



# MAX BRYAN

## HIS GAS TRAP M1 GARAND AND THEIR SERVICE IN THE 551<sup>ST</sup> PARACHUTE INFANTRY BATTALION

BY GEORGE DILLMAN

As collectors of historical artifacts, there are rare occasions when we acquire a firearm with the realization that the story of the person who used the firearm and the momentous historical events in which the firearm was used eclipse the story of the firearm itself. This is one of those occasions. The following pages recount the story of a particular firearm but more importantly, the story of the man who used it, the Parachute Infantry brothers with whom he served, their heroic deeds and their tragic fate. I am indebted to the following authors for their extensive research that has enabled the understanding of the circumstances and events that surrounded U.S. Rifle, Caliber .30, M1, serial number 46097 in World War II. Dan Morgan, *The Left Corner of My Heart: The Saga of the 551<sup>st</sup> Parachute Infantry Battalion*, Gregory Orfalea, *Messengers of the Lost Battalion: The Heroic 551<sup>st</sup> and the Turning of the Tide at the Battle of the Bulge*, Les Hughes, "The 551<sup>st</sup> Parachute Infantry Battalion," Bill Delany, "Sentimental Journey," *Daily Press* (January 31, 1990), R.W. Rogers, "York County Man's Unit is Recognized for Counterattack at Battle of the Bulge 56 Years Later," *Daily Press* (April 1, 2001), Billy Pyle, *The Gas Trap Garand* and Bruce N. Canfield, *The M1 Garand Rifle*.

15 AUGUST 1944 - 1700 HOURS: Operation Dragoon, the Allied invasion of Southern France, was on and Private Max Bryan was enduring the familiar discomfort that is common for all paratroopers crammed like sardines into their transport aircraft and laden with the one-hundred-plus pound plethora of weapons and equipment strapped to their bodies. Max Bryan was a member of the 551<sup>st</sup> Parachute Infantry Battalion. He and the rest of the Battalion were about to accomplish another first in U.S. military history, a daylight combat jump into enemy territory, which also happened to be their first combat jump. Fittingly, their parachute operation was code named Operation Canary. After leaving their camp in Lido di Roma, Italy, they had taken off from an airfield north of Rome and were now flying over the Mediterranean toward their drop zone near La Motte, France, in the foothills fifty-one miles west-southwest of Nice. While sitting

on the hard canvas seat of the C-47 Dakota aircraft he probably tried to adjust the position of the bulky canvas case that held his weapon, U.S. Rifle, Caliber .30, M1, serial number 46097. Max almost certainly struggled with his apprehension about the upcoming jump and the uncertainties of combat with the resulting hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach. Perhaps his thoughts drifted back to the beginning of his journey that led to this pivotal moment in his life.

Max Bryan had enlisted in 1942 at the age of 17 as a volunteer for the Parachute Infantry. Having completed Parachute School he then became a part of the Parachute School Replacement Pool at the Frying Pan, Fort Benning, Georgia. While there, he became one of the future members of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 551<sup>st</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment (Reinforced) which was activated at Fort Kobbe, Panama Canal Zone, on 26 November 1942 with Company C of the 501<sup>st</sup> Parachute Infantry Battalion, already in Fort Kobbe, forming its nucleus. (The 551<sup>st</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment was never raised beyond battalion strength and was redesignated the 551<sup>st</sup> Parachute Infantry Battalion. It and the 509<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Battalion were the only two independent Parachute Battalions in the U.S. Army during World War II, a distinction for which they would later pay dearly). On 8 December, the men at the Frying Pan were told they were leaving the Continental United States and that they were not to write or send anything home. In addition, men with tattoos were ordered to report to the medical area where their new hard-won paratrooper tattoos were scraped off or covered with more tattoos to obliterate the originals. On the night of 11 December, the men left Fort Benning by troop train. The train took them to Camp Patrick Henry near Newport News where they were restricted to camp and forbidden to wear any clothing or insignia that would identify them as paratroopers. In the process, the men were denied the customary furlough that was granted after graduation from Parachute School, which caused considerable complaining and resentment. It was during this interlude that one of the men stole a young short-haired dachshund

puppy from the yard of the port commander. The men named her "Furlough" and she became the Battalion mascot, a unifying symbol of their hardships, independence and general disregard for regulations. Furlough was smuggled aboard the troop ship USS Joseph T. Dickman in an empty gas mask carrier. When their commander, Major Wood Joerg, found out about Furlough, he accepted her as mascot, said he would take care of everything and looked out for her thereafter. Although Major Joerg was a hard disciplinarian, that act, which put the Major at risk of a court-martial, was the beginning of an incredible bond of respect and love between the men of the Battalion and their 27 year-old commander who would soon be promoted to Lieutenant Colonel. On 27 December, the Battalion sailed for Fort Kobbe. During the voyage, German U-boats sank two of the lead ships in their convoy. The men could not have guessed at that time that their future mission at Fort Kobbe would be to protect the Panama Canal and to provide a mobile strike force ready to resist any German effort to install a pro-Nazi government anywhere in the Caribbean or Central America. That mission would ultimately lead to the planned parachute invasion of the Caribbean island of Martinique, a French Vichy island being used by the Germans for a U-Boat resupply base. After the Battalion's arrival six days later at Fort Kobbe, Max Bryan was issued his M1 Garand rifle. During the several months of intensely difficult physical training, as well as many misadventures inflicted on the MPs, the local populace and each other, the strictly secret presence of the Battalion in the Canal Zone was suddenly publicized by a full dress review in Balboa, Panama, ostensibly for the president of Columbia. In reality, it was a brilliant psychological warfare gambit that persuaded the Vichy government in Martinique that it should retire to France, leaving the island in control of a government friendly to the Allied cause. The invasion of Martinique was canceled. During their stay at Fort Kobbe, the Battalion coalesced as an elite parachute infantry unit and acquired their nickname, GOYA Birds, or simply the GOYAs. The name was adapted from Lt. Col. Joerg's penchant for calling the men his "birds" and his never ending exhortations to "Get Off Your Ass!"

On 20 August 1943 the GOYAs, included their smuggled mascot, Furlough, boarded a troop ship and sailed into the Pacific bound for San Francisco. An event would take place on that voyage that would simultaneously enhance the popularity of Lt. Col. Joerg with the men and also mark the beginning of a troublesome chapter in the Battalion's history. The ship's crew discovered the presence of Furlough and since it was against regulations to transport unauthorized animals, the ship's Master-at-Arms ordered a crewmember to throw her overboard. When the crewmember attempted to carry out the order, he found himself surrounded by quiet, but very angry paratroopers who were willing to do whatever was necessary to save their beloved Furlough. Lt. Col. Joerg confronted the Master-at-Arms and convinced

him that his order was exceedingly unwise. The Master conceded and left the matter to be decided by the port authorities at San Francisco. Again, Lt. Col. Joerg intervened, at the risk of a court-martial, and saved Furlough. Unfortunately, Furlough's two puppies were also discovered and before the men could react, they were thrown overboard. That caused a feeling of loss and depression among many of the men that would only be exacerbated by later events.

After disembarking at San Francisco and a five-day cross-country troop train ride, the Battalion arrived at Camp Mackall, North Carolina on 8 September 1943. A few weeks later, volunteers were requested to attempt the first experimental mass parachute drops from gliders. The signature sheets filled immediately and the 551<sup>st</sup> made history with another first. But instead of the combat role that the men wanted and expected to take, it seemed that they were doomed to endless training at Camp Mackall. Their morale deteriorated. In October, an event occurred that some later thought sealed their fate. Their beloved commander, Lt. Col. Joerg was transferred and Lt. Col. Rupert D. Graves assumed command. Although the officers in the Battalion respected him, by some accounts from the enlisted men, it was an oil and water mix from the beginning. Lt. Col. Graves was a great deal older than Lt. Col. Joerg and in some of the men's opinions, seemed not to understand, or for that matter care, how to lead such a unit of quirky, ready to fight and high-energy men. His disciplinary measures were draconian and included punishing the innocent to motivate the guilty. Morale plummeted and AWOLs, as well as cases of venereal disease, soared. At one point, over two hundred men were in the stockade. It was during Lt. Col. Graves' tenure that another tragic event would scar the GOYAs. The Battalion's first night jump was scheduled and it was very poorly planned. The drop zone was small and between two lakes. For the first time, the control of the jump release point was taken from the jumpmasters and given to the pilots who signaled the men to jump by turning on a green light positioned by each jump door. To make matters worse, the pilots were inexperienced in parachute operations and the operation took place in a light rain and mist. It was a recipe for a disaster and that was exactly what happened. Disoriented by the low visibility, the pilots missed the release point. The end result was that many of the men landed in the water with a full combat load of equipment and with no way to readily release their parachute harness since they were not of the quick-release design. Eight of the GOYAs drowned that black night with another dying on the drop zone itself. An investigation ensued and Lt. Col. Graves was transferred. The men were jubilant when they found out that Lt. Col. Joerg would assume command once again. One of the first things he did was go to the stockade and release the nearly two hundred GOYAs interned there with the condition that they would promise to never go AWOL again.

Finally on 23 April 1944, the Battalion boarded Liberty ships for the voyage to Italy. This time, Lt. Col. Joerg had arranged Furlough's passage in advance and her presence was not questioned. The Battalion assembled in Naples the first week of June but instead of proceeding to Anzio to participate in the fighting still raging there, the Battalion was moved to Sicily for four weeks of some of the most grueling training they had endured thus far. After that, the Battalion moved back to Lido di Roma, Italy, where they were told they would be parachuting into southern France. Their training suddenly became much more relevant with the study of maps, aerial photographs and sand tables. Soon they were busy packing their parachutes and equipment in preparation for the imminent jump.



Figure 1. U.S. Rifle, Caliber .30, M1, Serial Number 46097 with the first design screw-on type gas cylinder, now commonly called a "Gas Trap M1 Garand."



Figure 2. First design Type 2 "Gas Trap M1 Garand" screw-on type gas cylinder.

As the paratrooper-laden formation of C-47s droned over southern France, Max Bryan's pulse almost certainly accelerated a bit when the paratroopers in his plane began to struggle to their feet despite their cumbersome loads. Although they were standing much earlier than normal for a jump, nervous energy and the understanding that they may have to get out of the plane both early and very quickly had brought them to their feet. Suddenly the jumpmaster began to shout commands above the roar of the engines, which caused adrenaline to surge through the paratroopers. "HOOK UP! - CHECK EQUIPMENT!" Their responses rapidly traveled from the back of the line of paratroopers—called a stick—to the front as each man checked the equipment of the man in front of him. "OK! - OK! - OK!" until the man at the front of the stick signaled with a thumb up to the jumpmaster and yelled, "ALL OK!" The jump light was red when the jumpmaster gave the command, "STAND IN THE DOOR!" The men shuffled toward the jump door, each pressed as closely as possible to the man in front of him, their inboard hands grasped their static lines so that they would not foul and their hearts raced. At 1809, the red light blinked off and the green light blinked on. The jumpmaster shouted, "GO! GO! GO!" The GOYAs threw themselves into the prop blast and to their fates.

Watching the GOYAs jump from the ground was Lt. Col. (later Lt. General) William Yarborough who was

commanding the 509<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Battalion. "Your outfit came in at 1800. We got in there about 0430, before dawn. I saw the whole thing and the best drop of all was yours. It was beautifully done, there wasn't any doubt about it." Furlough was not forgotten as she was brought ashore by a beach landing party and then transported to the GOYAs for their reunion at the front.

The M1 rifle that Max Bryan had been issued in Panama, carried through the war and then ultimately to his home, was one of the last manufactured of John C. Garand's first design with the screw-on type gas cylinder. (Figure 1, 2) These rifles are commonly known today as "Gas Trap" M1 Garands. Bill Delany interviewed Max Bryan for a newspaper article published January 31, 1990 in the *Daily Press* entitled "Sentimental Journey." That article stated, "He still owns the M-1 rifle issued in Panama to replace the broomstick rifle used in training." A picture of Mr. Bryan holding his Gas Trap M1 Garand accompanies the article. (Figure 3) The history of the development and production of the U.S. Rifle, Caliber .30, M1 has been well documented but it is relevant to discuss the transition period during which the production of the Gas Trap M1 rifle was changed to the second design, spline type gas cylinder rifles commonly known as the "Gas Port" M1 Garand. (Figure 4) It is also relevant to discuss how these Gas Trap rifles were issued and used during the war.





Figure 3. Max Bryan and his wife Doris holding his "Gas Trap M1 Garand" that he carried through WWII to include the Battle of the Bulge. Photo by Ransy Moor, 1990 for the *Daily Press*.

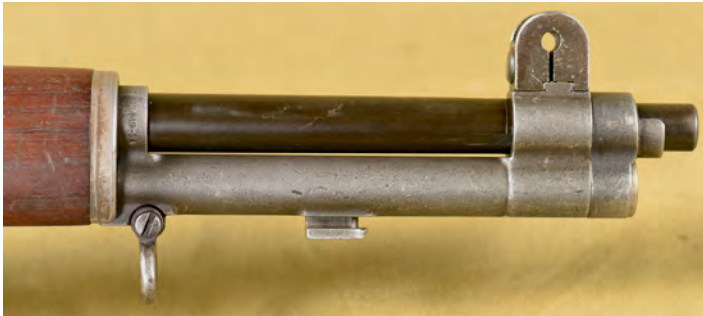


Figure 4. Second design "Gas Port M1 Garand" spline type gas cylinder.

The regular production Gas Trap M1 rifles were manufactured at Springfield Armory starting with serial number 81 in August of 1937 with production continuing through August of 1940. From the time that the M1 was first tested and then fielded, problems were reported and modifications were incorporated to resolve those problems. The biggest change involved the redesign of the gas system. The Gas Trap rifle's gas cylinder screwed onto the barrel and was secured by the bottom of the front sight which fit through the top of the gas cylinder and into a slot that was machined into the top of the barrel which prevented the gas cylinder from unscrewing. The front sight was then secured to the gas cylinder by a single screw. (Figure 5) In use, it was found that the fit of

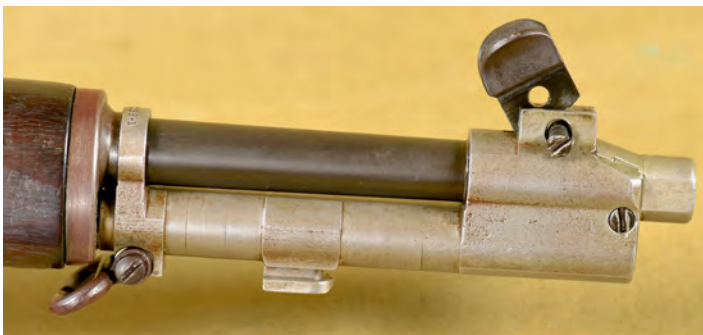


Figure 5. The front sight is inserted through a slot in the top front of the "Gas Trap" screw-on gas cylinder and into a slot in top of the barrel to keep the gas cylinder from unscrewing. The front sight is secured by a single screw.

the bottom of the front sight into the slot in the barrel was loose which allowed the gas cylinder and front sight to move on the barrel enough to adversely affect the rifle's accuracy. In addition, when the U.S. Marine Corps tested the M1 rifles at the U.S. Marine Corps base at San Diego from January to June of 1939, they reported that accuracy varied widely from rifle to rifle and that the problem with many of the rifles appeared to stem from the bullets striking the gas cylinder and gas plug, due to their misalignment with the bore. Other complaints were that the gas system accumulated excessive carbon which was difficult to remove, the gas system was not strong enough to support the bayonet during combat use and that it was possible for a cleaning patch to become lodged between the gas cylinder and gas plug, which rendered the rifle inoperable. (Figure 6) But the incident that most prompted the design change occurred when Arthur "Art" H. Tuttle, John C. Garand's assistant at Springfield Armory, was test firing an M1. While shooting the rifle rapid fire, the screw that secured the gas plug to the gas cylinder loosened and fell out. That allowed the gas plug to move upwards in its slot and into the path of the next bullet. The result was that the entire gas cylinder was blown off the barrel. (Figure 7) The work to design a new gas system was begun in early 1939 and on 26 October 1939, the Ordnance Committee approved the design change. However, it was not until 15 March 1940 that the production drawings were changed to incorporate the new design. Nonetheless, there was a large inventory of the old parts on



Figure 6. The first design screw-on "Gas Trap" gas cylinder was thought to be too weak to support the bayonet during combat use.

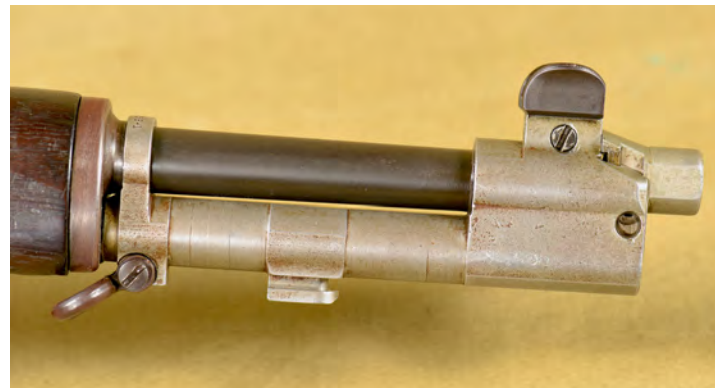


Figure 7. During test firing by Arthur "Art" Tuttle, John C. Garand's assistant, the screw that secured the gas plug fell out, the gas plug moved up into the path of the bullet and the next shot blew the gas cylinder off the barrel.

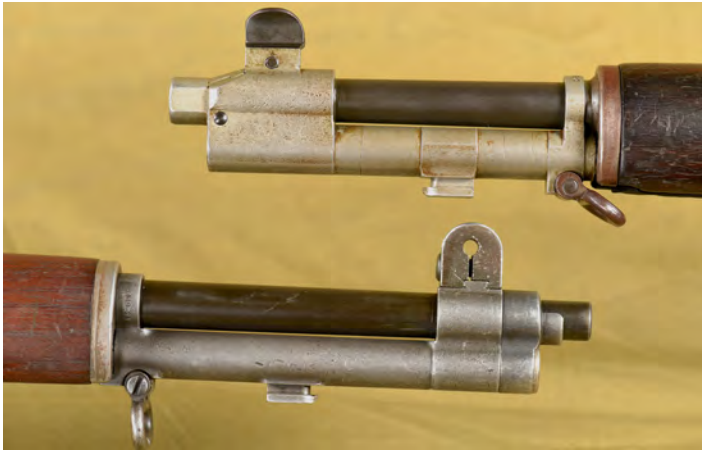


Figure 8. During the period of June 1940 through August of 1940, production of both the "Gas Trap" and "Gas Port" M1 rifles was intermixed. As a result, there are documented Gas Trap models with serial numbers in the low 51,000 range and Gas Port models with serial numbers starting in the 45,000 range.

hand and the decision was made to continue production of the Gas Trap rifles until the old parts were used up. During the period of June 1940 through August of 1940, production of both the Gas Trap and Gas Port M1 rifles was intermixed. (Figure 8) As a result, there are documented Gas Trap models with serial numbers in the low 51,000 range and Gas Port models with serial numbers starting in the 45,000 range. Because of this, the exact number of Gas Trap M1s made is difficult to determine but it is at least 48,119 and is almost certainly somewhat higher. In addition to the decision to continue the production of Gas Trap M1s until the old parts were used up, it was also decided to not upgrade existing Gas Trap M1s to the Gas Port design until they became unserviceable and were returned to Fifth Echelon Depot Maintenance for major overhaul and arsenal rebuild. The Gas Trap rifles were considered to be useable and there was a major effort to get as many M1 rifles into the hands of the troops as soon as possible. For that reason, a surprising number of Gas Trap M1s were used in combat, especially in the Pacific theater. It is documented that Gas Trap rifles were also issued in the Panama Canal Zone in 1941 and early 1942 where Max Bryan was issued his rifle. Finally, in 1947, the Army issued orders that all M1 rifles with the Gas Trap gas cylinder were to be destroyed. Due to the extensive rebuild programs, the high combat losses of the Gas Trap M1s that were issued during WWII and their destruction after the war, an original Gas Trap M1 is exceedingly rare. Billy Pyle states, "less than two dozen rifles still in their original Gas Trap configuration have surfaced on the free market." Even more rare is an original condition Gas Trap M1 that has documented combat provenance such as Max Bryan's.

U.S. Rifle, Caliber .30, M1, serial number 46097 has the typical characteristics of the last production Gas Trap M1s. (Figure 9) It was manufactured in July of 1940 and its history is unknown until it was issued to Max Bryan in January of 1943. Remarkably, it appears that no upgrades were made or parts changed leaving



Figure 9. U.S. Rifle, Caliber 30, M1, serial number 46097 manufactured in July 1940 at Springfield Armory

the rifle in its original configuration. The rifle exhibits wear consistent with months of combat use in extreme climate conditions although it is not significantly damaged or unserviceable other than the bore, which is rough, dark and very worn. The metal finish has an even patina that shows the rifle was heavily used but well taken care of. The part of the lower hand guard that covers the chamber area of the barrel shows darkening and is cracked from the high heat resulting from rapid sustained firing. The right side of the stock is heavily dented, especially under the bolt area, from the points of the cartridges in enbloc clips being banged against the stock to ensure that they were seated evenly prior to loading. (Figure 10, 11) The wood of the stock has been worn to the point that the cartouche on the left side of the stock is all but invisible. The single modification is that the front part of the safety is broken off. This was a fairly common modification done by combat soldiers to make the safety quieter to engage and disengage. (Figure 12) The Data Sheet for this rifle is included in Billy Pyle's excellent book *The Gas Trap Garand* on page 230.

The GOYAs landed relatively unscathed in southern France with 2 two Killed In Action (KIA) and five Wounded In Action (WIA) but soon witnessed the



Figure 10. Dents in the right side of the stock were caused striking the points of the .30-06 cartridges in 8-round enbloc clips against the stock to ensure that the cartridges were completely seated in the clip.





Figure 11 If the cartridges in the 8-round enbloc clip are not completely seated in the clip, it is difficult, if not impossible, to load the rifle.



Figure 12 Photo shows the original modified safety with the tip broken off (in front) compared to an installed replacement unmodified safety. The modification was done in the field to make the safety quieter to engage and disengage.

horrible carnage that their sister unit, the 550<sup>th</sup> Glider Infantry Battalion, suffered in the ensuing chaos of crash landings. On D+1 the GOYAs were given the order to take the village of Draguignan, which they did on 17 August 1944. In the process, they captured about 500 German soldiers including Major General Ludwig Bieringer and his entire LXII Wehrmacht Corps staff. The GOYAs had accomplished another first, as he was the first German General captured in the western European Theater of Operations (ETO). In spite of their accomplishment, the credit for the capture of Draguignan was initially given to the 36<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division and then subsequently to the 517<sup>th</sup> Parachute Regimental Combat Team which ironically was commanded by the GOYAs old nemesis, Lt. Col. Rupert Graves. Neither of those credited participated in the attack. It was the beginning of a pattern of denying the GOYAs the credit they were due and it would continue to dog them to the bitter end.

From Draguignan, the GOYAs advanced toward Cannes. During the attack, Company B was caught in heavy artillery fire on Hill 105 and took a high num-

ber of casualties that included about sixteen KIA. After heavy fighting, the GOYAs were the first to enter Cannes on 24 August 1944 without another shot being fired. On 29 August, the GOYAs were the first to enter Nice, the capital of the Riviera. Once again the GOYAs were not given their due and history incorrectly credited the 509<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Battalion with the honor.

It was at Cannes that Max Bryan walked past the battalion aid station and saw about twenty bodies lined up for Graves Registration. He thought what a terrible job it was to tag the dead, to go through their pockets to discard anything that would be offensive to their families and to write the letters that would be sent to their homes. He could not imagine that it would be his job five months later.

In early September the GOYAs, with Furlough, joined the 509<sup>th</sup> and the 550<sup>th</sup>, which made up the 509<sup>th</sup> Task Force. The 509<sup>th</sup> Task Force had the job of protecting the right flank of the 7<sup>th</sup> Army in the Maritime Alps. The GOYAs faced the Austrian 4<sup>th</sup> Höhesgebirgsjaeger (High Mountain Assault) Battalion, a part of the 5<sup>th</sup> Gebirgsjaeger Division, along a thirty-five mile front close to the Italian border. The Paratroopers who had trained in the jungles of Panama found themselves fighting in the craggy high altitude environment of the Alps. For three months the Austrians would daily rain artillery fire on the GOYAs and the GOYAs would return fire with their mortars. The GOYAs would send patrols up the mountains to catch the Austrians off-guard and the Austrians would infiltrate the high valleys at night to lay mines. By late September the snow began to fall and the GOYAs found themselves patrolling on skis. One of the GOYAs that died in those mountains was Furlough's keeper, PFC Joe Edgerly. On 4 November 1944, he was a point man on a patrol and was KIA in an ambush. Although not factual, battalion legend, in an expression of the affection that the men felt toward Edgerly and Furlough, states that Edgerly, with Furlough by his side, was hit and fell into a crevasse. When his frozen body was recovered the next day, the GOYAs found Furlough guarding him. The GOYAs sustained eleven KIA, ninety WIA and several Missing In Action (MIA) during their time in the Alps. By 18 November 1944, the GOYAs had endured ninety-six straight days of combat duty. Both the 551<sup>st</sup> and the 509<sup>th</sup> set the longest consecutive combat duty record for any of the U.S. Parachute units in Europe.

The GOYAs were relieved and pulled back to St. Jeannet to rest and re-equip. Then on 8 December 1944, they were moved to Laon where the men thought they would train for the expected Airborne assault across the Rhine into Germany. It was not to be, since the Germans launched Unternehmen Wacht am Rhein (Operation Watch on the Rhine) renamed Herbstnebel (Autumn Mist) on 16 December. The Battle of the Bulge had begun. On 17 December, Lt. Col. Joerg notified his officers that the GOYAs would

move out of the area the next day. After being told that their destination would be Bastogne, the movement was delayed due to the increasing confusion caused by the German attack. On 19 December, the men were loaded into 2 ½ ton trucks and set off on their trip to the Ardennes. It became evident that Bastogne was already encircled so the GOYAs were rerouted to Werbomont, but the Battalion's convoy became fragmented due to their passage through the battle area. The Battalion was finally regrouped by 25 December. On 27 December, Major General James Gavin, commander of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division, visited the bivouac area at Rahier. He announced that the 551<sup>st</sup> had been selected for the signal honor of conducting the first "raid in force" against the Germans. He warned the 551<sup>st</sup> that they could take heavy casualties but that the mission was vital. The GOYAs were ordered to pass through American lines at night, advance about four miles behind German lines where they would attack the village of Noirefontaine and then return with prisoners for interrogation. The attack was successful with the GOYAs sustaining four KIA and fifteen WIA. After the raid, the GOYAs were held in reserve for six days but they were under artillery bombardment most of that time.

At 0430 hours on 3 January 1945, the GOYAs started their movement to the Line of Departure as part of a full-scale counter attack. Their ultimate objective was the village of Rochelival to eliminate the German bridgehead on the River Salm. In spite of the snow and bitter temperatures that dropped to below zero degrees at times, the men were told to leave their heavy overcoats and overshoes behind since they would not be able to move quickly with them. The plan was to bring the cold weather gear up to the men with the trucks that afternoon. The trucks were not able to get through due to the roads being mined. The GOYAs did not see their blankets, overcoats and overshoes for the next six days and nights and suffered greatly, sustaining a large number of weather-related casualties. The attack went badly with insufficient artillery support and a lack of coordination between the units on the flanks. Company A had a strength of one hundred forty-two enlisted men and eight officers when they started the attack and by the time they reached the next phase line, only six enlisted and one officer were still able to fight. That night the noncommissioned officers were told to keep everyone awake so that the men would not freeze to death in their sleep. During the first day of the attack, the GOYAs had suffered one hundred eighty-nine casualties, nearly one-third of the Battalion's strength. Max Bryan had the terrible duty of Graves Registration during the battle. His day started badly when his jeep hit a mine, which damaged his right knee. But Bryan kept doing his job, searching through the pockets of the dead GOYAs and discarding everything that he found that would cause embarrassment for their families.

At 0630 on 4 January 1945, the GOYAs left the

phase line to continue the attack but the lack of sleep, exhaustion, poor clothing and the near zero temperatures were taking a severe toll. The objective for the day was the village of Dairomont and after advancing all day, at about 1600 hours, all hell broke loose. In the process of attacking a German position, Lieutenant Dick Durkee gave the order to fix bayonets and charge so that his fellow GOYAs who had circled behind the Germans would not be hit by friendly fire. During the ensuing pitched battle, sixty-four Germans were killed with no prisoners taken. The GOYAs were not in a forgiving mood. It was one of the very few documented bayonet attacks in the ETO. That night, the GOYAs moved into a defensive position but trench-foot and frostbite were taking nearly as many of the men out of action as the Germans.

The morning of 5 January 1945 presented the men with a sight they had not seen for days. The skies had cleared and the sun was shining brightly until about noon when the area was blanketed by a thick fog. The GOYAs twice fought off fierce counter attacks and had to engage in heavy hand-to-hand combat to repel the enemy. One of the counter attacks was by the Russians of the 669<sup>th</sup> Russian Ost Battalion which included Russian, Polish and Mongolian soldiers. In addition to the combat casualties, several of the GOYAs froze to death. It was also on this day that two GOYAs were captured and marched back to Germany. (These were the only two GOYAs captured during the war. They were liberated five months later.) By this time, the men had not eaten for two days and drinking water was scarce due to the cold and the danger of lighting fires to thaw their canteens.

6 January 1945 was relatively quiet but in essence, it was the lull before the storm. The GOYAs fought small skirmishes with German stragglers but most of the casualties and resulting evacuations were due to the unrelenting cold. The most important events of this day involved the mid-afternoon detachment of the 551<sup>st</sup> from Lt. Col. Rupert Graves' 517<sup>th</sup> Regiment and their subsequent attachment to Colonel Reuben Tucker's 504<sup>th</sup> Regiment. At first, Lt. Col. Joerg was encouraged by the change since he had great confidence in the leadership and combat record of Tucker. He knew that the attack on Rochelival the next day would be a difficult and bloody affair at best, so Tucker's 504<sup>th</sup> was essential to the success of the attack. Unfortunately, the change came so late in the day that there was essentially no coordination or communication between the 551<sup>st</sup> and the 504<sup>th</sup>. By that evening Joerg realized that it was the 551<sup>st</sup> that would have to make the attack alone. The GOYAs had started the attack with six hundred forty-three men and now there were only about two hundred fifty starving, exhausted and weak men left that were able to fight. That night Joerg pleaded with his superiors that the attack be given to a stronger unit or at least postponed, but his pleas were denied. It was a suicide mission and Joerg and the rest of the GOYAs knew it.



The GOYAs began their move toward Rochelival at about 0400 hours on 7 January 1945. The approach to the village required that the GOYAs attack across a downward sloping open pasture strung with barbed wire, cross through a gully and then advance upward toward a bluff where about seven hundred Germans of the 62<sup>nd</sup> Volksgrenadiers were entrenched behind a rock wall with machine guns. The Germans had the forest to the left, right and ahead targeted with howitzers and mortars. Joerg chose to place his Command Post foxhole on the edge of the forest overlooking the pasture only about three hundred yards from the German muzzles. Joerg made one last desperate attempt to get armor and artillery support for the attack. There were supposed to be three tanks, but they did not arrive. The artillery support consisted of four rounds that only alerted the Germans that an attack was imminent. At 0630 hours the first machinegun fire erupted and the battle had begun. About sixty men in A Company advanced from the left flank but were immediately cut down. Only nine men of the company managed to withdraw. Hearing the cacophony of machine gun fire, Lt. Col. Joerg emerged from his foxhole to observe the carnage. At about 0800 an artillery shell descended and exploded in a tree over Joerg. A white-hot fragment pierced his helmet and his skull. News of the GOYAs beloved commander's mortal wound raced through the Battalion. The men were stunned at their loss but they kept up the attack with Major Bill Holm assuming command. B Company and what remained of C Company pressed the attack. Finally, a single tank, probably a light M5 Stuart, arrived. It was disabled and unable to fire its main gun or its coaxial machinegun but it apparently had a psychological effect on the Germans who saw it. After close-in house-to-house fighting the Germans began to surrender, first in small groups and then in droves. In all, between three hundred to four hundred prisoners were taken. The battle was over and the GOYAs held Rochelival until they were relieved on 9 January after repelling a final German counter attack on the 8th. During the GOYAs' attack that had begun on 3 January, the GOYAs had suffered more than 83% casualties with many being related to exposure to the harsh weather. Out of the six hundred forty-three men that started the battle, only fourteen officers and ninety-six enlisted men were still able enough for duty.

Max Bryan was doing his job of Graves Registration on the afternoon of that fateful day of 7 January 1945. He had seen Lt. Col. Joerg killed that day and had been shelled himself. As he went about the gruesome task of tagging the bodies and marking their locations by thrusting their rifle muzzles, with bayonets attached, into the ground and hanging their helmets on the stocks, some German artillery fire began to land close by. Bryan took cover in the nearby woods and looked across an open meadow where he saw a woman running and carrying something, which she dropped. Disregarding his own safety, Bryan ventured into the meadow and picked up what the wom-

an had dropped. It was her 18 month-old boy. The woman's name was Alice Gabriel and Bryan took her and her son, Lèon, to the aid station in Dairomont. The next morning, Bryan tried to milk some cows for the infant's breakfast but the cows were in shock and he ended up with only a pint. For the next four days, Bryan would cook them a bit of breakfast, do his job during the day and then come back to care for them. Eventually, Bryan reunited Alice and Lèon with her brother-in-law. When they parted they did not think to exchange addresses.

On 11 January 1945, the remaining GOYAs were transported to Juslenville where they were dispersed among the Belgian families to rest and recuperate. Then on 27 January, General James Gavin addressed the GOYAs in a theater in Juslenville. He told them they had made a "good showing, a record they could be proud of in the Belgium Campaign." Also, "Your loss is my gain. I've never seen more courageous people." He then told them that the U.S. Army was doing what the Germans could not. The 551<sup>st</sup> was being deactivated and disbanded which took place officially on 10 February. Most of the GOYAs were absorbed into the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne for the duration of the war. The men were devastated by the news. They felt betrayed and it only got worse when they were denied the recognition and honor they were due. When some asked to return to Laon to retrieve the Battalion's records and personal effects, General Ridgway denied the request. As a result, most of the records were lost to the chaos of war and memory of the GOYAs and their sacrifices faded into obscurity.

"Furlough" too was lost. Some thought she had been left behind in Laon when the GOYAs were suddenly moved to the Battle of the Bulge. Two men said they remembered seeing her in the thick of the counter attack being carried in a sling by one of the men. But no one knew for sure. The GOYAs never saw her again.

After the war, each of the remaining GOYAs felt alone, not knowing the fate of the others. But slowly, they began to discover each other. A Battalion Association was formed in 1977 and in 1980, Dan Morgan, a GOYA himself, began to write the book, *The Left Corner of My Heart: The Saga of the 551<sup>st</sup> Parachute Infantry Battalion*. Morgan based his book on about ninety personal interviews of his fellow GOYAs. The Battalion's history began to be reconstructed and the men began the arduous task of righting past wrongs. They had monuments and plaques erected in places such as Noirefontaine, Leignon, La Chapelle and Rochelival. Even Fort Benning, Georgia now has a memorial that includes a statue of Furlough. A monument was also erected at Camp Mackall, North Carolina to honor the 8 GOYAs that drowned that black night on 16 February 1944. After years of effort to cut through bureaucratic red tape, the 551<sup>st</sup> Parachute Infantry Battalion was awarded the Presidential Unit Citation for extraordinary heroism on 23 February 2001.



(Figure 13) Max Bryan received a Bronze Star for his service in the 551<sup>st</sup>. It arrived in the mail and was dated 31 January 1983. In 1989, Max Bryan returned with some of his fellow GOYAs to visit the areas of Belgium they had fought over. While there, he was reunited with Alice Willem-Collienne and her now grown son, Lèon Gabriel Willem. Max Bryan received a letter from Lèon the next year in which Lèon stated, "This soldier who wanted to see me, he was an engineer from NASA. What an honor for a grade school teacher! On that day in my parent's dining room, I was sitting, neither beside a horrible soldier, nor beside a super engineer, but beside a happy father, who offered his arms and his heart to this boy, Lèon, whom he found and saved [near] Christmas Day. I have accepted this gift and this adoption with respect and tender feeling. I didn't understand too well what was happening to me. I wasn't asking much about it. As friendship is something rare, and precious, I don't talk much about it. Thank you, Father Max!" Max Bryan died on 5 December 2009. He had retired from the NASA Langley Research Center where he worked as an Engineering Technician and he was a 58-year member of the Masonic Lodge.



Figure 13 Max Bryan with his military decorations and mementos. Photo by Sangjib Min, 2001 for the *Daily Press*.

As the last of the GOYAs pass from this earth, U.S. Rifle, Caliber .30, M1, serial number 46097 remains behind. It is a rare and valuable rifle in its own right to be sure, but its true value stems from the fact that it is a reminder to all who see it of Max Bryan who carried it in battle, his fellow GOYAs of the 551<sup>st</sup> Parachute Infantry Battalion and their extraordinary deeds and sacrifices that contributed to the defeat of Nazi Germany. They should never be forgotten.