

## Captain Francis Ernest Flanders

By Irving T. Shanley

Francis Flanders was born in Worcester, Massachusetts August 25, 1919, the son of Frank L. Flanders and Margaret M. (Sullivan) Flanders. The Flanders family moved to Northborough, Massachusetts about 1937. Francis graduated from Northborough High School in June 1938. He was president of his class. One of his classmates, Patricia (Proctor) MacFarland, said that Francis was only in town a short time when they graduated. She thought he was planning to be a priest. Howard Proctor, Patricia's brother, said that Francis married Helen Haninen who graduated with the class of 1934. Francis and Helen had one son, Gerald Francis (Frank) Flanders. Howard Proctor, and David Proctor, another of Patricia's brothers, both served in the Normandy invasion in June 1944. Francis had four brothers—Gerald J. Flanders, Richard F. Flanders, Raymond Flanders, and Robert Flanders, and one sister—Loretta M. Flanders. All were born in Worcester. Captain Francis E. Flanders and his wife Helen are buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

Francis enlisted as a private in the Massachusetts National Guard on July 1, 1940 at Worcester, Massachusetts for three years and was assigned to Company B, 181st Infantry Regiment. His serial number was 20110558. He had prior service with the Massachusetts National Guard with Company D of this Regiment from April 1, 1938 to October 25, 1938. The 181st Infantry Regiment, 26th Infantry (Yankee) Division stationed in Worcester, Massachusetts was called to active duty with the Army on January 16, 1941. At the time of his enlistment, Francis was living at 181 East Main Street, Northborough, Massachusetts. Francis rose through the enlisted ranks and later attended the Army's Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning, Georgia and was commissioned a 2nd Lieutenant May 2, 1942.

Captain Flanders joined the 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment about April 1943 at Camp Mackall, North Carolina and was assigned as Commanding Officer of F Company. The Regiment was activated for duty during World War II at Camp Blanding, Florida October 20, 1942. Of the more than 6,000 enlisted men who had volunteered for parachute duty and were processed at Camp Blanding for assignment to the Regiment, only 1,800 were selected, and only 500 of the 2,200 officers processed were selected. After 13 rigorous weeks of basic training at Blanding, the Regiment was transferred to Fort Benning, Georgia for three weeks of parachute qualification. After completion of the five qualifying parachute jumps in March 1943 the Regiment was transferred to Camp Mackall for eight months of tactical training before shipping overseas to the European Theater of Operations (ETO). Captain Flanders was a fine officer and a gentleman and was greatly admired and respected by the men and officers under his command.

The Regiment was moved to Camp Shanks, New York for final overseas processing in late December 1943, and the day after Christmas boarded the United States Army Troop Transport (USAT) ship James Parker for shipment to Belfast, Ireland. The James Parker along with other troop transport vessels was part of a large naval convoy escorted by US Navy corvettes and other warships across the Atlantic because of heavy German U-boat (submarine) activity. After two months of training at Port Stewart, Northern Ireland, the Regiment was moved by ferry to Scotland and then by train to Nottingham, England, which became their base camp. They lived in six-man squad tents on the outskirts of Nottingham in Wollaton Park, which was part of Sherwood Forest where Robin Hood and his merry men roamed in the days of yore as he stole from the rich to help the poor.

Most of the men in the Regiment had completed 11 parachute jumps prior to the Normandy invasion, including the five jumps made at the parachute school at Fort Benning, Georgia in March 1943 while qualifying as parachutists. The other six jumps were tactical training jumps with weapons and full field equipment-four at Camp Mackall, one at Tullahoma, Tennessee on maneuvers, and the other in England just before the Normandy drop. On these training jumps, emphasis on the speedy assembly of units immediately after hitting the ground was stressed since assembly after a drop is very crucial to the success of any airborne operation. Assembly is all the more difficult during darkness and under enemy fire. At the Saltby Air Base in England where the 2nd Battalion, which included F Company, was sealed behind barbed wire about a week before the invasion, the Battalion practiced assembly again and again. For the Normandy drop, the 2nd Battalion, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Thomas J.B. Shanley, (West Point 1939) planned to assemble after the jump on a light held aloft by a member of the Battalion staff, with one company dispersed to the north of the light, one to the south, one east, and the other to the west. The planned assembly of the Battalion never happened because of the darkness, heavy enemy fire, the many hedgerows with their towering trees, and the evasive actions taken by the troop carrier pilots causing dispersal of the troopers over a wide area. In addition, the drop zones were crawling with krauts and most troopers had to fight their way to get anywhere.

Just prior to the Normandy invasion. Colonel Roy E. Lindquist, Commanding Officer of the 508th, was notified that the Regiment would be attached to the 82nd Airborne Division for the upcoming invasion which was commanded by Major General Matthew Ridgeway and Brigadier General James (Slim Jim) Gavin. The 508th had previously been a separate Regiment and later was part of the 2nd Airborne Brigade along with the 507th Parachute Infantry Regiment.

The parachute jump into Normandy took place about 2:15 am, June 6, 1944. The C47 unarmed jump planes began to encounter slight to moderate enemy antiaircraft fire when they approached the west coast of the Cotentin Peninsula. The hostile antiaircraft fire joined by automatic weapons firing tracer ammunition became more intense as the planes reached the drop zones in the middle of the peninsula making it difficult for the pilots to maintain formation causing some to deviate from their planned route. As the troopers were standing in the planes, with the jumpmasters standing in the open doors, anxiously waiting for the pilots to turn on the green light at the jump door, there were numerous, thunderous explosions all around the planes from the German antiaircraft fire. The troopers were anxious to get out of the planes because they thought their chances of survival were far greater floating down in their parachutes than staying in the planes. The troopers were yelling, "Let's go! Let's go!" during the short time they were waiting for the green light.

Information received from several men who served in the Regiment with Captain Flanders during the invasion indicate that he was captured by the Germans shortly after landing on French soil near the towns of Picauville and Ste. Mere Eglise. The paratrooper drop zones were located about ten miles west of the Utah and Omaha beaches where four American Infantry Divisions were to come ashore at dawn. The mission of the 508th was to prevent the Germans from reinforcing their units at the beaches. Private Jack Schlegel, 3rd Battalion of the 508th, said that he was wounded and captured on D-Day and taken to a French chateau where there were about 200 to 300 other American prisoners. Schlegel said that on June 7 (D+1) the American prisoners were loaded onto 20 new German trucks with canvas covers and were heading toward Saint Lo on a modern paved highway when the convoy was strafed by Allied fighter planes. The pilots apparently did not know that there were American POWs in the trucks. Schlegel said there were two heavy weapons vehicles

leading the convoy and one at the rear, and that there was a guard on each truck armed with a machine gun. The captured American officers were separated from the enlisted prisoners and rode in the first truck. The senior American prisoner was the Commanding Officer of the 507th Parachute Infantry Regiment, and he was placed in charge of all prisoners in the convoy. Schlegel said that he rode in the last truck. He said that the planes made four runs at the trucks and that all the vehicles in the convoy were hit and burning. He said that their German guards jumped off the trucks and took cover in the nearby ditches when they realized that they were about to be strafed. He estimated that as many as 20 prisoners were killed in the strafing and about 80 were wounded. Those prisoners who were not severely wounded were told to place the dead in one area and the wounded in another. Schlegel did not know Captain Flanders but believes he was one of those killed in the strafing.

Schlegel said that the survivors of the attack by the planes were assembled and were forced to march to the rear. He said that he and another prisoner escaped during the march but were recaptured soon after. At a German POW hospital in August 1944 where Schlegel was treated for his wounds he found out that the American prisoners who were wounded in the strafing were taken to the POW hospital in Rennes, France. He said he did not know what happened to the dead prisoners.

Sergeant Frank McKee, who was a rifle squad leader in F Company during WWII, said that Captain Flanders was a quiet, low-key, competent officer and that the Company ran smoothly under his leadership. McKee also said that after the war he was an acquaintance of Lieutenant Mike Bodak, who was Schlegel's platoon leader going into Normandy, and who was also captured and severely wounded during the same strafing, told him that Captain Flanders was riding in the truck with the other officers and was killed during the strafing. Bodak survived the war in POW camps and became a paraplegic as a result of his wounds.

Sergeant Robert J. Broderick served in F Company from Camp Blanding, Florida through the end of the war in Europe and remembers that Flanders came to F Company in the spring of 1943 at Camp Mackall, North Carolina as a First Lieutenant as its new Commanding Officer. Most of the officers and enlisted men in the Company thought a lot about their old commander. Captain Donald K. Ipson, who apparently didn't fare too well with his superiors. So they were somewhat apprehensive of the newcomer, Flanders, especially considering his opening remarks about how he was going to straighten out F Company. But one of the guys in Broderick's squad, Don Wright (deceased), had attended demolition school with Flanders and told Broderick that Flanders had been a Regular Army NCO and that he would be just fine.

Broderick said that shortly after Tennessee maneuvers there was a rumor floating around that Flanders said he had screwed up during the maneuvers and was concerned because of his impending promotion to Captain. A few days later, while the other company officers were at the company headquarters, Flanders walked in sporting newly-acquired "twin nails," and immediately started to lecture them on the proper respect that must be accorded superior officers—and he was mobbed. This was probably the last time all these officers would whoop and holler together out of sheer delight.

While in Northern Ireland, Broderick said he and his buddy, Brightsman, were arrested by the Chute Patrol while passing through the city of Coleraine which was off limits. When the off-limits report reached Flanders, he called both men to his office and demanded to know what the hell they had been up to, and as they began to

explain with some lamed-brained excuse, he broke out with a huge grin and said, "Get the hell out of here!"

The Regiment fought the Germans in Normandy in close combat for 33 consecutive days. After the allied forces had gained strong footing in France, the 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment was transferred from Normandy by ship back to its base camp in Nottingham, England where they took in replacements and were re-equipped to prepare for their next assignment. That assignment came on September 17, 1944 when the Regiment, as part of the 82nd Airborne Division, jumped in broad daylight on a sunny Sunday afternoon at about 1:30 pm onto Drop zones just south of Nijmegen, Holland. During this operation the men of the Regiment captured the big prize of the invasion, the Nijmegen Bridge, which provided a crossing point over the Waal River into Germany. Two other parachute drops had been planned for the 508th in early September 1944 in Belgium—one at Tournai and the other near Liege, but these drops had to be cancelled because General Patton's fast-moving ground forces had overrun the drop zones.

On July 29, 1944, at our base camp in Nottingham, England, a memorial service was held for the 333 men of the Regiment who were killed in Normandy. The Regiment was formed in the rain on the parade ground and a member of the band sang "My Buddy." Then, as the honor roll was read by the battalion commanders, each company guidon was lowered in salute. Colonel Lindquist reminded the men of the Regiment that the real heroes of the Regiment were left in France. There was not a dry eye in sight. The Regiment was awarded the United States Distinguished Unit Citation for its part in the Normandy invasion, and particularly, for its gallant stand on Hill 30 in Picauville fighting off vastly superior enemy forces for three days, thereby denying the enemy from moving to the east to oppose the beach landings. Colonel Shanley, the 2nd Battalion Commander, had managed to assemble about 400 troopers for the defense of Hill 30.

The Regiment also participated in the Battle of the Bulge when the Germans breached the weak American line in Belgium on December 17, 1944 in a last-ditch effort to turn the tide against the Allied forces. That same evening the 508th, along with the rest of the 82nd Airborne Division and the 101st Airborne Division, was alerted to make a speedy move on trucks from its new base camp at Sissonne, France to Belgium to counter the German onslaught. The Germans were defeated after almost two months of heavy fighting and the Regiment returned to its base camp at Sissonne before being transferred to Frankfurt, Germany to become General Dwight D. Eisenhower's honor guard.

The officers and men of the 508th Infantry Regiment suffered greatly during the three major campaigns they fought in during World War II with a total of 2,670 battle casualties, including 616 killed in action or died of wounds. They were awarded one Medal of Honor, 14 Distinguished Service Crosses, 118 Silver Stars, 378 Bronze Stars, 19 Foreign Decorations, and almost 2,000 Purple Hearts. In addition to the US Distinguished Unit Citation the Regiment was awarded for the Normandy invasion, it was also awarded three other unit citations—the French Fourragere (Croix de Guerre with Palm), the Belgian Fourragere, and the Militaire Willems Orde, Degree of Knight Fourth Class (Orange Lanyard of the Royal Netherlands Army). The 82nd Airborne Division, including the 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment, became the first non- Dutch unit to be awarded this lanyard.

Captain Flanders' awards and decorations include the Bronze Star Medal, Purple Heart Medal, Combat Infantry Badge, Parachute Badge, National Defense Service Medal, American Campaign Medal, Africa-European Campaign Medal with one

battle star and invasion arrowhead. Good Conduct Medal, Victory Medal, French Fourragere, and the United States Distinguished Unit Citation.

Francis Flanders was a true patriot who gave unselfishly of himself to defend the freedoms we all enjoy today. He was a volunteer—he volunteered for duty with the Army National Guard, for active duty with the United States Army, for parachute duty with the elite 82nd Airborne Division, and for duty as a commissioned officer. As a young man, just barely in his twenties, he left the comfort and safety of his home and family to travel three thousand miles to bring freedom to the long-oppressed peoples of war-torn Europe during the darkest days in our history. He parachuted into Normandy, France on June 6, 1944 (D-Day) as part of the Great Crusade and the largest invasion ever in the history of warfare—and he paid the ultimate price.