On the Cover

An injured and exhausted Private First Class Anthony J. Kohlrus, who was serving with the 133d Infantry, 34th Infantry Division, in Italy awaits treatment at an aid station in Edward Reep's 1944 ink on paper, Fatigue Casualty. (Army Art Collection)

For an article on the artwork and career of combat artist Edward Reep, go page 4 of this issue of On Point.
Many stories of the invasion of Normandy have been lost over time as memories fade and veterans pass away. Among these are the stories of the nine or so paratroopers who landed in the chestnut trees in the center of Ste. Mère Église and were gunned down by the German defenders. One of the paratroopers killed at Ste. Mère Église was a first lieutenant in the 101st Airborne Division named Walter J. Gunther, Jr.

Walter Joseph Gunther, Jr., was born 30 January 1918 in Malden, Massachusetts, in a part of town known as Edgewater. He showed signs of leadership at an early age. He attended Malden Catholic High School, where he was a talented football player; his team went on to win the 1936 Championship of the Greater Boston Catholic High School League. During his teenage years, he spent his summers with the Citizen Military Training Camp at Fort McKinley in Portland Harbor, Maine. After graduating from Malden Catholic, he attended Northeastern University as a sociology major. During college, he worked as a counselor at the Agassiz Village Camp in Lexington, Massachusetts. At the age of twenty-two, Gunther was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Officers’ Reserve Corps and trained as an infantry officer.

Gunther was called up for active duty after Pearl Harbor and underwent a refresher course on infantry tactics at Fort Benning, Georgia. He then volunteered for the paratroopers and began training at Camp Toccoa, Georgia, in late summer of 1942. He was assigned to 3d Platoon, Dog Company, 2d Battalion, 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment (PIR), 101st Airborne Division. He first served as the leader of 3d Platoon and later as the executive officer of Dog Company. Bob Lundy, a Dog Company veteran,

Walter Gunther, a native of Malden, Massachusetts, received his commission in 1939 and was called to active duty shortly after Pearl Harbor. He then volunteered for the paratroopers and began airborne training in late summer 1942. (Kent Gunther)

recalled that everyone liked Gunther.

Gunther was one of the 148 officers out of the 300 applicants who survived the initial cut during airborne training. The training at Camp Toccoa would test a man’s limits and mold him into an elite soldier. Everyone wanted jump wings, and Lieutenant Gunther was no exception.

On 1 December 1942, the men of Lieutenant Colonel Robert Strayer’s 2d Battalion began a 118 mile march from Camp Toccoa to Atlanta, Georgia. The commander of the 506th, Colonel Robert Sink, had read in Reader’s Digest that a Japanese battalion had marched 100 miles in seventy-two hours in Malaya. Sink would be damned if his boys in the 506th could not beat that. They moved out at 0700 in full pack, enduring freezing rain and 100 miles of muddy back roads. The trek tested the physical limits of the paratroopers. Nevertheless, Gunther led his men from the front. Someone managed to snap a picture of Gunther walking tall in front of his platoon, seemingly in high spirits. Clarence W. Merrill, a trooper in Gunther’s company, would later state, “[Lt. Gunther] was just one of those hard-driving guys who inspired the coinage of the term ‘gung ho.” Though many had to be supported by their comrades towards the end, 2nd Battalion, 506th PIR, marched through Atlanta to Colonel Sink’s delight. They had com-

Gunther trained with the newly organized 101st Airborne Division at Camp Toccoa, Georgia.

Upon his arrival at the camp, he was assigned to 3d Platoon, 2d Battalion, 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment. (National Archives)
completed the march in seventy-five hours.

With Toccoa behind them, Gunther and the rest of Dog Company advanced to jump school at Fort Benning, Georgia. They were in good enough shape to advance past A stage to B stage, which lasted one week and mainly consisted of getting familiar with their jump equipment and landing techniques. C stage consisted of numerous mock jumps from 250-foot towers. There were wind machines for added realism, as well as a night jump. The last week was D stage, where the soldiers would earn their wings after making five jumps from a C-47 at 1,500 feet. After five jumps, ninety-four percent of the 506th qualified as paratroopers. They received certificates and their silver jump wings a day after Christmas 1942. Gunther proudly wore his silver jump wings with his pants tucked into his boots, which distinguished a paratrooper from a “straight leg” infantryman.

Gunther was then assigned to Camp MacKall, North Carolina, with the rest of the 506th, where they began making jumps with rifles and full packs. After a summer of advanced training and wargames, the 506th was transferred to Camp Shanks, New York, where they boarded the Samaria on 28 August 1943 for England. In addition to his impending deployment, Gunther had another thing on his mind. His wife Mary, an Army nurse from New Orleans whom he married in 1942, was due to give birth to their first child towards the end of August. On 30 August 1943, two days after Gunther left for England, Mary gave birth to a daughter, whom they named Susan. While on board the Samaria, he received word that he was the father of a baby girl. When he was not playing craps with the other officers on A Deck, he thought about his new family. Every night after lights out he pictured his wife with their new daughter.

The Samaria arrived in Liverpool on 18 September, a month before the rest of the 101st, and was stationed at Aldbourne, England. It was there that they began training for the invasion of Europe. The first winter was uncomfortable for Gunther and his comrades as the training schedule made sure they spent most of their time outside. They began making regular practice jumps and rehearsed small-unit tactics. On top of their training, the troopers of the 101st endured grueling physical and mental conditioning.

Training became even more intense in the spring of 1944 as the date of the invasion of Normandy approached. The 506th left Aldbourne on 31 May and were quartered in a marshaling area in southwestern England. While quarantined, Gunther wrote his last letter home on 1 June 1944. It was to his wife, and it ended with the line “I love you Mary with all my heart.” It was postmarked 6 June 1944.

Lugging 100 pounds of gear, Gunther boarded a C-47 transport with other members of his unit at 2200 on 5 June. He was in the first wave of paratroopers that would land in Normandy and secure the western flank of the Allied beachhead. There were six drop zones behind Utah Beach. The 101st Airborne mission was named Operation ALBANY, and they were to land in Drop Zones A, C, D; the 82d Airborne Division’s plan of attack was code-named Operation BOSTON, and they were to land in Drop Zones T, O, and N. 2d Battalion 506th PIR, would touch down in Drop Zone C, which was just to the west of Ste. Marie-du-Mont. They were tasked with taking and holding Exits 1 and 2 off Utah Beach so that VII Corps could quickly move inland. It took seven planes to load up every man in Dog Company for the invasion; Gunther was in Stick 61 and served as the jumpmaster for his C-47.

The air fleet began to make its way down the runway at 2310. Once in the air, the C-47s got into V formations, with three planes to a V. Gunther was in the same V as his company commander. Whatever solitary thoughts Gunther was thinking quickly dissipated once his formation approached the Normandy coast. The American aircraft began taking heavy antiaircraft fire from the German defenses, and the other two C-47s in Gunther’s formation were shot down. Gunther’s own transport was hit by flak, and around 0100 the pilot of his plane turned on the red light, signaling the paratroopers to prepare to jump. Gunther stood up and shouted to his men to get ready. He then gave the order to “stand up.” The men of Stick 61 got on their feet and waited for their lieutenant’s command. Gunther then ordered them to “hook up.” The troopers clipped their chutes to the static line overhead. As they waited to jump and their plane was peppered with antiaircraft fire, the inexperienced pilots took evasive action. Gunther’s plane
was hit and one of the engines burst into flames. The pilot of the stricken C-47 turned on the green light and the men cleared out of the plane in ten seconds. Gunther was the first one to jump. His parachute opened and he began the descent towards Normandy. The pilot, however, had hit the green light far too early, and Gunther’s stick jumped miles northwest of their drop zone over a key objective of the 82d Airborne Division, Ste. Mère Église.

In Ste. Mère Église, a fire caused by a stray incendiary bomb engulfed M. Hainon’s villa and illuminated the village square. After the mayor got the local German garrison to lift the curfew, the citizens of Ste. Mère Église started a bucket brigade to put out the blaze. The German garrison got into formation near the bucket brigade as the church bell continued to ring. A little after 0110, the Germans and the French heard the roar of the Allied air armada. As he descended into the town, Gunther would have seen panicking French civilians and German soldiers running about in the village square that glowed from the fire. It was one of the last sights Gunther would see.

Roughly thirty Americans dropped into Ste. Mère Église on 6 June, with several landing in and around the village square. The fire from the villa lit up the night sky, giving the Germans a clear view of the incoming paratroopers. German reinforcements rushed into the square, believing that they were the focal point of the attack. Gunther landed in a tree near the parish cemetery, virtually at the center of town. As he desperately tried to cut the harness of his parachute, he was shot by a German machine gunner. Gunther was killed in action at approximately 0120, making him one of the first casualties of D-Day.

As Gunther’s body hung in that tree, fighting raged all around him. Eight other paratroopers suffered the same fate as Gunther. Clarence Merrill was in the same stick as Gunther and also drifted over Ste. Mère Église. He managed to hide in a ditch while the Germans swarmed all around him. Outside of the town, the American paratroopers, mainly from the 82d Airborne, were regrouping and moving towards their objectives.

Despite all the activity, the German garrison at Ste. Mère Église inexplicably went back to sleep once the initial shooting had stopped. On the outside of town, Lieutenant Colonel Edward “Cannonball” Krause of 3d Battalion, 505th PIR, began gathering his forces. When he had two companies of men, he marched them into Ste. Mère Église, where they captured thirty Germans in their beds and shot eleven who tried to run. By 0500 on D-Day, Ste. Mère Église was secure. With the German garrison either dead or captured, Merrill emerged from his hideout and began to gather the dead with his comrades. Fifty years later he stated, “The hardest part for me was cutting down my friend, Walter Gunther.”

Back home in Malden, the headline for the local paper read “HUNDREDS OF MALDEN BOYS IN INVASION, ALLIES DRIVE NINE MILES INTO FRANCE.” For a month there was little word of Gunther’s fate. His family received news that his plane made it through German antiaircraft fire, and that a lieutenant in his formation (who was shot down and survived) saw his name on a casualty list. Nothing was concrete, and his family still hoped for the best. Back in Normandy, however, Gunther’s men were already aware of his death by the end of D-Day. Bob Lundy remembered when he and his comrades first learned of Gunther’s death. There was little time to mourn the fallen, as the war still raged around them. They knew there would be casualties. Lundy was wounded in the upper left arm on D+3 and was evacuated to England. He would be patched up in time for Operation MARKET-GARDEN and would fight with the 101st until he contracted pneumonia at Bastogne.

On 8 July 1944, Mary Gunther received a Western Union telegram that read: “The Secretary of War desires me to express his deep regret that your husband First Lieutenant Walter J Gunther Jr was killed in action on [6] June in France letter follows.” With it came Walter’s Purple heart. Two days later, the headline of the Malden Evening News read: “LT GUNThER KILLED IN INVASION.” A memorial service was held for Gunther on 18 July at the Church of Immaculate Conception. He was later buried at the Normandy American Cemetery in Colleville-Sur-Mer, France.

Gunther’s story is not at all uncommon. Of the paratroopers who dropped into Normandy, 2,499 became casualties in the first twenty-four hours. Many of those fell victim to misdrops over German positions or marshals purposely flooded. Like so many others, Gunther’s promising life was tragically cut short on 6 June 1944. He was intelligent, athletic, and a natural leader. Whether he was marching his men to Atlanta or jumping out of a C-47, Walter was always in front. He led by example rather than fear, and though he did not live to see it, the men he trained would serve with distinction for the rest of the war. There is little doubt that Gunther’s leadership during training played a role in the future success of Dog Company.

Gunther’s story would have been lost to history had it not been for the efforts of both
The C-47 carrying Gunther and other paratroopers from the 101st Airborne Division dropped them over the town of St. Mère Eglise, an objective of the 82nd Airborne. Gunther landed in a tree, and as he attempted to free himself from his parachute harness, he was shot and killed. (National Archives)

his family and the town of Malden. In 2010, Kent Gunther, Walter’s cousin, made an inquiry to the Malden Police Department about a small memorial to Gunther that was taken down years ago. Kent reached Kevin Molis, a lieutenant in the Malden Police Department. Molis began digging, and gradually uncovered Gunther’s story. In the process, he helped reunite lost relatives (including Gunther’s daughter) and built support for a memorial in Gunther’s honor. That memorial became a reality on the sixty-sixth anniversary of D-day, and it is located not far from Gunther’s childhood home. His surviving family was reunited during the commemoration, including his daughter Susan and his three granddaughters. It was a solemn occasion as old comrades of Gunther said a few words in his honor. A small garden surrounds a black marble tablet, which reads:

Lt. Walter J. Gunther Jr.: Born in Malden and lived on Murray Hill Park when he left to serve his country during World War II, as a member of the legendary 101st Airborne Division. He was killed in action at Normandy on D-Day June 6, 1944. Lt. Gunther was posthumously awarded the Purple Heart and is buried at the Normandy American Cemetery at Colleville-sur-Mer, France.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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An article announcing Gunther’s death appeared on the front page of the Malden Evening News on 10 July 1944. (Malden Public Library)

Gunerth is buried in the Normandy American Cemetery, one of 9,357 American servicemen buried there. (Kent Gunther)