

The Link for All 508th Veterans & Active Duty and Family & Friends
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Rock Merritt Passes (1923-2021)

Saluting Our Heroes



CSM KENNETH "ROCK" MERRITT

Normandy · Holland · Ardennes
Dominican Republic · Vietnam



U.S. ARMY
1942-1977



"Think of...Rock Merritt, who saw a recruitment poster asking him if he was man enough to be a paratrooper so he signed up on the spot. That decision landed him here on D-Day with the 508th Regiment, the unit that would suffer heavy casualties. Seventy years later, it's said that all across Fort Bragg, they know Rock. Not just for his exploits on D-Day or his thirty-five years in the Army, but because ninety-one-year-old Rock Merritt still spends his time speaking to the young men and women of today's Army. And still bleeds olive drab green for his 82nd Airborne."

U.S. President Barak Obama – Normandy American Cemetery, 06 June 2014

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Command Sergeant Major Kenneth J. (Rock) Merritt

Decorated WWII Veteran Passes at Age 97

Fayetteville, NC - Kenneth J. (Rock) Merritt, a decorated World War II Paratrooper who achieved a distinguished 35-year career with the United States Army, died on March 10, 2021, after a recent period of declining health.

Rock Merritt was born August 10, 1923, in Warner, Oklahoma. Having lived through the Great Depression, at 17 years old, Rock enlisted in the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) to help support his family. Rock entered the U.S. Army on October 15, 1942, and volunteered for airborne training. He was assigned to the 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR) which was activated on October 20, 1942 at Fort Blanding, FL.

During 1943, Rock attended parachute school at Fort Benning, GA and advanced infantry and airborne operations training at Camp Mackall, NC. Following additional training in the U.S. and Ireland, the regiment conducted vigorous unit training, night parachute jumps and field exercises for over four months near Nottingham, England.



CPL Rock Merritt - July 1944

During World War II, Rock was with Headquarters Company 1st Battalion, 508th PIR and held the ranks of Private First Class, Corporal, Sergeant, Staff Sergeant and Technical Sergeant. He parachuted into Normandy near Chef-du-Pont during the June 5-6, 1944 invasion of France and engaged in key battles at Chef-du-Pont (June 12) and on Hills 131 and 95 (July 3-4). He earned a Silver Star on Hill 131 for courageously knocking out a critical German machine gun nest at 2 AM on July 4th. He jumped into Eastern Holland during Operation Market Garden on September 17, 1944 and was involved in combat operations in Nijmegen and near Drop Zone/Landing Zone T in Groesbeek on September 17 and 18. Later, under excruciating winter weather, Rock fought December 18-24 at Vielsalm, Belgium during the Battle of the Bulge. On January 20, 1945, Rock earned a ten-day leave in the U.S. for being the most decorated man in his Company.

Post-World War II, from May 1945 to November 1946, Rock was Platoon Sergeant with the 508th PIR, the unit selected to guard General Dwight D. Eisenhower's command post in Frankfurt, Germany. He then served with the 504th PIR heavy machine gun platoon until 1949. In 1949, he was promoted to 1st Sergeant and in 1951, he earned the rank of Battalion Sergeant Major for the 504th PIR, 82nd Airborne Division. Following special duty assignments in the late 1950s, Rock became the first person to serve two tours as XVIII Airborne Corps Command Sergeant Major during 1964-1966 and 1973-1977, serving seven Corps Commanders. Beyond his WWII overseas service, Rock also deployed to the Dominican Republic and Vietnam. Rock retired from the United States Army on December 1, 1977.

Rock married Sally Hatley of Stillwell, Oklahoma on August 12, 1943, and they raised three children—Kenny, Jerry and Dianna. His beloved Sally Merritt passed away on July 11, 2004. Rock is survived by his children, 6 grandchildren, 13 great-grandchildren and 3 great-great-grandchildren.

In 2016, at Fort Benning, GA, Rock was honored with the coveted Doughboy Award for lifelong contributions to the U.S. Army Infantry. In 2018, at Fort Bragg, NC, Rock was named an original inductee to the 82nd Airborne Division Hall of Fame. Of the millions of All American soldiers who have served with the famed 82nd Airborne Division, only 49 have been inducted into the Division's Hall of Fame.

On June 6, 2014, U.S. President Barack Obama, speaking before thousands at the Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial in Colleville-sur-Mer, France to commemorate the 70th Anniversary of D-Day, saluted Rock with, “Whenever the world life makes you cynical, stop and think of these men. Whenever you lose hope, stop and think of these men. Think of...Rock Merritt, who saw a recruitment poster asking him if he was man enough to be a paratrooper so he signed up on the spot. That decision landed him here on D-Day with the 508th Regiment, a unit that would suffer heavy casualties. Seventy years later, it's said that all across Fort Bragg, they know Rock. Not just for his exploits on D-Day or his thirty-five years in the Army, but because ninety-one-year-old Rock Merritt still spends his time speaking to the young men and women of today's Army. And still bleeds olive drab green for his 82nd Airborne. Whenever the world makes you cynical, whenever you doubt that courage and goodness is possible, stop and think of these men...”



**CSM (Ret) Rock Merritt, U.S. President
Barak Obama & French President
Francois Hollande – June 6, 2014**

Rock, I want you to know that Staff Sergeant Melvin Cedillo Martin, who is here today, is following in your footsteps. He just had to become an American first. Because Melvin was born in Honduras, moved to the United States and joined the Army. After tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, he was reassigned to the 82nd Airborne. And Sunday, he'll parachute into Normandy. 'I became part of a family of real American heroes,' he said. 'The Paratroopers of the 82nd Airborne.'”

In 1975, when Rock took sixteen top squad leaders from Fort Bragg, NC to the annual convention of the Association of the United States Army (AUSA) in Washington D.C., he finally met General of the Army (Retired) Omar Bradley, a senior officer of the U.S. Army during World War II who would later become the first Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. General Bradley was the last Five-Star General who retired from active duty in 1953 and died in 1981. In their first private meeting, General Bradley and Command Sergeant Major Rock Merritt would agree that the Squad Leader role was the toughest job in the Army. By the time



**General Omar Bradley (left) &
CSM Rock Merritt – October 1977**



**CSM (Ret) Rock Merritt with 508th Paratroopers at Fort Bragg, NC
94th Birthday – August 2017**

Rock last met with General Bradley prior to his 1977 retirement, at the request of General Bradley, Rock agreed to commit time to speak to and coach young Paratroopers and Squad Leaders at Fort Bragg as Rock would live nearby in Fayetteville, NC in retirement. For the next 43 years, Rock did just that, at both Fort Bragg and other military posts and schools. Rock’s last major speech was to cadets and faculty at West Point Military Academy on February 11, 2020.

At age 96, Rock visited Franklin County, Massachusetts in September 2019 to commemorate the 75th Anniversary of World War II and Operation Market Garden, a bold attempt by the Allies to



CSM (Ret) Rock Merritt at Frontier Regional School – Sept 2019

parachute behind lines into Eastern Holland and end the War early before Christmas 1944. He held Q&A sessions with students at Frontier Regional High School and Deerfield Academy and visited with Veterans at their weekly luncheon in Greenfield, MA. As featured speaker at a World War II Commemoration event on September 18th in the Wapping section of Deerfield, he

saluted his 508th PIR comrade, Private First Class James A Childs, who was killed a day after jumping with Rock and over 20,000 American and British Paratroopers into Holland on September 17, 1944. Remarkably, three of the fifteen Town of Deerfield (population 2684 in 1940) residents killed in World War II were Paratroopers from the 82nd Airborne Division – two from the 508th PIR, one from the 504th PIR – so Rock’s presence was all the more fitting. Rock would reflect on his visit to Franklin County, MA, saying, “Beautiful countryside and farmlands, such big trees, sharp and interested students, and just very nice people.” Suffice it to say, Rock was a natural ambassador of the 82nd Airborne Division and the 508th PIR, and he was tireless in reaching out to young and old alike, whether civilian or military.

Rock Merritt was a champion of the 501(c)(3) tax-exempt *Family and Friends of the 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment Association*, a non-profit dedicated to Honoring, Preserving and Communicating the History of All Eras of 508th Paratroopers from World War II to today’s 508th Battalions based out of Fort Bragg, NC. On the occasion of Rock’s 95th Birthday in August 2018, the Association established the “Rock Merritt Squad Leader of the Year Award” to annually recognize a Squad Leader who demonstrates outstanding leadership performance and potential. Fortunately, Rock was able to participate in the first three annual award ceremonies. Please visit http://www.508pir.org/f_and_f/paymstr_1.htm to contribute to the Rock Merritt Squad Leader of the Year fund.



CPL KENNETH “ROCK” MERRITT Squad Leader of the Year Award

- In Honor:** CSM (Ret) Kenneth “Rock” Merritt.
35-Year U.S. Army career. Original Paratrooper with the 508th PIR. WWII Veteran of Normandy, Holland and Battle of the Bulge. Silver Star recipient.
- To Recognize:** Annually, one Paratrooper from each 508th Battalion who demonstrates outstanding leadership performance and potential.
- Criteria:** Leadership Attributes may include:
- Competence and proficiency in area of expertise.
 - Decision-making ability.
 - Ability to motivate and build/sustain morale.
 - Ability to foster a cohesive team.
 - Demonstrated passion, energy and personality.
 - Success on the training and/or battle field.
- Selection Team:** Committee of Battalion senior NCOs as designated by the Battalion Commanding Officer.
- Selection Process:** Process at the discretion of the Selection Team consistent with other Battalion and U.S. Army processes for recognizing outstanding leadership and achievement. Selection Team responsible for providing a summary paragraph highlighting the Recipient’s qualifications and achievements that underpin his or her selection.
- Award Details:** Awarded annually considering each Battalion’s training and deployment calendars.
1. Each recipient’s name and unit engraved on a perpetual plaque that will hang in each Battalion headquarters.
 2. Each recipient receives a Framed Certificate.
 3. Each recipient receives a Supporter level Lifetime Membership in the *Family and Friends of the 508th PIR Association*.
 4. Each recipient receives a \$250 gift card.

SUPPORT THE AWARD FUND AT: http://www.508pir.org/f_and_f/paymstr_1.htm



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Dedicated to Honoring, Preserving and Communicating the History of All Eras of 508th Paratroopers.
508PIR.org



508TH ALL-ERA & ALL-AIRBORNE REUNION Columbus, OH June 23 – June 27, 2021



Registration Fee (per Person)
Adults: \$150.00 Under 18: \$50.00

Name _____

Address _____ City _____ St. _____ Zip _____

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Guest(s) Name(s) _____

\$150 Adults _____ x \$150 = \$ _____

\$50 Children under 18 _____ x \$50 = \$ _____

Donation to Help with General Expenses (**THANK YOU!**) = \$ _____

Total \$ _____

Hotel Reservation Instructions

Please reserve your hotel room(s) at the **Nationwide Hotel and Conference Center**, 100 Green Meadows Drive South, Lewis Center, OH 43035. **Call +1 614-880-4300 or Book On-Line at www.nwhotelandconferencecenter.com** . Be sure to reference **Group 257735** for the **attractive group rate of \$149.64 (King Bed Room) / \$161.24 (2 Double Bed Room) / \$172.84 (King or 2 Double Bed Parlor Room) per night, tax & hot breakfast included.** Reservations must be made by **April 24, 2021** for this special rate. Please book early. The hotel also has a limited number of handicapped accessible rooms.

UNLIKE IN PRIOR YEARS, REUNION REGISTRATION FEES WILL NOT BE REFUNDED IF YOU ARE UNABLE TO ATTEND, GIVEN THE IMPACT YOUR NON-ATTENDANCE WILL HAVE ON OUR HOTEL CONTRACT. YOU CAN CANCEL YOUR HOTEL ROOM AT LEAST 24 HOURS IN ADVANCE OF YOUR ARRIVAL DATE TO AVOID ANY ROOM CHARGES.

Pay On-Line (Credit Card & PayPal) at http://www.508pir.org/reunion/reunion_04.htm and Email Form to: Treasurer@508PIR.org

or

Please Mail Registration Form & Fee to:

Chris Harris – Treasurer, 68B N Main St, So. Deerfield, MA 01373

Checks should be made payable to:

“F&F 508th PIR Assoc”

“FURY FROM THE SKY” NORMANDY HILL 30 JAMES DIETZ PRINTS AVAILABLE

Limited-Edition Prints signed by Association champions CSM (Ret) Rock Merritt and LTC (Ret) Bob Chisolm, both Veterans of all three 508th WWII combat operations 76+ years ago and who along with 1SG Leonard Funk, are among just 49 All American Hall Of Fame inductees.



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