

A Commander's Sense of Duty

The U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) inducted six retired officers into its Commando Hall of Honor at MacDill Air Force Base, Florida, on 18 April 2018: Major (MAJ) Raymond P. Ambrozak, Generals (GEN) Bryan D. Brown and Stanley A. McChrystal, Major General (MG) James E. Rudder, U.S. Army; Captain (CAPT) Charles M. Heron, U.S. Navy; and Colonel (COL) William J. Kornitzer, U.S. Air Force. Following the ceremony, James E. 'Bud' Rudder Jr., the son of the WWII 2nd Ranger Battalion commander, provided the author a letter. It revealed the depth of a commander's sense of duty.

Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Rudder's 2nd Ranger Battalion was split into three groups to assault the French coast at Normandy on D-Day, 6 June 1944. While LTC Rudder led Force A to scale the cliffs at Point du Hoc and seize the enemy guns believed to be emplaced there, Force B, consisting of C Company, 2nd Battalion, landed at Omaha Beach. Force B was to fight overland through Point de la Percée and Vierville-sur-Mer, and clear three miles of coastal road guarded by enemy emplacements enroute to linking up with Force A.¹ What was supposed to be accomplished in two hours took more than two days. As Ranger historian Robert W. Black wrote, "No Ranger unit engaged in the invasion of Europe

suffered as heavily as the men of C Company."² Of the sixty-eight Rangers that landed with C Company, twenty-one were killed and another eighteen wounded.³ Among the dead was Corporal (CPL) Willie C. Caperton.

Less than a week after securing Pointe du Hoc, with the battle for Normandy still raging, LTC Rudder made time to write the families of his soldiers killed in action. MG Rudder's son provided a copy of a letter sent to the family of CPL Caperton. Additional research located his family. They still had the letter sent by LTC Rudder from Normandy seventy-four years ago. We thank the Rudder and Caperton families for providing a sobering reminder of the terrific costs that soldiers pay in their service to the nation. The letter is a testimonial to the impact on the families who suffer tragic losses in war, and to the leadership and character exhibited within the Army Special Operations Community. ▲ TJS

Endnotes

- 1 Robert W. Black, *Rangers in World War II* (New York: Ivy Books, 1992), 196.
- 2 Black, *Rangers in World War II*, 227.
- 3 Edwin M. Sorvisto, *2nd Ranger Battalion: Roughing It With Charlie* (Plzeň, Czechoslovakia: Nový Vsetisk, 1945), 30.



(Above) The cliffs at Pointe du Hoc after the battle. (Opposite) Assault route of Force B (LTC Rudder) is marked on his map.



LTC James E. Rudder



CPL Willis 'Bill' C. Caperton



HEADQUARTERS
SECOND RANGER INFANTRY BATTALION
APO 230 c/o P.M., New York, N.Y.

FRANCE
13 July 1944

Re: Cpl Willis C Caperton - 36610503

Dear Mrs Caperton:

No Commanding Officer can ever find words to adequately express his deep sympathy with those whose sons, husbands, or brothers finished their earthly tour of duty while under his command. The soldiers who formed the Ranger Battalion were the best - all volunteers. Their strenuous training and carefully supervised work and recreation brought officers and men, and the men and their buddies close, so close that they learned mutual respect and a dependence upon each other to carry out the individual tasks in order that the unit plan might work. The Day of Invasion found these men ready, fully trained, fully equipped not only physically but mentally. On the day before they came to France, men of all Faiths had gathered with the Chaplain and dedicated the work at hand to God and their individual part in it as subject to His Holy Will.

The mission of the Rangers was successfully accomplished but as with all worthwhile things, the cost was great, so great indeed, that it cost the life you cherished and lost us a comrade and a friend. A Country must be great to call for the sacrifice of such men but America will always be great just because such men have fallen in order that the principles expressed in our Constitution might endure.

Every public honor will be accorded his memory. His President has already proclaimed him a hero. A grateful Congress will erect a monument to his name. The people of America will realize what that Gold Star means to those who loved him and will resolve to keep America worthy of such men. More than all these, however, the surviving Rangers, his buddies, will carry with them all their lives the example of his courage and will do their best to instill a like nobility in the hearts of generations to come.

So our comrade has gone and we realize that there is a void in your heart which neither your Country's gratitude nor our sympathy can fill. We, with whom he shared his life ask only now to share his memory that it may inspire us all to the gaining of an early Victory and the making of a lasting peace.

With deepest sympathy,

James E. Rudder
JAMES E. RUDDER
Lt Col Infantry
Commanding



Original letter from LTC Rudder to CPL Caperton's mother expressing condolences for the death of her son. To the left is the Purple Heart awarded posthumously to CPL Caperton.