MEMOIRS OF A PARACHUTE INFANTRYMAN

THE MIGHTY TIGER

SGT. ROBERT J. BRODERICK

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For my darling wife and our wonderful children,
grandchildren, and great grandchildren.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Much of the memorabilia that I had accumulated during the war years would have continued to languish at the bottom of some desk drawer had it not been for the gentle, if not persistent plodding of my wife and daughters. They had insisted I could put together the bits and pieces to come up with a history of my life in uniform. Considering that it all happened over a half century ago, I had grave doubts as to the prospects for success.

I can't remember when I started this, but as the months slipped by, I often said to hell with it and just gave up. But my lovely ladies would have none of that, so I struggled forward.

It was my big girl, Carol, who kept the project alive. She had repeatedly put up with my mental lapses, disjointed and repetitious paragraphs, countless mistakes and more re-writes than can be imagined. Without her, this brief narrative would not have happened.

THE MIGHTY TIGER

You probably will find my "memoirs" interesting even though they are purely subjective and written with my children and grandchildren in mind: No blood and guts, boogie nor ladies. And I have skipped hilarious sometime macabre, possibly illegal, immoral and other details of life in the Parathoops that helped us retain our sanity. That stuff is best left for the reunions wherein we can lie to each other with impunity.

Memory being what it is, I make no claim as to historical accuracy nor factual accounting of what may or may not have transpired during those long months. But in many ways the photos, letters and other memorabilia that I had stored away long ago — when memories of events were still fresh — have helped put most of the pieces together.

When my eldest granddaughter was about ten years old she sat down at her grandmother's typewriter and pecked out a brief synopsis of life as she viewed it. Among other things, her grandmother was the "good fairy Godmother" and I was the "King, the mighty king." Needless to say the family picked up on that "mighty tiger" and over time I became the "Mighty Tiger" to my wife, children and grandchildren. Hence the title of my brief memoirs.

War is a country no traveler ever forgets. It haunts those who survive the journey as no other experience. The memories of war cling to the mind with astonishing tenacity, and sometimes, in the dark of night when the glow of your cigarette is a distant fire in some place most people have never heard of, nothing seems to equal their demand for attention.

Author unknown

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Somehow fate seems to lie in wait for the unwary. How could I have possibly known that the infantry was in my future and would forever cast its shadow over my life?

The evening of December 11, 1939, Dick Gaston came into the local drug store at the corner of 45th and Latona where Stan Bever was playing the store's only pinball machine as Bill Parfitt and I watched. Dick was a corporal in Headquarters Battery, 2nd Battalion, 146th Field Artillery, Washington National Guard. His uniform was the standard WWI type artilleryman's "boots and britches," and we decided, as a laugh, to go down to the new armory and watch Dick "march."

I don't know who decided we ought to enlist, but enlist we did. Actually, upon further reflection, it must have been Stan as he was the first to do it. Oddly, both Bill and I had been talking about joining the Naval Air Reserve at Sand Point, but at the

time I was not quite old enough. As it was, I had to lie about my age to join the Guards. And so, the three of us, Stan, Bill and I – the three Musketeers – lightly entered into something that was to profoundly affect our lives.

When I told my father what I had done, he just wondered aloud if it had been the right thing to do, but recognized that my brother, John, was already in the Naval Reserve, and Tom was in the ROTC at the University of Washington and would soon transfer to the 205th Coast Artillery, Washington National Guard, as a sergeant.

Initially, we were issued uniforms of WWI vintage: coarse wool, whatever sizes were available. But just before summer camp at Camp Murray, located adjacent to Army and Air Force Joint Base Lewis-McChord, we were issued regulation OD's, and the boots, britches, and heavy woolens were gone forever.

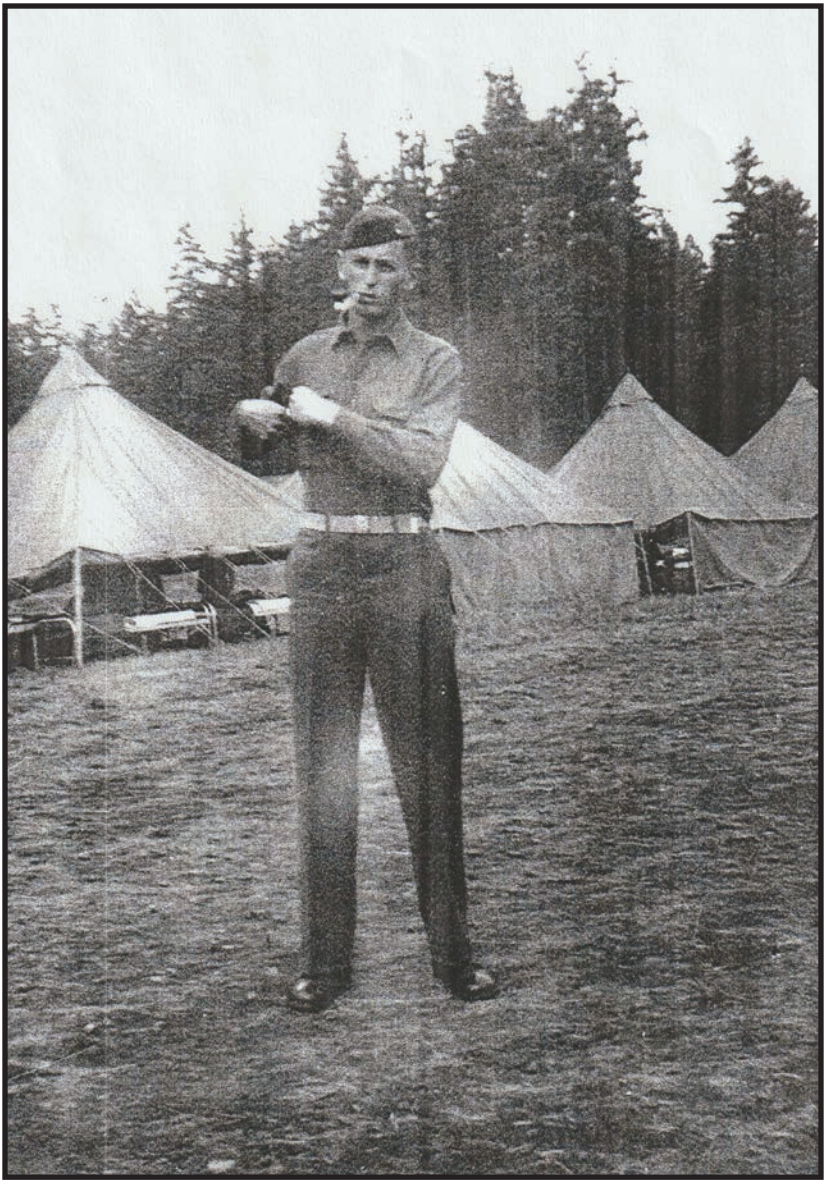
With the war in Europe in progress, our drill nights went from once a week to twice a week. As a private, I received one dollar a drill night. So now I was making two dollars a week. Not bad – a small but welcome addition to my empty pocketbook in the very tough job market of 1940.

That summer saw us at Camp Murray for participation in Army maneuvers. I was a message center clerk. The regular Army men considered us Boy Scouts and paid but passing contempt for us. But, at our level, it made little difference, and all of us enjoyed Army life in the field. But I do remember one evening, as an infantry outfit from Montana came through our area on a

"forced" march, sweating, cursing, and stumbling along, burdened with rifles and heavy packs and all the other paraphernalia of the foot soldier. We thought they were nuts. Somehow fate seems to lie in wait for the unwary. How could I possibly have known that the infantry was in my future and would forever cast its shadow over my life?

On the 16th of September in 1940, the Guard was inducted into Federal Service for a year of active duty. For Stan and Bill it was to be five long years of active service including forty-one months in the South Pacific. For me, it was just nine days. I was given a medical discharge because of malfunctioning kidneys.

It is hard for me, even after all these years, to describe the utter personal devastation of suddenly finding myself on the outside, cut off from my life-long buddies because of something I neither understood, nor was prepared for. Especially since a civilian doctor, who was a prominent kidney specialist in Seattle, could find nothing fundamentally wrong.



Pvt. Bob Broderick
146th Field Artillery
Washington National Guard
1940

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I was still working swing shift when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. The radio had announced the raid as we were eating breakfast that fateful Sunday morning.

On January 2, 1941, I went to work for the Boeing Airplane Company, earning a hundred dollars per month. My first job was working on various sub-assembly parts being put together at the old Kenworth Truck plant located a few blocks south of Boeing Plant #2. It was a stupefying job. All day long I put rivets in holes, handed the parts to the riveter who sat at a stationary rivet machine and foot-actuated the smashing of each rivet – one at a time - all day long. I only stayed at that job for less than a month as I was then transferred to Plant #1 (the original Red Barn) where working on the huge 314 Clippers, I spent a very pleasant spring and summer.

On most weekends, Stan and Bill had the usual passes,

and we continued to fool around much as before. In fact, they seldom even wore their uniforms. But in August, I was transferred back to Plant #2 and put on the swing shift, so I began to see less and less of the guys. Initially, I worked in the balcony paint shop doping B-17 control surfaces that, in those days, were fabric-covered. It was another boring job. After a couple months of smelling dope (aka lacquer,) I asked to be transferred down to the main floor to begin work on the second B-17E to be built. When I arrived, that huge assembly area was empty except for a B-17E that was largely completed, and the skeleton of the second one that I began working on. Both of these airplanes were assembled largely from blueprints and the guidance of the engineers and veterans of earlier model B-17 production. I was to stay on that job for the next fifteen months to be a participant and witness to the fantastic growth from that modest beginning to the mass production of such a magnificent airplane which formed the basis for America's heavy bombardment fleet.

I was still working swing shift when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. The radio had announced the raid as we were eating breakfast that fateful Sunday morning. My mother had cried as my brother John was thought to be there.

A day or two later I was sent down to the neighborhood Japanese-owned dry cleaner and shoemaker to pick up some items. The entire family at the cleaners were just sobbing. The little Japanese shoemaker, who had repaired our shoes for as long as I could remember, and who had sons and daughters in

Seattle high schools, simply sat as though his world had crashed around him, as indeed it had. Both were put out of business within days.

I should mention that Bill Parfitt and I had, for many years, gone out to dinner and a movie on our respective birthdays. And as Bill's birthday is December 7th, we did not let a little war interfere with tradition. I don't remember where we had dinner, but I do know we attended some movie at the Orpheum Theater and the management kept flashing on the screen, "All military personnel report to your unit at once." Bill, in civilian clothes, simply ignored the notice.

I remember coming home from work the next night through downtown Seattle along 4th Avenue, crowds of people milling around, throwing rocks, etc. at the still-lighted, second-story clothing store windows when most of the city was blacked out in order to make it a more difficult target in case the Japanese decided to drop bombs on the mainland. As I recall, it was a little bit scary driving without headlights. The view of a blacked-out city from the upper porch of my home at 4523 5th Ave. N.E. was a scene of beauty and wonder.

Within the week, Bob Kiebler (KIA 12/7/44) and I went downtown to the Exchange Building when the Navy held its tests for prospective aviation cadets. The mental exams were easy, and both Bob and I were instructed to report the following day for our physical exams. Bob flunked out almost at once due to an irregular heartbeat. Two days later, having just successfully

completed the tough physical exam that my friend couldn't pass, I was told that I had failed the final exam. Kidneys again. Moreover, the Navy, in their infinite wisdom, would have nothing further to do with me, even though, as one medical officer pointed out, my specialty as a journeyman aircraft assembler was desperately needed. In retrospect, I'm happy for the Navy's arrogance, for if they had accepted me, I most assuredly would have spent the rest of the war repairing Navy airplanes in some god-forsaken hole in the South Pacific, or below decks on some aircraft carrier.

I went back to Boeing, while soon thereafter, the 41st Infantry Division headed overseas taking with it Stan and Bill and thousands of others for their rendezvous with destiny.

In September, I received my draft notice but thought little about it. I had already flunked out of the Army, and the Navy rejected me, so I didn't bother to advise my supervisors at Boeing. If I had, they would have insisted on a deferment as the production shops were critically short of skilled personnel at the time. I reported to the Draft Board but did not mention any physical problems. Consequently, I was listed as 1-A and ordered to appear for a physical. A Greyhound bus took a load of us to Tacoma and what passed for a physical was completed in about an hour. The standard joke in those days was that "one doctor looked down your throat while, at the same time, another doctor looked up your ass. If they couldn't see each other, you were in."

Amid the confusion of so many guys all taking a physical at the same time, I managed to switch my urine specimen with only God knows who, and so I passed. During the time needed to process the paperwork and the swearing-in ceremony, I went to a movie at some local theater: "At Last." It seemed appropriate at that time, as it still does in my memory, for *at last* I was going to be in the service.

Attack on Pearl Harbor
December 7, 1941

3

I boarded a bus loaded with other inductees for transportation to Fort Lewis where presumably all of us would soon be indoctrinated into the mysteries of Army life.

I returned to the Army Center at the designated hour, and together with fifty or sixty other guys, was sworn into the Army of the United States. The designation "United States Army" was reserved for regular Army personnel.

I was absolutely elated. I was in the Army! I didn't care what fate had in store for me. All I was certain of was that I wasn't going to spend the war working at Boeing. I was now a part of my own great rendezvous with destiny, whatever that might be.

One of the first things I did was to buy a candid camera, an Argus C-3 that cost the princely sum of twelve dollars, about ten percent of my monthly wages. That camera went with me halfway around the world, including combat after Normandy,

(I did not take it with me into Normandy), until it was lost in a blinding snowstorm somewhere in the Ardennes during the Battle of the Bulge. While many of the pictures I took in Holland survived, most were destroyed by enemy artillery fire. Of course, none of the pictures I took in the Ardennes survived.

Although I was inducted into the Army on October 20th, 1941, I did not actually report for active duty until November 1st, taking advantage of the Army's policy of granting time to clear up business and/or personal affairs. On that date, I boarded a bus loaded with other inductees for transportation to Fort Lewis where presumably all of us would soon be indoctrinated into the mysteries of Army life. And indeed, over the next few days, we managed to get a uniform, pull KP, and learn to fall in and out twenty times a day.

On the second day, we were marched to a huge hall to hear about such things as military courtesy, venereal disease, and other matters of interest that the Army deemed important. Somewhere along the way an officer said something to the effect that the Army was looking for volunteers for a new, tough, and dangerous special unit: the Paratroops. Participants had to weigh less than one-hundred-eighty pounds, be in excellent physical condition, young, tough, etc. Not a single person, out of the several hundred present, volunteered. The officer then commented: "No one? Well, we're batting 100% on *that* so far this week," and the entire audience roared with laughter. He then proceeded to talk about a few other matters, and finally we were dismissed.

I have no real recollection at what point I decided to go forward, but as the guys began filing out, I walked to the front of the auditorium and told the officer I would volunteer. Without comment, he turned to the table behind him, picked up a piece of paper, and handed it down to me. The paper simply said, "I will jump from an airplane in flight." I signed the paper and gave it back to him. He then asked me to hand up my Form 6. Immediately thereafter, my Form 6 was stamped with large red letters: PARATROOPS. At that precise moment, I became a marked man.

4

I didn't have a clue what I was getting in to, but I didn't care. Whatever fate had in store for me in the months ahead, I was confident I could handle.

To this day, I am not certain why I volunteered. Pride, I guess. I was still so chagrinned at having flunked both Army and Navy physicals that there was something of an "I'll show the bastards" attitude in signing that paper. But it was absurd: probably a classic example of pride getting in the way of judgement. I was for all intents and purposes unfit for military service; in the service under false pretenses, and volunteering for a branch of the service that required maximum physical condition and courage. Furthermore, I was terrified of heights, and at one hundred fifty pounds and six feet tall, was hardly a prototype paratrooper.

I had no sooner returned to the barracks when a sergeant called me out and told me to report to the dispensary for a

special physical required of all would-be paratroopers. I was stunned! In the Army only two days and I had inadvertently put myself in position to again be put out of the service. Although it was probably the most thorough physical I had taken to date, a urinalysis apparently wasn't required. One of the doctors thought I had flat feet but didn't pursue that matter, and so I passed. The following day, I boarded a train that was to take me to Camp Blanding, Florida, near Jacksonville, to join the ranks of the fledgling 508 Parachute Infantry Regiment. I didn't have a clue what I was getting in to, but I didn't care. Whatever fate had in store for me in the months ahead, I was confident I could handle. And, strangely enough, I did with ease.

The long train trip across the country in the dead of winter was quite pleasant. I learned the fine art of three-handed pinochle, playing all day long with a couple of guys headed for the Army Air Corps in Miami. Occasionally, the train would stop, and all us new GI's would march around a block or two of some small town along the way. It was the route of the Great Northern Railroad, and I had actually traveled this same route in 1939 on my way to the New York World's Fair.

I have no recollection of the trip from Chicago south to Florida, but one beautiful, warm morning during the first week of November, I arrived at the small railroad station at Stark, Florida to view my first paratroopers, the cadre who were to make paratroopers of us all. But of the forty-five hundred who were processed, only twenty-three hundred of us survived

basic training to reach jump school.

I can still remember the ride into camp in a truck atop our barracks bags to the catcalls of others along the way that had preceded us into basic training. All were "straight-legs" with little knowledge that a parachute regiment was being formed in their midst.

The 508 Parachute Infantry Regiment was constituted on October 20, 1942 and was to be the first of its kind formed from scratch to complete airborne basic training, move on to jump school, then to advanced training, and finally, overseas and combat in the European Theater of Operations.

In some ways, the program was designed to see how far they could push recruits. It was a grueling experience and it started with a visit to team doctors/psychiatrists who asked such questions as "Why do you want to be a paratrooper?" and/or, "Don't you know you'll be dead in six months?" To which I replied, "If it doesn't bother you, why should it bother me?" I was told to get the hell back to my company.

But while the basic training was physically and mentally demanding, there was seldom any of the nonsense depicted in most war movies where DI's are screaming at, and/or demeaning recruits. In our outfit you either measured up to airborne standards, or you were gone. We were almost always treated like men. The screening of recruits, the extreme discipline required, and the paratroop training program was apparently a huge success as nobody questions the fact that as a fighting unit, we

were among the finest in the world. And from the very first day our officers and NCO's ran as we ran, marched as we marched, and in the field, ate as we ate, and generally lived as we lived.

5

As the weeks turned into months, then into years, long, tedious marches, often under absolutely terrible conditions, became routine and my beloved M-1 rifle but a toy in my hands.

Originally, I was assigned to Headquarters Company, 2nd Battalion that was then in the process of building up to full strength with new recruits arriving daily, most right out of the reception centers from across the country. Few had seen any previous military service.

As recruits, we were provided all the things we would need that had not been previously issued upon induction into the Army. The new items included the M-1 rifle, a bayonet, a canteen, a helmet, mess gear, etc.

When I first received the M-1 and the helmet, I thought they both weighed a ton and couldn't imagine ever getting used to

either. Now, properly decked out, we were about to embark on a ten-mile march, M-1, helmet, and all. But I didn't think any of us were quite prepared for such an introduction to the infantry. Some dropped out after only a few miles, but most hobbled along on blistered feet, determined to stick it out. While I had no problems with my feet (notwithstanding that doctor at the reception center) I was near exhaustion toward the end, and with each grueling mile, my M-1 and steel helmet became unbearably heavy. As the weeks turned into months, then into years, long, tedious marches, often under absolutely terrible conditions, became routine, and my beloved M-1 rifle but a toy in my hands. The steel helmet somehow lost all its weight, becoming no more than a felt hat.

With basic training underway, we were subjected to daily five-mile "jogs" and an hour of calisthenics and/or judo. Almost every day, the group marched somewhere into and then out of the boondocks. We trained on small-unit tactics that, at our level, consisted mostly of running, crawling, digging, and/or fighting with one another, which included knocking the man around you down, and then dealing with the melee that ensued. Of course, we soon learned to play the game – especially if the guy you were supposed to knock down was Brightsman who I'll introduce you to in the next chapter. Strangely enough, some that was actually fun.

The only saving grace to all that was happening was that we didn't spend a lot of time on parade; the ground junk so dear to the

hearts of chair-borne brass. Hell, we didn't even know what a "Retreat Formation" was (the lowering of the flag each evening) until nearly the end of the war. We almost never paraded, only enough to get by without looking like an unruly mob. I have a couple of great stories to tell on how we used to screw up a formation, and our post-Normandy review by Ike. But I won't get into that now.

Sometime around the fifth week, we began finding out how to fire our rifles. The stuff we went through prior to going out to the rifle range is so laughable, it's not worth mentioning. Mostly it was WWI type of training. The actual time at the range itself was a crashing bore. Mostly we spent time doing nothing until our turn came up to fire a few rounds at a target some few hundred yards away. Worse still, was our turn in the pits marking targets. A couple of days later, I was told I had qualified as an "expert." I'll never know how that came about, as I will always believe they got me confused with some other guy. While I could usually hit the target, I seriously doubt if I ever came near to the "bullseye." And the answer is simple: an M-1 is designed for neutral or right-eye firing. My left eye is the governing eye; hence, aiming with my right eye always resulted in considerable distortion. And you can't shoot an M-1 rifle from your left shoulder unless you want spent shell casings in your face as they eject.

But, for whatever reason, the dye was cast, and as an "expert rifleman," I found myself transferred to a rifle company. I didn't

know it at the time, but the survival rate of those in a Headquarters Company was infinitely better than those of us in a rifle (line) company.

6

He could charm the gold out of a banker's teeth while willingly giving him the shirt off his back. And he was my constant companion for the next twenty-two months until his death...

Soon after arriving in F Company, I was put on KP and there met a handsome young man named Gerald Brightsman. He had also qualified as an expert rifleman and had been transferred into F Company at the same time as me. In those early days, we had a First Sergeant who could not keep an accurate duty roster. As a consequence, when he lost track of duty assignments, he would simply start all over at the beginning of the alphabet. As there were only three in the company whose name began with the letter "A," and two of those were "acting" corporals, Broderick and Brightsman frequently found themselves pulling extra duty. One of the more obnoxious duties was KP, and the dirtiest job

on KP was the pots and pans. And so he and I, in laughing defiance of another stupid day in the kitchen, always volunteered for the job. We became wonderful, warm and close friends, scrubbing large, greasy, messy pots and associated pans, on opposite sides of the huge metal tubs that had been designed for that purpose.

Gerald Brightsman was from The Dalles, Oregon, grew up in utter poverty, apparently without a father, but he had an uncle, "Scratch," whom he was very fond of. He worked in the wheat fields with the grown men, helping to support his mother and younger brother. He had graduated from The Dalles High School in 1939, and at the age of eighteen, had left home for Los Angeles to seek a better life. After arriving there, he had no trouble landing a job in a machine shop as he had a natural flair for the mechanical and could fix almost anything, skills learned during the depth of the Depression when all the farm equipment had to be kept running. In those days, there was seldom any money for new equipment or replacement parts. His teenaged years in the wheat fields made him incredibly strong, and on those rare occasions when his anger was aroused, very damn tough. But mostly, he was a warm, outgoing guy and made friends with everybody. Above all, he loved the ladies and would screw a woodpile if he thought a snake was in it.

It was great fun to watch him operate. He could charm the gold out of a banker's teeth while willingly giving him the shirt off his back. And he was my constant companion for the next

twenty-two months until his death during an attack on the outskirts of the small Dutch town of Beek.

He and I had spent long hours talking and dreaming aloud of the great times we would have when the war was over. Neither of us had a very clear idea of what we were doing in the paratroops, but the potential for great danger was never of concern.

Even after all of these years, it is with immense sadness that I remember that time. A few days after the battle for Beek, Holland, I had the priveledge of being "burial sergeant." I led several of my men back to the area where my dear friend, along with Pat Rickard, Wade Smith, Chuck Logan, and a couple of others had fallen. As we looked down at what had been Gerald Brightsman, now just a discolored, stinking, maggot-infested corpse, many of the guys wept, and something went out of me that day.

Gerald Brightsman
(and friend)
Camp Mackall, N.C.
1943