

THE 502 PARACHUTE INFANTRY IN McCUTCHANVILLE

As Remembered by Paul Swope & Others in 2007 Updated June 28, 2008

In the spring of 1943 I was 14 years old. We had no idea what was about to happen in the small village of McCutchanville where I lived. It was rumored that we were going to have some soldiers camped in the area.

Just before Decoration Day (Memorial Day now) there was an advanced group that arrived. I don't remember exactly how many there were but I would guess 15 to 20. They came in to find places for the rest of the Battalion. I have no recollection to where this advanced group was camped. They were in McCutchanville at Decoration Day and helped the McCutchanville Church observe the day. They were in full uniform with the American flag leading the way and marched in formation up Kansas Road to the church. I don't remember if they took part in the proceedings or if they just stood by. Lawrence France remembers them firing a salute.

In the next few weeks we learned it was going to be an eventful summer. It was the 502 Battalion of the 101st Airborne Division that was moving four Companies of men into the area. Three right in McCutchanville and Head Quarters Company down behind the Evansville airport. Of the ones in McCutchanville, one Company about a half mile up Browning road from Petersburg Road, on the north side, no houses at that time. The second was at what is now the McCutchanville Park. The third was on the east side of Lake Talahi, there were no houses on the east side of the lake at that time. I really don't know how many men were in each company but the internet says 5 officers and 125 men in each. These three are listed as rifle companies. The number of soldiers was more people than the population of McCutchanville.

My Father, Ralph H. Swope, had a general store at the intersection of Whetstone Road and Petersburg Road. Foot traffic from all three areas went past his store. They quickly designated Father's store as an official "PX". There were times when they were in training that the "PX" would be off limits. At those times there would a guard posted in the intersection. Dad could get stock to sell to the soldiers that no other store could get. I remember that he had a display case that was full of candy; he could sell this only to the soldiers. During WWII every thing was rationed. Candy was one thing that Dad normally could not even get to sell. There was a big sign on top "Soldiers only". People that came out from town would look at all that forbidden candy and start pointing out what they wanted. We would have to point at the sign and say "soldiers only".

The men would march down to the airport and get into C-47 airplanes and fly to jump in maneuvers in Tennessee. They would be gone several days and then they would come back in trucks. The first thing they would do would hit Dad's store and buy sweet rolls and a quart of milk. I would guess that the food they got on maneuvers was not too good. They were always passing out K rations and C rations to us kids.

In talking to my cousin, Ross McCutchan, I found out something I had not heard before. During their training here some would be taken into another county and dumped. They would then have to find their way back to McCutchanville and to their camps. My cousin lived on a farm that was in their path of return. He said their barn, the old Swope barn, was one of the designated buildings that they had to check out for "enemy" personnel. As they went through the fields there would be others shooting 4th of July sky rockets and other things at them. I would assume this was basically a map reading exercise or they would not have used the same buildings as check points.

My sister, Nancy Swope Glackman, reminded me that we had two wives of the men staying with us for a while during that summer. I have no recollection of them. It may be that I was at the store during the days helping Dad. Also it was probably I was 14 and not interested in these "old" 20 year + women. Could be I was more interested in the paratroopers' guns, M1s, carbines, two way radios and so forth. She said that one of the men would come by and flirt with one of the wives.

I talked to another local resident, Joyce Engelhardt Goebel, who lived at the Y of Petersburg Road and Green River Road. She said they would come marching north up Petersburg Rd and then turn down Green River Rd and they would watch them until out of sight. Then Sally Ahles Georges, who lived south of McCutchanville just north of the airport, would see them coming up Petersburg Rd from the south, which would be quite a distance around that loop. If they were going around this loop it was about 12 miles. I checked it the best I could but in the years that have past a few of the roads on the south end have been rerouted.

The soldiers were living in pup tents. The kind that each man would carry half a tent then put them together to make one tent. Of course these tents had no floor. I don't recollect if the officers had better facilities. As far as I could see the only sanitary facilities were slit trenches. Lawrence France tells me there was a mess tent next to their property on Whetstone Road. They would bring left over food next door to the France house. Mrs. France was a widow with several children still at home. Lawrence said he would take a wagon and pick up the garbage and feed it to their hogs.

Mary Lou Asay said her father took them on a ride through McCutchanville to see the soldiers. She remembers she could see some of them had their mirrors on fence posts and they were shaving that way.

Blue Grass Church had a parish house that had a floor that was for roller-skating. Richard Riggs tells me that there were some of the paratroopers would come up to Blue Grass and roller-skate on Saturday night. He said they would have a big time.

The boys of the community all belonged to the Boy Scouts. There were some of the soldiers that came out to help out with some things. We had our meetings in a log cabin in the center of the community. One of the men was a professional boxer and he gave us pointers on boxing.

There was one thing that happened during the summer that could have turned out badly. There was an Officer, Lieutenant T. L. Bunn, which all the men thought a lot of. He would run a bank for them and take their pay and dole it out to them as they needed it. That way they would not gamble it away. The word got spread that he had been in Evansville and a black man had stabbed him. Some of the rumors even said he was dead. Anyway the men had set up they were going to go to town and clean out the black area. Some said that they even asked the soldiers that were scheduled to come in town from Breckenridge who would be on week end passes. It was claimed that some even had live grenades and live ammunition. Evansville was closed down and passes were canceled. No one from Breckenridge or the 502 was allowed out. The next day the officer in question stood at the intersection in front of Dads store getting the word out that he had not been hurt. By the next weekend it had all blown over.

You must remember these men were all ready to fight. They had been in hard training ever since the unit was formed over a year before. They were not being trained to be just regular soldiers; they were being trained to spearhead the invasion of Europe. I reviewed again the History Channels DVD "Brothers in Arms: The untold Story of the 502". It is a wonder any of them survived, but they did their job. It is said that there was 80% casualties in the 502nd.

On the weekends there would be an influx of young ladies from Evansville. They would usually pair up and disappear. I remember some would come out on bicycles and park them at the store. I remember two young ladies came out on a bicycle built for two, I thought that was something else and had to get on and ride it. They showed up on Monday and went back to Evansville.

There were not many girls of that age in McCutchanville. I heard from Paul Moffett, their house was right across Wheatstone road from where the 502 was camped, that McCutchanville girls would come down to their house to talk to the men. He said his mother would keep a eye on things and allow no shenanigans. There was one that was the prettiest girl around, blond and fair skinned, Ravelee Stelloh, which was the best looking girl soldiers would see. She attracted one of the troopers. He, Robert Fowler, was over six foot tall and very handsome. He came back without a scratch and they were married. Although he was originally from Louisville KY, when they got married they settled in Evansville. He worked for Sears here and was the manager of the hardware department downtown for years. I understand there was a large write up in the Louisville paper about when he was captured and how he escaped. I wish I had a copy.

Families in the area would invite soldiers in for Sunday dinners. The only problem there was not enough families to accommodate all the soldiers. Also with rationing the families would have to stretch things. I do know that Dad invited a soldier once in a while.

When they left, all the areas were policed up and left in good shape. I heard from Glen Schlensker they had his father, George, bring a tractor down to the club grounds and fill in the latrines and generally clean up the area. They had bought Cokes from Dad and he never charged the deposit on the bottles. They had them all policed up and stacked and told him he could come down and pick them up. I helped him load some of them. I even went around the areas and did a little policing of my own. I found a few eating utensils and other souvenirs.

After the war I remember one man showing up and walking all the roads around McCutchanville. Dad had him over for supper and as I member he didn't talk much. He had been wounded because he was walking with a limp. It is said the 502 had 80% casualties.

If you would like a DVD of the 502 in action, type the below into your browser.

<http://store.aetv.com/html/product/index.jhtml?id=74810&browseCategoryId=&location=&parentcatid=&subcatid=>

It is the History Channel web site.