

MILITARY MATTERS

Last patrol for the Band of Brothers

Easy Company to hold final reunion, book signing in Norfolk

By Angelique Moon
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Ed Shames sat with his back straight and suit perfectly pressed as he told the story of E Company (aka Easy). If 82-year-old Shames were in uniform much like what he wore during World War II, he would look just as much a soldier now as he was then.

An easy-going, talkative man, no one would guess some of the horrific events he endured during the war. He talks about it now with ease. For the longest time he didn't. He's ready to recount details of what happened to him and his brothers in arms who overcame obstacles that would test the human spirit.

Shames, a 2nd lieutenant when the war ended, and about two dozen other paratroopers from Easy will hold a book signing Oct. 16 from 2-4 p.m. at the MacArthur Memorial in downtown Norfolk. They will be signing Stephen Ambrose's book, *Band of Brothers: E Company, 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne from Normandy to Hitler's Eagle's Nest*.

The event will most likely be their last public appearance together and last formal reunion. Shames said they might have small get-togethers in the future with Easy members and

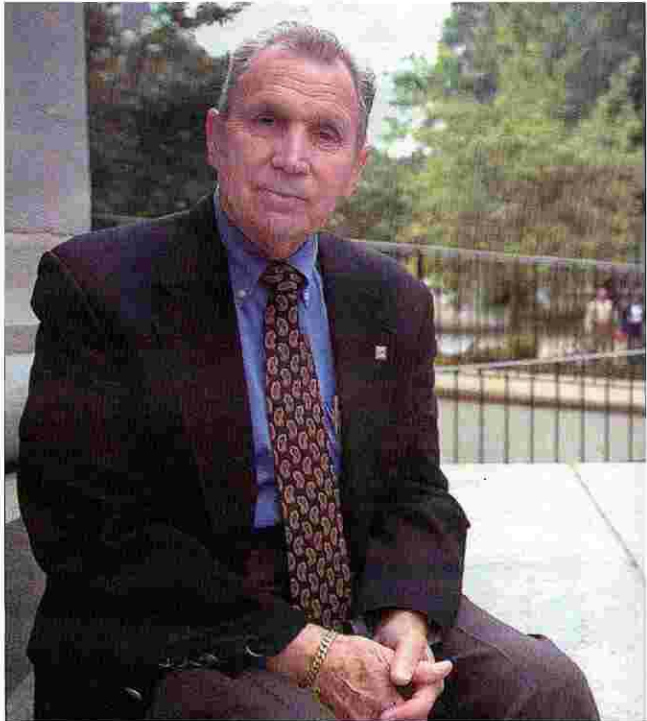
widows. With only a handful of brothers left, each day brings them closer to ending this chapter in history.

BAND OF BROTHERS

Easy men don't consider themselves heroes. "We're nobody special. If we hadn't volunteered, we would've been drafted, but that doesn't make you a hero," he said. "You want to know who the real heroes of World War II were? The housewives who went to work in a grease pit or who pressed steel. It was the people back home who kept everything together."

Regardless of how one defines a hero, Easy Company earned its share of medals for bravery. Nearly a dozen were awarded Bronze and Silver stars for actions on D-Day.

Paratroopers were dropped behind enemy lines a few hours before the



Soundings photo by Harry Gerwien

ABOVE: Ed Shames, 82, is one of the original members of Easy Company, one of 13 companies of the 101st Airborne's 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment during World War II. He was one of the youngest members, having joined at age 19. He and his fellow paratroopers made history by dropping behind enemy lines during the D-Day invasion. Shames and about 20 other Easy Company men will be signing Stephen Ambrose's book, *Band of Brothers*, Oct 16 at MacArthur Memorial in downtown Norfolk.

RIGHT: Shames as a 2nd Lieutenant. He moved up the ranks quickly and was given a battlefield commission shortly after D-Day. This picture was taken in London soon after he was commissioned.



beach assault. Some of the members of the 506 were killed on their way down or instantly when their planes exploded. When a small band of Easy men finally made it to their rendezvous point, they were quickly sent to take out some guns that were firing on troops trying to make it ashore on Utah Beach. They did it with success and quickly moved inland.

From there, Easy Company would go through scores of troop replacements – enlisted and officers – but they forged together through France, Holland and Belgium. They were there for the Battle of the Bulge, holding the front line. They did what they had to in order to keep going, and in the end they created a bond that can only be shared by those in combat.

Their story not only was portrayed in Ambrose's novel, but also in the HBO miniseries *Band of Brothers*. For anyone who has looked at either, the names and faces and stories are recognizable.

"People say kids today don't know anything about war," Shames said. He added that they probably expect him to contradict them, but he doesn't. "You want to know my answer? I thought we went to war so they wouldn't know about war."

TOUGH BEGINNINGS

The 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment's journey began in 1942. Shames and the rest of the men who would make up the 13 companies to the 506, including E Company, volunteered for service and were weeded out slowly. Shames a Norfolk native, was 19 at the time.

"We were intelligent people in the 506. We were a unique outfit," he said.

Men had to have a certain level of intelligence and pass a series of tests of their mental and physical capacities. They had to be sharp and physically perfect, and there was a reason for that, Shames said.

The idea for the 506 was born at Fort Monroe. It was the general headquarters of the Army, and officials there decided they needed a shock regiment and how to get it, Shames explained.

They wanted to form a parachute regiment like the 82nd Division had, which didn't work because not everyone wanted to jump out of an airplane.

So they came up with an all-volunteer regiment – the 506th. Shames and thousands of others bought into the propaganda and signed up in the summer and fall of 1942.

"I said, this is something I'd been waiting for," he recalled about when he enlisted. Of the 7000 who signed up, he added, only 2,800 would make it.

Curahee, a mountain soldiers had to run three miles up and back, was just the beginning of the weeding out process. The run up the mountain and down at Camp Toccoa, Ga., separated them from the rest. Then there was an obstacle course. There was a smile on Shames' face as he recalled the course they called "the death trap." After the men left Camp Toccoa and moved on for further training. Shames said the medics took down the course. "It was rough. People had broken bones... the medics said it was enough," he said.

After Curahee, there were still too many men. They had to lose thousands before the 506 went to jump training at Fort Benning, Ga. Soon they went from 25-mile marches, to 49-mile marches then to more than 100-mile marches. The men were dropped off overnight and given a compass to find their way back. If they didn't make it back in time, they were out.

Shames recalled that 1st Battalion had weeded out their men quickly. But 2nd Battalion and 3rd Battalion, which he was a part of at the time, still had a lot of men to lose. The 2nd Battalion was to do a 103-mile march that took three days. The 3rd Battalion, however, wanted to out do 2nd Battalion and decided to do a 149-mile march from Atlanta to Fort Benning in the same amount of time.

Shames was a private then, and to stay in the 506, privates to sergeants had to do a little more than 100 miles. Officers and non-commissioned officers, however, had to do the entire march. "We lost half of them," he said. "But we had to. Now we had the crème de crème."

They next went to jump school, then a few more training bases in the States before finally heading overseas where they would wait for the allied invasion.

THE WAR ITSELF

"I was one of the officers to go across the Rhine (River) to rescue British soldiers," Shames said. He said there were eight men in his platoon who went across with him. He was given a citation that day for the rescue, but didn't learn about it until a few years ago when an author who has millions of dollars worth of WW II paraphernalia mentioned it to him.

After being assigned to I Company, he was made an operations specialist of 3rd Battalion. He was the first non-com in the regiment to receive a battlefield commission and was then moved from I Company to Easy Company's 2nd Battalion. This battalion was featured in the HBO miniseries *Band of Brothers*. Shames (played by Joseph May) wasn't featured until episode seven ("The Breaking Point") of the miniseries.

Shames recalled the day when Col. Robert Sink, commander of the 506, called him into his office to give him his new orders. "I was standing at attention, and he said – and he was a tough customer – 'you think you're the toughest son of a b****, don't you?' I said, 'Yes, sir!' "He was as mean as a snake," Shames recalled of the colonel. He received his commission at Carentan, France, on June 13, 1944, just shortly after D-Day. Then Sink told him there were some renegades to take care of in the 3rd platoon of E Company. He joined Easy Company as a 2nd Lieutenant.

Shames was lucky in his position during the war. As only a 2nd lieutenant, he was made a platoon leader with no assistant. With an assistant, he would have always been subordinate to the other officer. He wasn't to receive an assistant until the war was almost over.

"I had the finest group of men," he said. Darrell "Shifty" Powers, Earl McClung, James "Mo" Alley, Walter Gordon, Rod Strohl and Paul Rogers – all sergeants – were his men in charge. Rogers was Shames' platoon sergeant and right hand man.

Then he recounted what he was like back then. When the company was determining a new commanding officer because Capt. Richard Winters was moved up to battalion headquarters, Shames said someone named him – "and I had just become an officer." Then someone in the group said, "No, we can't have him because he yells too much...at the officers and the men." Shames laughed at this. Then he told a story that happened at last year's reunion.

One of his sergeants he hadn't seen in 60 years came up to him and said he wanted to talk. After signing books and having a few drinks, the former soldier said he was ready. "He said, 'you were the meanest son



Photo courtesy of David James/HBO

Easy Company is depicted in the HBO miniseries *Band of Brothers*. Here, the men prepare to board planes for the Normandy invasion. Easy Company and the rest of the 506 would drop into Normandy a few hours before the beach assault.

of a b****, but you brought us home,” Shames said, adding that he didn’t know whether to take it as a compliment or not at first.

Shames admitted he was mean, saying it was necessary to stay alive. “We had less casualties in my platoon. The men were rough. I insisted we did things as perfect as possible. My sergeants were the same way. When you did things wrong, you were dead. And we lost less people. It was a lot of work and a lot of skill,” Shames said.

He and his men would go through Holland, then Bastogne, Belgium, and further into Europe after Normandy. Shames said a lot of people were wounded, but they were all lucky. “If we hadn’t held the Germans off in Bastogne, we would’ve been fighting for eight or nine more months,” Shames said. “Bastogne was a key battle in the war. Every time someone mentions Bastogne, my feet still feel frozen,” he said about the experience of fending off Germans in the dead of winter during the Battle of the Bulge.

THE REUNION

Shames said it was important not to list anyone’s rank in the article. There is no rank anymore or distinction between original E men and replacements. Now at 82, he recalls how he was one of the youngest when he joined. Many of those who are still alive are closer to 90. “Most of these guys were privates or corporals or, at the most, sergeants. The lowest buck private is as important as the commanding officer,” he said.

Shames said he and his Easy Company comrades will sign Ambrose’s book because that’s what people want and realizes it’s important to them. But the autograph session won’t be the only highlight of Oct 16.

There will be a shadow box display of medals. The maker, Frank DeAngelis, was made an honorary member of the Band of Brothers because of his efforts. He made shadow boxes for all the Easy Company men. “One of his shadow boxes will be on display at the book signing,” Shames said, but wouldn’t reveal whose. “We wanted a lesser private’s on display. It’ll be a secret until the unveiling at 2 p.m.”

The event will also incorporate 506 re-enactors in full WW II uniforms and combat gear who will talk about the war, the 506 and weapons. “I think they know more than I do,” Shames said with a laugh. “It’s quite a show.”

The biggest draw to the event, though, is the Veterans themselves. They, along with family and friends, will be participating in reunion events, which include a boat cruise, trip the Nauticus and the wine tasting festival at Town Point Park, special dinners, performances by military bands and the public book signing.

This story was originally published in the Soundings News Publication on October 13, 2004.

NOTE: The shadow box that was on display that day was that of PFC Ed Joint. His shadow box is listed with the other Band of Brother members.