

WOJG Ernest Lee Dilburn

1917 ~ 1970

EARLY YEARS

Ernest Lee Dilburn was born in Samson, Alabama on 2 January 1917. He graduated from Hernando High School Brooksville, Florida in June of 1935 and immediately joined the Army. He received his basic training at Fort Benning, Georgia and following graduation, was assigned to the 3rd Battalion 29th Infantry Regiment at Fort Benning. During the next five and one half years, he rapidly advanced from Private to Staff Sergeant.

MILITARY EXPERIENCES

In 1940 he volunteered to be a member of the Army's first Parachute Test Platoon. Six hundred candidates from the 29th Infantry Regiment volunteered. After a difficult selection process, he was one of forty-eight enlisted soldiers chosen. Upon completion of the three month test he was awarded one of the first parachute badges and was selected to be an airborne instructor in the 501st Parachute Infantry Battalion. In 1942 when the 101st Airborne Division was activated, he was again selected to be one of the original members and sent to Fort Campbell Kentucky. Besides being an instructor on basic and advanced airborne techniques, he was trained as a radio operator and assigned to the 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment. In this assignment he was promoted to Sergeant First Class, then Master Sergeant and was selected by Colonel Sink to be a Warrant Officer. Upon being commissioned, he became the assistant regimental communications officer. He held this position when the division sailed for England in 1943.

While in England and after several tactical exercises preparing for D-Day, he was selected to be one of the original 54 pathfinders for the 101st. The first combat test for pathfinders was the D-Day jump. On 6 June 1944 he was the jumpmaster of a 12 man stick that jumped into Normandy several hours before the rest of the division. His mission was to mark the drop zones for the follow-on Screaming Eagles. Due to enemy action, most of his stick were killed or captured immediately upon landing. He spent the remainder of the war as a POW in Poland until freed by the Russian Army in April 1945. Once freed, he remained in the Army and retired in 1958 with the rank of Master Sergeant. His last assignment was radar specialist stationed at Augsburg Germany.

AWARDS

During his military service to our nation he received many awards which included: The Combat Infantry Badge, Master Parachutist Badge with combat jump star, the Bronze Star, Army Commendation Medal, Army Good Conduct Medal, European Campaign Medal, German Occupation Medal, World War Two Victory Medal and the POW Medal.

LATER YEARS

Following his retirement after 23 years of honorable Army service, he continued to serve his nation. He repaired Army helicopter radios at Fort Rucker, Alabama until his untimely death on 14 January 1970.

Ernest is remembered by his family and friends for many firsts. First he was an original member of the Army's Parachute Test Platoon, second he was one of the original members of the 501st Parachute Infantry Battalion, third he was one of the original members of the 101st Airborne Division, fourth he was one of the original members of the 101st Airborne Division Pathfinders and finally, he was one of the first to jump into Normandy on 6 June 1944.

Written by Rita Dilburn Paulk, daughter of Ernest L. Dilburn