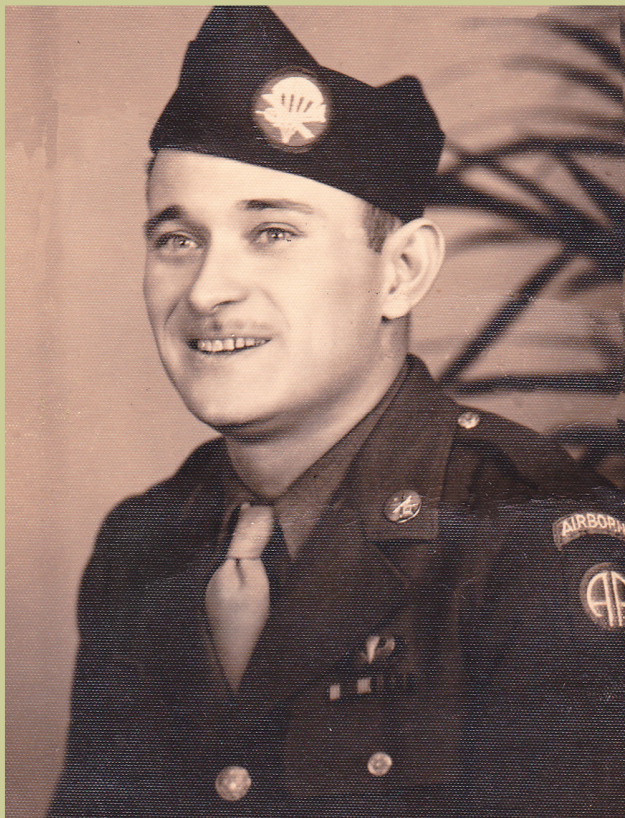


Ralph E. Sawyer

Army

Radio Operator, 82nd Airborne, 504 Paratroopers



Pvt. Ralph E. Sawyer
Army
82nd Airborne Paratroopers
Radio Operator—Signal Company A & D
504 Paratroopers, Battalion 1

Ralph was born on a farm near Staunton, Illinois on October 15, 1912--the second oldest of eleven children and the only boy. At the age of 30, Ralph enlisted in the Army on October 1942 and was immediately sent to Fort Benning, Georgia for Paratrooper training. He served as a radio operator with the Signal Company in the 82nd Airborne Division, Co. A & D - O.P. 469 Paratroopers in the 504, Bat-

talion 1.

He spent 22 months overseas and over 3 years in service to his country. He was in North Africa, Sicily, Italy, Holland, Normandy's D-Day and the Battle of the Bulge and he was already on the ground in Sicily with the 504 when the 505 Par-



US Airborne Paratroopers
Bound for Sicily
July 9, 1943

atroopers were mistakenly fire upon by "friendly fire" and 81 were killed.

The 82nd Airborne engaged in 7 major operations from Sicily to D-Day. They were usually the first unit dropped and earned the name, "Devils in Baggy Pants." from the Germans.

Later Ralph was sent to Leicester, England where met and married his wife, Kathleen Layte. Kay and his daughter, Carol Ann, arrived 16 months after Ralph returned home in 1945.

Ralph E. Sawyer

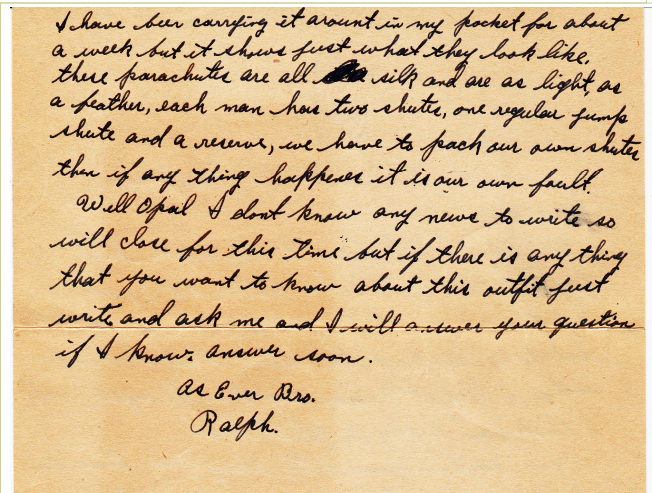
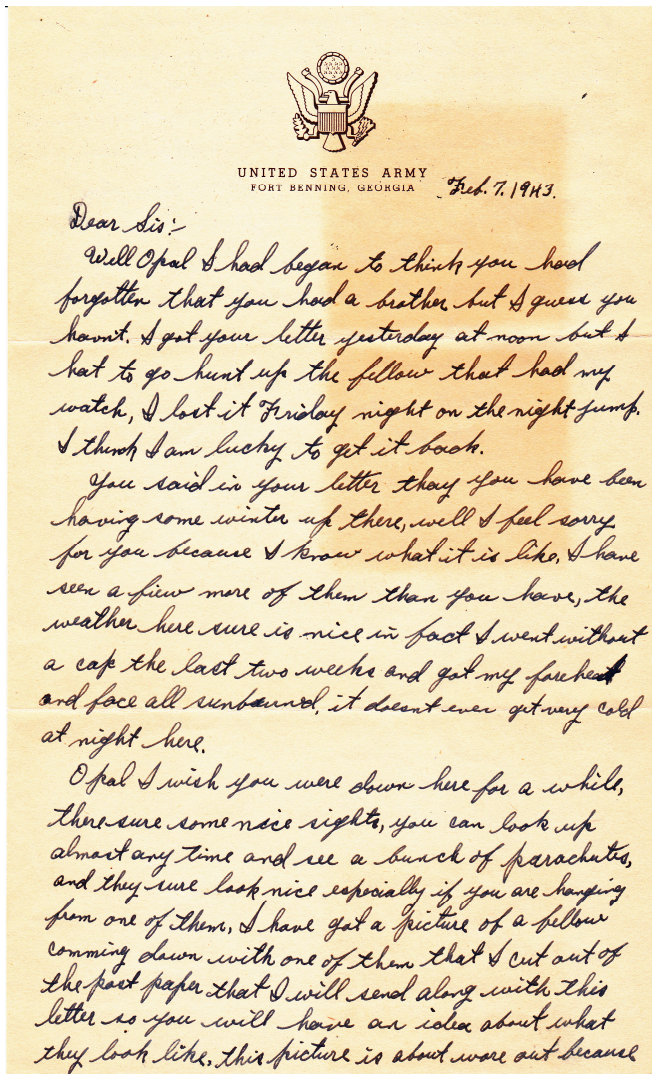
Army

Radio Operator, 82nd Airborne, 504 Paratroopers

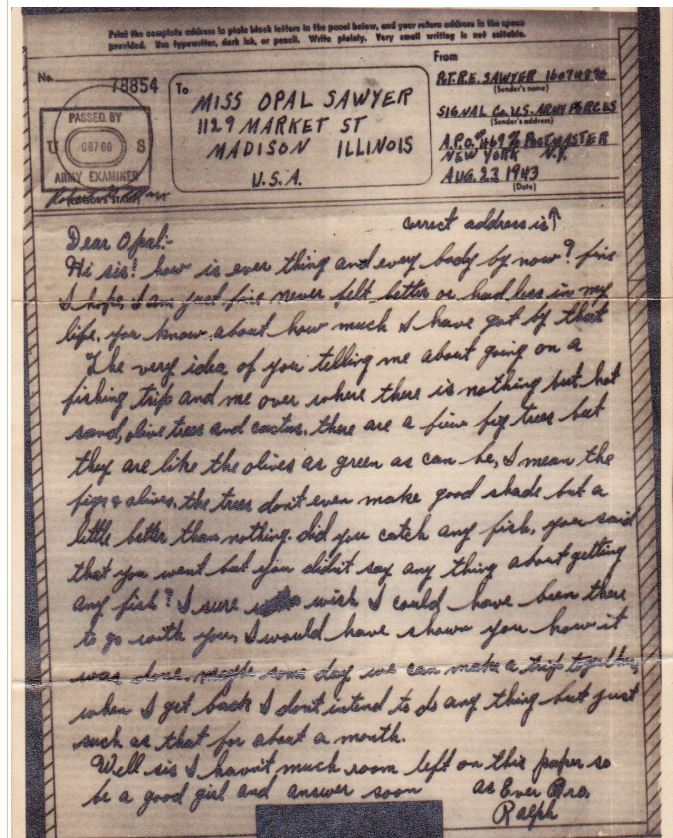
Ralph and his family lived in Staunton until 1963 and then moved to Pekin, IL. He was employed by Caterpillar Corp in Peoria until he passed in 1979.

Letters home to his younger sister, Opal Sawyer Brown, allow insights to where Ralph was during his military service.

Feb, 1943 – Fort Benning, Georgia, Ralph writes:



V-mail from overseas on August 23, 1943



Ralph E. Sawyer

Army

Radio Operator, 82nd Airborne, 504 Paratroopers



US 82nd Airborne
Operation Husky
July 9, 1943



US 82nd Airborne
Troopers after Midnight Jump
Gela, Sicily



US 82nd Airborne
Company D, North Africa
July 9, 1943 Before Sicily Drop



US 82nd Airborne
Paratroopers caught in trees
Italian Campaign

Ralph E. Sawyer

Army

Radio Operator, 82nd Airborne, 504 Paratroopers

November 1, 1943

Ralph writes he hurt his shoulder when they invaded Sicily on July 9, 1943. He was with the first group that went in at midnight on July 9. "It was awful dark" and he landed in an olive tree — at which time his left arm was caught on a large branch and his shoulder was badly injured at that time. "I guess I was lucky though some of the fellows got their feet and legs broke."

Uncle Sawyer (1)
1st Lt Sig C
Over Sea
Nov. 1, 1943

Dear Sis:-
How are you and every one around there? fine I hope. I am ok at the present, I just got out of the hospital again two weeks ago. I had malaria and was laid up for three weeks and while I was there they took some more x-rays of my shoulder and wanted to operate but I said nothing doing. I said if they will send me back to the states to do it ok but not over here, they said it would take five months for a complete job, it would take two operations and I don't want to stay in a hospital that long over here and they haven't got the things to do with over here that they have over there, maybe if I just

let it go it will be alright, it isn't near as bad as it was, it doesn't bother as long as I don't try to reach over my head or behind me, it is my left shoulder and I use my right arm the most any way, we are allowed to write more now than we were any time since we came across so I can tell you (I guess) that I hurt my shoulder when we invaded Sicily, I was with the first bunch that went in, we made a parachute jump at midnight the 9th of July, it was awful dark and when I was coming down and got close enough to see the ground and the outline of things I thought it was rows of grapes below me but it turned out to be

Ralph drops hints about where his battalion has been. "Say sis I have always wanted to see Rome and Naples, well I have seen Naples and hope to see Rome before long, it wouldn't hurt my feelings if they sent me home instead of letting me see any more of this country."

The 82nd was part of the invasion for Sicily, Anzio and Naples. All fiercely fought battles as the Allies drove the Germans out of Sicily and Italy.

Ralph E. Sawyer

Army

Radio Operator, 82nd Airborne, 504 Paratroopers

olive trees and I think I landed in the largest one in the orchard. I went right down through the tree and got my left arm caught on a large branch and that is how it happened. I guess I was lucky though, some of the fellows got their feet and legs broken, you see that country is awful rocky.

Say sis I have always wanted to see Rome and Naples, well I have seen Naples and hope to see Rome before long. it wouldn't hurt my feelings if they sent me home instead of letting me see any more of this country over here.

Opal I sent \$2.50 home the first part of Sep. do you know if they got it or not? I still have the receipt for it if any thing

Ralph writes, "Sis we are allowed to tell what outfit we are with at last, I am with the 82nd Airborne Division and am a radio operator with the signal Company, in fact I am on duty now and it is twenty minutes until three in the morning and I am out here all alone.

should happen^(H) that it gets lost or any thing. you tell them to write and let me know when they get it and if they don't get it after 90 days the government will check on it for us.

Sis we are allowed to tell what outfit we are with at last, I am with the 82nd Airborne Division and am a radio operator with the signal company, in fact I am on duty now and it is twenty minutes until three in the morning and I am out here all alone.

Well sis I have scribbled off enough now to ruin your eyes so will sign off for tonight. I am all wound up and can think of a lot to write to night but will save some for next time write soon and often. As Ever Bro. Ralph.

By the time, Opal received his November letter, Ralph had been in North Africa, where his unit been involved in fighting in Gela and Salerno, Sicily and then onto Anzio and Naples in Italy. Personally, Ralph had contracted Malaria and suffered two bouts with it in addition to suffering the shoulder injury described in his letters.

Ralph E. Sawyer

Army

Radio Operator, 82nd Airborne, 504 Paratroopers



Ralph gave his “wings” to his little sister...
Opal Sawyer Frizzo Brown
Proudly Wears, 1944



Wedding Day
Ralph and Kay Sawyer
(English War Bride)
Lieicester, England 1944



Sawyer Family
1940

Ralph E. Sawyer

Army

Radio Operator, 82nd Airborne, 504 Paratroopers



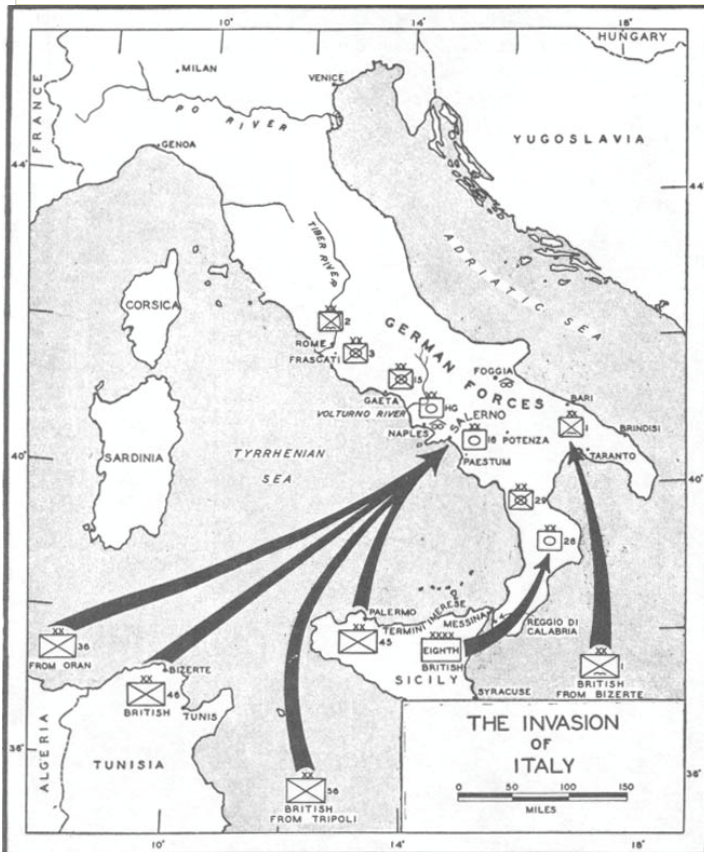
US 82nd Airborne

504 (PIR) Company A, Signal Company, Battalion 1
Leicester, England
August 1944

Ralph E. Sawyer

Army

Radio Operator 82nd Airborne Paratroopers 504



History of the 82nd Airborne

504 PIR, Company A

In the spring of 1943, the 82nd All Americans became the first airborne division sent overseas. They left via troop ships from New England and landed in Casablanca, North Africa on May 10, 1943. From there, they moved by rail to Oujda and then by truck to Kairouan, Tunisia. That would be their departure point for the Division's first combat drop - the invasion of Sicily.

Sicily - Operation Husky

Colonel James Gavin's 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR) and the 3rd Battalion of the 504th PIR parachuted to take the high ground near Ponte Olivo airfield northeast of Gela, Sicily on July 9, 1943. Despite the wide scattering of the assault, the objectives were seized and the units linked up

with the 1st Infantry Division the next day.

On July 11, 1943, the remaining Battalions of the 504th PIR were dropped in the vicinity of Gela with heavy losses from both the German and Allied (*friendly fire*) antiaircraft fire. Despite the heavy losses the division was moved up to the front by motor and reinforced by the 39th Infantry Regiment of the 9th Infantry Division on July 12, 1943. The crossings of Fiume delle Canno were secured on July 18, 1943 and the division pushed along the coastal highway, seizing the Marsala-Trapani area of Sicily's western coast by July 23rd.

Salerno - The Oil Drum Drop

The Division's second combat operation was a night parachute drop onto the [Salerno](#) beachhead on September 13, 1943 in support of General Mark Clark's 5th Army which was in danger of being pushed back into the sea.

The 504th PIR was parachuted south of the Sele River near Salerno on September 13, 1943. In order to guide the C-47 pilots to the shrinking dropzone, oil drums filled with gasoline soaked sand were ignited every 50 yards when signaled. 1300 troopers landed that night infusing a new sense of confidence to the beleaguered soldiers of the 5th Army. The 505th PIR was dropped the following night near the same dropzone to reinforce the air assault. On September 15th the 325th Glider Infantry Regiment (GIR) was brought into the beachhead amphibiously to join the rest of the division.

Once the beachhead was secured, the 504th PIR & the 376th PFAB began an attack to recover Altavilla on September 16, 1943 and the division fought towards [Naples](#) which it reached on October 1, 1943 and moved in to the next day for security duty.

"Leg Infantry"

After Naples, the 504th PIR & the 376th PFAB were detached from the 82nd Airborne temporarily and fought as "leg infantry" through the hills of

Ralph E. Sawyer

Army

Radio Operator 82nd Airborne Paratroopers 504

southern Italy as part of the 36th Infantry Division. On October 29th they capture Gallo. They then battled in the [Winter Line](#) commencing with attacks up Hill 687 on December 15th, 1943.

On 9 December 1943 Colonel Gavin was promoted to Brigadier General and assumed the duties of the Assistant Division Commander of the 82nd Airborne while Lt Col Herbert Batchellor assumed command of the 505th. During the early months of 1944, units of the Division were moved to England as the allies were preparing for the assault on Western Europe. The 505th PIR again changed commanders on 22 March 1944 when Lt Col William Ekman assumed command. He would lead the 505th through the remainder of the war.

Anzio - Operation Shingle

On January 22nd & 23rd 1944, the 504th PIR, landed on the beach at Anzio and participated in heavy combat along the Mussolini Canal. It was their fierce fighting during this defensive engagement that earned the 504th PIR the nickname "*Devils in Baggy Pants*." The nickname was taken from an entry made in a German officer's diary.

D-Day - Operation Neptune

While the 504th was detached, the remainder of the 82nd was pulled out of Italy in December 1943 and moved to the United Kingdom to prepare for the liberation of Europe. With two combat jumps under its belt, the 82nd Airborne Division was now ready for the most ambitious airborne operation of the war, Operation Neptune -the airborne invasion of Normandy. The operation was part of Operation OVERLORD, the amphibious assault on the northern coast of Nazi-occupied France.

In preparation for the operation, the division was reorganized. Two new parachute infantry regiments, the 507th and the 508th, joined the division. However, due to its depleted state following the fighting in Italy, the 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment did not take part in the invasion.

On [June 5-6, 1944](#), the paratroopers of the 82nd's three parachute infantry regiments and reinforced glider infantry regiment boarded hundreds of transport planes and gliders and, began the largest airborne assault in history. They were among the first soldiers to fight in Normandy, France.

The division dropped behind Utah Beach, Normandy, France between Ste Mere-Eglise and Carentan on June 6th, 1944. They were reinforced by the 325th GIR the next day. The division remained under strong German pressure along the Merderit River. Eventually, the 325th GIR crossed the river to secure a bridgehead at La Fiere on June 9th. It was during this action that Pfc Charles N. DeGlopper single-handedly defended his platoon's position and subsequently was awarded the Medal of Honor for his heroism.

The next day the 505th PIR captured Montebourg Station and on June 12th the 508th PIR crossed the Douve at Beuzeville-la-Bastille and reached Baup. They established a bridgehead at Pont l'Abbe on June 19th. The division then attacked down the west coast of the Cotentin Peninsula and captured Hill 131 on July 3rd. The following day the 82nd seized Hill 95 overlooking La Haye-du-Puits.

By the time the All-American Division was pulled back to England on July 13, 1944, it had seen 33 days of bloody combat and suffered 5,245 paratroopers killed, wounded or missing. The Division's post battle report read, "...33 days of action without relief, without replacements. Every mission accomplished. No ground gained was ever relinquished."

Following the Normandy invasion, the 82nd became part of the newly organized XVIII Airborne Corps which consisted of the U.S. 17th, 82nd, and 101st Airborne Divisions. General Ridgway was promoted and assumed command of the XVIII Airborne Corps. Meanwhile, Assistant Division Commander, General James Gavin was also pro-

Ralph E. Sawyer

Army

Radio Operator, 82nd Airborne, 504 Paratroopers

moted and assumed command of the 82nd Airborne.

Operation Market Garden

In September, the 82nd began planning for Operation Market Garden in Holland. The operation called for three-plus airborne divisions to seize and hold key bridges and roads deep behind German lines. The 504th now back at full strength rejoined the 82nd, while the 507th went to the 17th Airborne Division.



US 82nd Airborne
Holland
September 1944

On September 17, the 82nd Airborne Division conducted its fourth combat jump of World War II into Holland. Fighting off ferocious German counterattacks, the 82nd captured the Maas Bridge at Grave, the Maas-Waal Canal Bridge at Heumen and the Nijmegen-Groesbeek Ridge. The next day attempts to take Nijmegen Highway Bridge failed.

On 20 September the 504th carried out an heroic

assault crossing the Waal. With artillery support the first wave of the 504th assaulted, in twenty-six assault boats, under intense fire, taking 200 casualties in the process. Finally on D+4 the 504th finally secured their hold on the bridge, fighting off another German counterattack just before noon.

It was in this skirmish that Pvt. John Towle won the Medal of Honor. Its success, however, was short-lived because of the defeat of other Allied units at Arnhem. The gateway to Germany would not open in September 1944, and the 82nd was ordered back to France.

Battle of the Bulge The Ardennes Offensive

Suddenly, on December 16, 1944, the Germans launched a surprise offensive through the Ardennes Forest which caught the Allies completely



US 82nd Airborne
Battle of the Bulge—Belgium
December 1944

by surprise. The 82nd moved into action on December 17th in response to the German's Ardennes Counteroffensive and blunted General VonUntedt's northern penetration in the Ameri-

Ralph E. Sawyer

Army

Radio Operator, 82nd Airborne, 504 Paratroopers

can lines. On December 20th the 82nd attacked in the Vielsalm-St. Vith region and the 504th PIR took Monceau. This fierce attack forced the German units back across the Ambleve River the next day.

However, further German assaults along the Salm hit the 505th PIR in the [Trois Ponts](#) area on December 22nd and by December 24th the division lost Manhay. On December 25th, 1944 the division withdrew from the Vielsalm salient then attacked north-east of Bra on December 27th reaching Salm by January 4th, 1945.

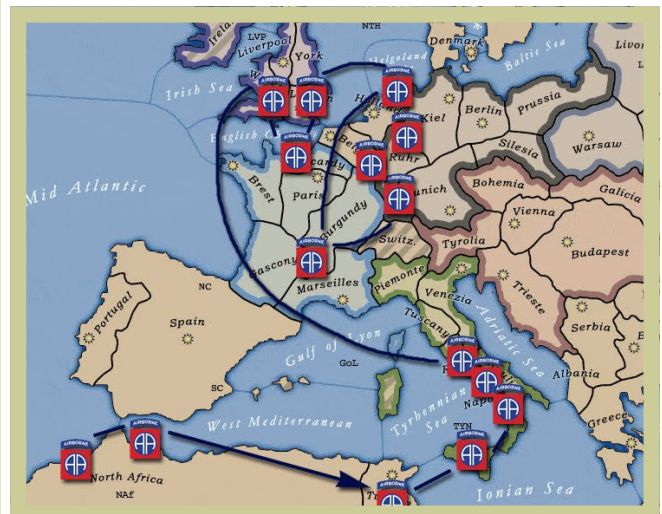
On January 7th the 508th PIR Red Devil's launched an attack with the 504th in the vicinity of Thier-du-Mont where it suffered heavy casualties. The 508th was then withdrawn from the line and placed in reserve until January 21st when it replaced elements of the 2d Infantry Division.

On January 29, 1945 First Sergeant Leonard Funk, Jr. of Company C, 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment won the Congressional Medal of Honor for action at Holzheim, Belgium. After leading his unit and capturing 80 Germans.

On February 7th, 1945 the division attacked Bergstein, a town on the Roer River. The 82nd crossed the Roer River on February 17th. During April, 1945 the division performed security duty in Cologne until they attacked in the Bleckede area and pushed toward the Elbe River. As the 504th PIR drove toward Forst Carrenzien, the German 21st Army surrendered to the division on May 2, 1945.

Occupation of Germany

Following the surrender of Germany, the 82nd was ordered to Berlin for occupation duty. In Berlin General George Patton was so impressed with the 82nd's honor guard he said, "In all my years in the Army and all the honor guards I have ever seen, the 82nd's honor guard is undoubtedly the best." Hence the "All-Americans" became known as "America's Guard of Honor." (http://www.ww2-airborne.us/division/82_overview.html)



US 82nd Airborne WWII Campaign Map European Theatre



US 82nd Airborne

Uniform Hat Wings

*Lovingly submitted by Ralph's sister,
Opal Sawyer Frizzo Brown
December 6, 2016*