on some portable racks. They then went into a shower room where the showerheads were in the ceiling. They had no control over the water flow, but it was warm and felt good. Apparently the clothes went through a gas chamber to kill the fleas, bedbugs, lice, etc. while they were showering. This was the delousing treatment. The clothes were not laundered. There were no towels. They dried themselves by putting on their dirty clothes.

They received soup, a slice of bread, and two small boiled potatoes a day. British prisoners in the compound received a larger daily ration of food, so usually three prisoners would combine their food to provide a more stable daily ration. It also reduced the crowd at the stove. They would dice up the bread and potatoes add it with water to the "Skilly" and end up with a cupful of soup twice a day.

For captors and captives alike, the focus was to somehow endure, day after day, the deprivation and boredom. Standing head counts, appels, were conducted at least once a day to make sure no one was missing and to reinforce authority.

While he was in Stalag 4B camp, the Germans treated his wounds, but he lost forty pounds for lack of food.

Dad was liberated by the Russians January 31, 1945. A female Russian officer, with eyes of steel, and her troops captured the POW camp and freed the prisoners. She gave them directions to get back to their troops. It took several months to find their way back. They were covered with lice and sick. German civilians would take them in and feed them and give them a place to sleep. After finding their troops, dad was put in the hospital. He was deloused and treated for injuries to his neck. Shrapnel had to be removed from his neck.

He returned to the U.S. Apr 9, 1945 and received an Honorable Discharge at the Separation Center in Ft. McPherson, Georgia on July 8, 1945. He was awarded the European African-Middle Eastern Theater of Operations Ribbon with three Bronze Stars, the Purple Heart with 1 Bronze Oak Leaf Cluster, Presidential Unit Emblem (The degree of heroism required is the same as that which would warrant award of a Distinguished Service Cross to an individual and is considered an individual decoration). Good Conduct Ribbon, Meritorious Unit Emblem, American Campaign Medal, WW 11 Victory Medal, Army of Occupation Medal w/Germany Clasp, Honorable Service Lapel Button WW 11, Marksman Badge w/Rifle Bar, (Prisoner of War Medal" was awarded October 14, 2002 and received January 2003, 58 years late and 16 years after his death.) Parachutist Badge w/three Bronze Stars, and Browning Automatic Rifle Marksman Ribbon.

Before he entered the Army he was a bartender and a lifeguard at Reelfoot Lake. After he returned he opened a restaurant in Ridgely, Tn. And ran a Taxi service. Later went to Radio & TV repair school in Chicago, Il.

He died at 8:45 AM on May 1, 1987. Service were at Forest Hill East.