

Memorial Day 2019 Thoughts

Randy Shields, Wichita, KS

This is a long post, but I hope worth your time to read.



Robert Foust with his oldest sister
Pauline (my grandmother)



Francis Franks (my grandfather), Robert,
and his oldest brother Charles (L to R)

Your perspective of history is different when you experience things firsthand versus just reading about them. For example, this July is the 50th anniversary of man landing on the moon. I was 12 that year and remember it vividly. I had followed the space program from as early as I can remember. I knew the astronauts, what missions they had been on, the importance of beating the Russians to the moon, and the sacrifices many made (like Indiana native and Purdue graduate Gus Grissom, who died in the Apollo 1 fire). My own children only know what they read in history books, absorb from Dad stories, or gain watching movies like *First Man*, if they even go see them. Even then, Hollywood always puts a spin on things so they may not be totally accurate historically.

And so it is with me and World War 2. I learned about it in school, listened to firsthand war stories, and recognized a sacrifice was made by many to win the war. I see movies like *Saving Private Ryan* and get a small taste for the hell that D-Day must have been. This year marks the 75th anniversary of the D-Day invasion. A C-47 flew through a few weeks ago en route to Normandy for a re-enactment of the D-Day paratroop drop. Seemed pretty neat. I am always interested in seeing airplanes from that era fly, but mostly because I love airplanes.

However, I did not have a real appreciation for the re-enactment until my mom sent me a few pictures about a week ago. I knew that her uncle (Robert Junior Foust) had died in Normandy on June 6, 1944, but I always thought it was storming the beaches of Normandy, just like in *Saving Private Ryan*. But as I studied the pictures, I realized Robert was a paratrooper. He didn't storm the beach... he parachuted in behind enemy lines in total darkness several hours prior to the beach assault. I needed to know more. I talked with my mom some and also searched the internet. She was 11 years old at the time, not unlike my age for the moon landing. She remembers this time and the pain and sadness vividly. Here are some details. It is a combination of sources. I'll post the links at the end.

Robert enlisted in the Army on 5 Nov 1942 in Indianapolis. He was a paratrooper for the U.S. Army, in the 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR) of the 101st Airborne Division. He took basic training in Toccoa, Georgia and then went to Fort Benning for paratroop training.

All members of the regiment were parachute volunteers, but only a minor fraction were actually qualified jumpers during training at Camp Toccoa. So, when that very arduous training was over, in March 1943, the unit moved to Ft. Benning, GA to jump train all members not previously qualified. With jump training over, the regiment was assigned to the Airborne Command at Camp MacKall, NC. This was its home base during prolonged maneuvers in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Louisiana. In January 1944, the regiment deployed to England, by way of Camp Myles Standish, MA. Once in England, the 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR) became permanently attached to the 101st Airborne Division.

While I know Robert was in the 501st, I do not know what battalion he was in (1st, 2nd, or 3rd). There is more history online, but here are a few facts:

- This was the first combat jump for the 501st. The 1st and 2nd battalions departed Merryfield Airport at 2245hrs (10:45 PM), June 5, 1944. The 3rd battalion departed from Welford.
- All units were to fly across the English Channel and drop into Normandy, five hours prior to the seaborne landing. The 501st drop zones were north and east of the town of Carentan. Two battalions were to seize key canal locks at La Barquette and destroy the bridges over the Douve River, while the third battalion was in division reserve.
- Paratroopers of the 101st Airborne Division "Screaming Eagles" jumped first on June 6, between 00:48 and 01:40 (that's 1:40 AM). 6,928 troops were carried aboard 432 C-47s. The 82nd Airborne Division followed shortly behind them.
- The C-47s stayed low over the English Channel to avoid being detected by German radar. They would climb a little once near the drop zone.
- A fog bank was encountered after crossing the coast of France. That and enemy anti-aircraft fire (flak) caused the break-up of the C-47 formations.
- Flak from German anti-aircraft guns resulted in planes either going under or over their prescribed jump altitudes. Some of the men who jumped from planes at lower altitudes were injured when they hit the ground because of their chutes not having enough time to slow their descent, while others who jumped from higher altitudes reported a terrifying descent of several minutes watching tracer fire streaking up towards them.
- The 501st PIR's flights also encountered severe flak but still made an accurate jump on Drop Zone D. Part of the drop zone was covered by German gun fire that inflicted heavy casualties before many troops could get out of their chutes.
- Among those killed were two of the three battalion commanders and one of their executive officers.
- A group of 150 troops captured the main objective, the la Barquette lock, by 04:00.
- A staff officer put together a platoon and achieved another objective by seizing two foot bridges near la Porte at 04:30.
- The 2nd Battalion landed almost intact on drop zone D but in a day-long battle failed to take Saint-Come-du-Mont and destroy the highway bridges over the Douve.
- The 3rd Battalion of the 501st PIR, assigned to drop zone C, was more scattered, but took over the mission of securing the exits. A small unit reached the Pouppeville exit at 0600 and fought a six-hour battle to secure it, shortly before 4th Division troops arrived to link up.
- The 101st suffered 182 killed, 557 wounded, and 501 missing.
- Overall, there were 2499 American D-Day fatalities and 1915 from the other Allied nations, a total of 4414 dead.

We don't know how Robert died. Was he one of the PIRs shot before he could get out of his chute? Was he killed in one of the battles that day to secure the exits, destroy the bridges, or secure the lock? I can only begin to imagine the courage it took as a 22-year-old to jump from low altitude, in total darkness, some 12 miles behind enemy lines. This was his first combat experience. No amount of maneuvers in North Carolina could prepare you for what was coming... especially knowing the odds were very high that you might not survive the day.

Robert's best friend growing up was Billy Boxell, also from Hanfield Indiana. Billy had also volunteered to be a paratrooper and was together with Robert in the 501st. Billy also died that day. Robert and Billy died as true American heroes.

Robert's parents and Billy's parents got their telegrams the same evening. My mom said it really sank in the following day when a package containing candy and cookies they had sent was returned unopened. "I was only 11, but I will never forget that day." Robert's father (my great grandfather) had to identify the body and, besides the undertaker, was the only one to see it. He later told my grandfather (Francis Franks), "he never wanted to do that ever again." It was a closed casket funeral with Robert's first and Billy's the day after.

My great grandmother was recognized as a Gold Star mother, who gave the ultimate sacrifice to the Nation - a son. Her other two sons also served during World War 2. Charles volunteered for the Navy and Raymond was drafted into the Army. My grandfather was almost drafted, but had a job supporting a local steel foundry, which was considered a defense plant vital to the war effort. So, like a lot of other families across the country, the Foust / Franks family did their share and more to support the effort.

So, as we relax today and enjoy the freedoms we have in our great country, think not only about Robert and Billy and the thousands of others who gave their lives for our country, but also the loved ones left behind.

I appreciate my mom giving me insight into this time period. When I see the D-Day re-enactment in the news in about a week, I will see more than vintage airplanes dropping paratroops... I will remember people like Robert and Billy. I will better understand not only their sacrifice, but also that of those on the home front.

References:

https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_airborne_landings_in_Normandy

<https://www.ww2-airborne.us/units/501/501.html>