

Oct. 4, 1966

Mr. George Koskimaki
13914 Edmore Drive
Detroit 5, Michigan

Dear Mr. Koskimaki:

At long last I'll sit down and bat out this letter to you. Incidentally, I've attached the most up-to-date roster of E Company Men (including replacements) available with best possible addresses. I've incorporated names from your list.

Perhaps I'd better start with some personal background before answering your questionnaire directly, and particularly since my answers probably will take more space than your questionnaire provides. Please understand that we are speaking of a period now 22 years old and my memory has faded.

I joined E company of the 306th Parachute Regiment in late August of 1942 at Camp Toccoa, Ga. I was one of the earliest new men, aside from cadre men, in the company. You will recall that this regiment took basic training as a unit, incorporated much jump training (except actual jumps) then went through the parachute school by battalions. I believe this gave us some advantages in terms of training and in terms of weeding out men who were not suited, by disposition, or physical abilities, during the period at Toccoa. Incidentally, this camp -- probably a Georgia national guard camp -- originally was named Camp Toombs for the Confederate general. In addition, on entering the town, by train, you passed a coffin factory.

The Ranney Company, Public Relations

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Before enlisting, I had attended the University of North Dakota and had some ROTC training plus some previous CMTC (Citizens Military Training Corps) work in the summers. ~~When~~ when I entered E company, I thus knew close-order drill and all the weapons, except the mortar. So I was promptly made a sergeant. ~~Interfixwas~~ This was in the Third platoon. Terrence C. (Salty) Harris was another squad leader. ~~Corporal~~ Corporal Wood C. Lipton was corporal in my squad. Later I was platoon sergeant in the Second Platoon. Later still I was acting first sergeant-- at Camp Mackall. However, I didn't care for that and reverted to platoon sergeant.

In the fall of 1943 or early 1944, "Salty" Harris and I, then both platoon sergeants, were busted to private by Col. Robert Sink personally for starting a mutiny of E company non-coms against Capt. Herbert M. Sobel, then company commander. ~~Really~~ It was a little hairy with Sink threatening to shoot us for starting a mutiny in a combat zone. At any rate, we were busted. Salty was sent to the First Battalion and I was sent to I company in the Third Battalion. I don't know about "Salty," but I goofed off pretty well until Lt. Walter L. Moore (former E company officer) came around to recruit me for the Pathfinders. He once had been our platoon leader -- in fact, led the Third Platoon, E Company on our infamous march from Toccoa to Atlanta at Thanksgiving time in 1942 -- with every single man making the full march. Told us when we started that this was the situation. I laughed quietly, but we all made it.

When the Pathfinders were formed, I discovered that "Salty" Harris had joined, along with Fendlermaker (whose address is on the list I supplied), Charlie Gally, former top kick of F company,

Guy by the name of Eddie Lojbo who lives out here also was in the Pathfinders.

(I suppose the Pathfinder training has been pretty well described to you. ~~xxxx~~ It was a bit of a lark. Charleyalley was first sergeant of the Pathfinder group, I was supply sergeant and Salty Harris was probably a platoon sergeant. A good group of buys who had screwed off in some way.)

Personally, just before the invasion, I decided that I wanted to go into action with my old E company buddies, even as a busted-down platoon sergeant so I contacted then First Lt. Richard Winters, exec officer of E company, and asked him to transfer ~~be back~~. He got it arranged. And I went back to E company just in time to jump in France. They didn't quite know what to do with me or how to use me and, in fact, ended up as the last man on my plane because I joined the company late. I can't even remember which plane I was on. You asked about pre-takeoff events and I particularly recall the rambling, always the gambling. I had a Lonsine watch that I bought for \$150 in the States. ~~most~~ have lost and won it back 10 times in that period along. Curley Robbins, then of Salinas, Calif., was a great crapshooter while I was a fair blackjack dealer. Curley occasionally banking ~~by~~ my blackjack dealing while I banked his crapshooting because the action was fast.

After our plane took off I noticed that I was sitting next to some barrels of aviation gasoline that had been installed next to the pilot compartment bulkhead for extra fuel. Occurred to me that if they got hit it would be all over for all of us. This, I believe, is what happened to the Company headquarters plane that was lost.

Back up a minute. Our "mutinty" worked. Capt. Sobel was ~~trans~~ transferred out of E company before D day -- to Service company, I believe, and Lt. Meehan was brought in as Company commander. He was lost in the Company headquarters plane that went down.

We had blackout curtains in our plane, but were permitted to look out around them. Saw a lot of flack first coming up from what was reported to me as some Channel islands (could these be Gurnsey and Jersey -- don't even know if Germans occupied them). Wasn't particularly scared, didn't know quite what to expect. As we swung over France, we began to get a lot of ground fire. Probably 20 mm stuff. Reminded me at the time of the fellow who pounds the large gong in J. Arthur Rank movies except it was hitting quicker. We had orders to jump ~~EVER~~ unless we had a broken limb or severe body wound. After we had stood up, the fellow in front of me got hit and went down. The plane was lurching as the pilot took evasion action -- going damned fast incidentally. I finally decided the fellow in front couldn't jump, so I had to unhook my static line, move it around in front of his snap on the cable and headed for the door. As I went out, I ~~knelt~~ noticed that the jump light was dangling loose on its cable, still lighted, but just dangling. Everyone else had gone. So I came down pretty much alone.

As I came down, I noticed a town burning about a mile away, I supposed it was St. Mere ~~El~~lise, although I'm not sure. I landed in an apple orchard. This was plenty of tracers going up and shooting, but no one right around me. Then I heard a tremendous noise coming through the orchard, which had fairly tall grass on the ground. I left my chute draped over an apple tree and left near the harness a parachute bag which I'd jumped with. It contained ~~extra~~ bazooka ammunition. I thought that any Germans coming would open up on the dark bulk of the parachute bag, assuming it was a U. S. trooper. I ducked back in some tall brush, ready to take them on if there just a few. It was fairly light through the orchard although the sky was somewhat overcast as I recall.

The noise got louder and louder, then a whole herd of cows piled through the orchard, and right through the brush where I was hunched. I was in France. ~~X~~I got out that damned cricket, not quite sure whether to use it or not, but gave it a snap and got an answer. Turned out to be Jack McGrath, the bazooka man, and we started off somewhere, anywhere. Didn't know where we were. Gather a few other guys from various companies and headed off ~~southwest~~ generally easterly. First shock was running into a gun emplacement in an open field. We crept and crawled up to it (it was quiet) and discovered we'd liberated a ~~contrawe~~ water trough.

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By the time, we hit the first ~~round~~ road, with an intersection and signposts across the way, we have about 15 guys. I hesitated about heading out on the road, even to look at the signs for orientation when I heard another bunch of guys coming down the road talking and singing. Thought they must be Germans, but one guy walked up to the signpost, turned on a flashlight and said: "Holy Shit, we're 5 kilometers -- how far is that, Joe -- from our drop zone. We piled out of the weeds along the road, and joined up. By Turned the night we grouped together various ~~offi~~ men and officers until we had a group of about 50 or 75. Wandered around somewhat vaguely. Sometime~~s~~ during the night, we heard a wagon coming and all piled into ditches. Turned out to be a poor all kraut with a wagon load of bread. Right in the middle of us, someone opened up and about 30 guys must have fired together simultaneously at one poor old kraut. First blood. Encountered sporadic firing ~~and~~ during the night as our group headed generally for the beach area. By dawn, we were approaching beach area, in fact stumbled into area that had been heavily bombarded.

(We did not accomplish our specific platoon task with was related to a battery of four guns firing on the beach. However, the incident that Lipton described to you took place later in the morning as our entire group moved near, I believe, St. Marie Du Mont. We heard the guns firing to right of the road and kind of piled into the woods to investigate. We got within range and opened up on the gun crews who piled into trenches built for this purpose. Guarnere and Lt. Winters led this action. Must confess I moved up somewhat cautiously, but did get into action

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in the late stages. Here saw my first German prisoners, taken in the trench, and was surprised that they were hesitant about moving out of trench. Finally gathered that they were afraid of being shot. I believe that it was during this action that Lt. Winters got a slug in the leg. Seems to me it was here. As a result, Winters, who took over as company commander because Lt. Neehan was lost in headquarters plane, had to be carried, hauled in carts, etc., to get around. At first, he walked, but this not to be too painful. He was a fine officer and fine man, I'd very much like to see him again. Frankly, that seemed to take the better part of the first day although I recall some fire fights with German bicycle troops later that day.

In retrospect, I believe that the parachute operation turned out to be a complete fiasco in terms of landing in designated drop zones and in terms of assigned units carrying out specific assignments. The units were spread over such vast areas, and individual troops so widely spread that it was impossible to achieve the planned goals. However, the very dispersion was, I believe, an important ingredient of our success. Individual units attacked targets of opportunity -- by units, I mean groups of men assembled under whatever leadership was available. Can you imagine being a German general or intelligence officer trying to determine from the many reports of "Fallschirmjäger" coming in from all over the Cotentin peninsula, exactly what was happening where we were and in what strength? Imagine having communications wires cut, having messengers never get through, having command posts invaded? All these things happened. From German reports and accounts I have read, I have decided that the utter failure of our precise plans was the most magnificent contribution to the

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invasion effort. Perhaps sheer confusion, accompanied by strong local attacks, is the great contribution of airborne units, plus the interdiction value they have -- and we had in preventing German movements. I understand that our primary job was to keep exits from the beach open and to destroy gun batteries firing on the beaches. In general, I believe these two jobs were accomplished. It is perhaps significant that the Germans were unable to take strong, counter-action until about a week latter. Admittedly, this is due in part to the fact that Hitler still feared the primary attack might be elsewhere. But even local German commanders were loath to commit major forces ~~and~~ against a vaguely defined enemy force.

It may have been on ~~the~~ D day that we encountered Col. Sink and Gen. Taylor. We were pinned down in a ditch, getting fire from a group of buildings when Taylor and Sink drove up in a jeep, calm as well and asked why we didn't get going? If not D day, this would be within the next day or so before we entered Carentan.

"Salty" Harris, who had jumped with Pathfinders, showed up back in his old E company a couple days after D day. ~~HENRY~~ Said he had jumped with the ultra-high-frequency radio homing beacon, but never got it off his back to set it up. Germans spotted him and kept him on the run. An officer in our battalion headquarters insisted that "Salty" return to his first battlaion company and I believe that he was killed about June 13 or 14th.

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You asked about communications and operations men.

One was Sgt. Elmer L. Murray, Jr., who was killed in the Company headquarters plane. Another was Robert L. Smith, who has been living in Palo Alto near here, but now is, I understand, in Viet Nam in special forces or some sort of special service. Amos J. (Buck) Taylor might also be able to give you some good insights. He was a squad leader, hurt, as I recall, when an anti-personnel mine or something went off later in France.

That about wraps it up.

Couple more points:

Staff Sergeant James L. Diel, a wonderful quiet guy from Southern Illinois, survived France and got a battlefield commission. The guy never got to collect his pay as an officer. He was killed in Don, Holland, just a few minutes after landing.

I was recommended for a battlefield commission after two weeks in Holland where I was a sergeant in company headquarters, as I remember. However, on Oct. 3 or 4, while listening to a lecture about an area we were going to take over from a Canadian division north of Edinhaven somewhere, I accidentally shot myself field-stripping and ~~was~~ cleaning a .45 pistol. I absentmindedly snapped the trigger after re-assembling the darned gun and nearly blew a leg off. Took me nine months and some eight individual operations to put it back together. The field commission I would have gotten went, instead, to Carwood Lipton, another fine man and fine soldier.

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Burton P. Christenson of Fremont, Calif., is another E Company man who remembers many details pretty well.

Perhaps the problem is one of actually writing. It might be easier to get these guys into a room somewhere with a ~~RECORDING~~ tape recorder and just let them ramble along. Four of us were together out here not long ago when Frank Perconte came out from Joliet, Ill. I got Rader up from Paso Robles and Pat Christenson over from Fremont and we had a great time. The convention in Kentucky would have been a good spot, or try the convention in Chicago next year.

I believe you may be right about the Smith boy being communications. Believe it was Robert T. Smith and don't have any idea where he is.

I applaud your ambitions regarding a D-day book, but the real story of our invasion of France probably falls over ~~the~~ a longer period of time. D-day was a graphic, memorable event, but the fighting was harder and more important at other times, such as the taking of Carentan and its importance as a communications center at the base of the peninsula, the strong German counter-offens~~es~~ that began about a week or 10 days after D-day. Then the success or failure of our invasion was determined, particularly when the storms tore up the beaches. We were told one day outside of Carentan that our company, E company, was the only unit in the Allied army that didn't give up ground. The fact is that we were in a spot we couldn't get out of -- with a sw~~amp~~ on our ~~left and a road~~ right and a road on our left and a big hill behind us. Believe McGrath got Silver Star here for knocking out tanks.

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Helluva rambling rather incoherent letter, but that's the way
I write. Get it down, in any fashion, but get it down, then
edit, edit, edit, edit. Hope things work out for you.

I'm planning to be in Chicago next year and would recommend
the tape recorder to you as an interviewing tool. I use two
of them in my office and find them priceless for getting information
down spontaneously.

That's my story. Talking with other guys I might remember more.

The following is a reproduction of a long letter received from Mike Hanney (E/506) at the time I was researching my first book, D-Day With The Screaming Eagles. It was written from San Francisco on Oct. 4, 1966. I will forego addresses and salutations to save space.

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We did not accomplish our specific platoon task which was related to a battery of four guns firing on the beach. However, the incident that Lipton described to you took place later in the morning as our entire group moved near, I believe, Ste. Marie du Mont. We heard the guns firing to the right of the road and kind of piled into the woods to investigate. We got within range and opened up on the gun crews who piled into trenches built for this purpose. Guarnera and Lt. Winters led this action. Must confess I moved up somewhat cautiously, but did get into action in the late stages. Here saw my first German prisoners, taken in the trench, and was surprised that they were hesitant about moving out of the trench. Finally gathered that they were afraid of being shot. I believe that it was during this action that Lt. Winters got a slug in the leg. Seems to me it was here. As a result, Winters, who took over as company commander because Lt. Meehan was lost in the headquarters plane, had to be carried, hauled in carts, etc., to get around. At first, he walked, but this got to be too painful. He was a fine officer and fine man, I'd very much like to see him again. Frankly, that seemed to take the better part of the first day although I recall some fire fights with German bicycle troops later that day.

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