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Event salutes paratroopers who engaged in some of the fiercest fighting in France following D-Day

By Master Sgt. Donald Sparks

U.S. Special Operations Command Europe Public Affairs Office

CARENTAN, France -- A tranquil slab of marble with several bouquets of flowers at its base stood in the evening shadows June 5 on a piece of earth that 65 years earlier was the scene of some of the bloodiest fighting on the soil of France during World War II.

Nearly 200 citizens of Carentan paid homage to the “liberators” who delivered them from occupation by the Germans during a wreath-laying ceremony in honor of the paratroopers of the 3rd Battalion, 502nd Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division.

“We have been witnesses to what happened here 65 years ago,” said Carentan mayor Jean-Pierre Lhonneur. “We owe gratitude to the many Soldiers who sacrificed their youth and some their lives to liberate our country. Let us continue to show gratitude to those Soldiers today who protect our freedom.”



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World War II veterans Arthur Petersen, from Santa Barbara, Calif., and Robert Herrot, from Friendship, Wisc., study a historic photo together moments before a ceremony in Carentan, France honoring World War II paratroopers of the 3rd Battalion, 502nd Infantry Regiment as part of events honoring the 65th anniversary of D-Day.

Five World War II veterans and one widow took part in the ceremony. Each was presented a 65th anniversary commemoration pin from the people of Carentan by Lhonneur.

Veteran Robert Herrot from Friendship, Wisc., who served with the 327th Glider Infantry Regiment, remembers fighting in a marsh outside the French town.

“I’m just greatly gratified to live to age 89 to come back here again,” Herrot said. He last

came to Carentan in 1994 for the 50th Anniversary of the D-Day invasion.

At the mayor's request, Col. Arthur Kandarian, commander of 2nd Battalion, 502nd Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne (Air Assault) Division at Fort Campbell, Ky., translated the Lhonneur's speech in English to the audience.

"This is hallowed ground, a sacred piece of land," Kandarian said of the land where the memorial now stands.

After the D-Day invasion, Carentan was a key strategic point for establishing a defensive line against German resupply forces. A battle took place between June 10 and 12 as the American forces faced stiff opposition from the German 6th Parachute Regiment.

Led by Lt. Col. Robert G. Cole, the 3-502nd charged enemy forces with bayonets to take bridges at Carentan. His battalion suffered severe casualties -- nearly two-third of its fighting strength -- but eventually seized their objective.

Cole's actions in the battle earned him the Medal of Honor.

With "Screaming Eagle" patches on his left and right sleeves, Cpl. Terry Cater, an infantryman assigned to Company C, 2-502, said he felt great pride seeing the original World War II colors of the regiment on display at the event.

"This ceremony has humbled me a lot," said Cater, a native of Douglas, Ga. "I feel as if I'm walking in the footsteps of guys who came before me. It feels so good to see how the people here still receive and have open arms for our Soldiers."



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A citizen from the town of Carentan, France holds the United States flag near the encased regimentsal colors of the 3rd Battalion, 502nd Infantry Regiment. The paratroopers of 3-502nd engaged in some of the fiercest fighting on French soil in the Carentan area following the D-Day invasion in June 1944. A wreath-laying ceremony June 5 honored the regiment for liberating the town.



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