

# 'A Great Experience'

## Bud Parker's tribute to unsung D-Day heroes sparks PBS documentary

CAROLINE JOE

By Gary Goettling

**H**e was only 10 years old on D-Day, June 6, 1944, but nearly 60 years later Albert N. "Bud" Parker would find himself helping veterans and the public remember the unsung heroes of that pivotal World War II invasion.

A 1958 industrial management graduate, Parker has quite a bit of history himself — Georgia Tech history. A first-term trustee of the Georgia Tech Foundation, Parker spent many years in an unofficial capacity raising funds to develop Tech's infrastructure, primarily for the Athletic Department.

"I've been a close friend of (former athletics director) Homer Rice for many years," said Parker, a life member of the Alexander-Tharpe Fund, "so I spent most of my time helping Dr. Rice raise money to upgrade the facilities and complete projects such as the Student Success Center, expansion of the west stands, the Wardlaw Building and the Edge Building."

Parker also played an important if unheralded role in helping Tech build the campus Olympic venues and facilities for the 1996 Summer Games. His Foundation post is Parker's first inside look at how the organization supports Tech.

"I was interested in seeing how the Foundation carries out its fiduciary responsibilities and if, in my judgment, it was playing the role it is supposed to play," Parker said. "I have been very proud of the Foundation's leadership. It has some of the finest Tech graduates working for it, and I am highly impressed with the role the Foundation plays at Georgia Tech. It has been an honor for me to serve."

Parker's association with Tech reaches back to childhood. His father, William A. Parker, was a 1919 Tech graduate, so when the time came for young Parker to continue his education, Tech was a natural choice.

"I was raised as a Georgia Tech fan," he explained. "So that little bit of heritage was important."

Happy at the prospect of coming home from prep school, Parker wasn't inclined to leave Georgia again. With the family business — Beck & Gregg Hardware — and hence his professional future rooted in Atlanta, Parker believed that four years at Tech would be "a very comfortable fit."

As a student, he was active in intramurals and played on the tennis team four years. He was also involved in student government and was elected



**Bud Parker tackled the chance to document some nearly forgotten history — the D-Day mission of the 507th Parachute Infantry Regiment.**

president of his senior class.

"Georgia Tech was a lot different school then than it is now — it was smaller," Parker said. "But it was a fine school then, and it's even finer today."

After graduation and his two-year Navy ROTC obligation, Parker helped run the family hardware business until the company was sold to Genuine Parts Co. in the early '70s.

With the proceeds from the sale, Parker started a second career as a private investor.

Then in 2000 he tackled an opportunity to document some nearly forgotten history — and keep a promise.

During World War II, Parker's father-in-law, Bob Rae, had served with the 507th Parachute Infantry Regiment, a unit of the 82nd Airborne. Although the unit had performed heroically during and after D-Day, when Rae visited the French coast decades later he was distressed to discover that none of the markers and memorials dotting the battlefield mentioned the 507th.

"Before he died, my father-in-law asked me if I would help get a memorial built in Normandy," Parker recalled.

Parker spearheaded an effort to create and install a stone memorial a few miles inland, near the area where the 507th landed. At the dedication ceremony in 2001, Parker brought with him a videographer from Tech, David Druckenmiller, to produce a document-

tary about the combat history of the 507th.

"We thought we were making a keepsake video that we could give to family members and to the veterans still living," Parker recalled. "But David got so inspired from the experience over there, he came up with something extremely powerful."

The story that captivated Druckenmiller began with the 507th's D-Day mission to parachute several miles inland ahead of the Allied invasion and seize the 500-foot-long causeway over the Merderet River at La Fiere. The move was intended to bottle up German troops and seal them off from the invasion beaches and preserve the bridge for an Allied advance.

Success came only after 33 hours of continuous combat that inflicted heavy casualties on the 507th.

"The causeway was completely exposed and the Germans were dug in on the other side," Parker said. "It was a little like Pickett's Charge. It's a miracle that any of the paratroopers survived."

Later, the reconstituted 507th participated in what many historians consider Germany's last gasp in the war: the Battle of the Bulge.

After the raw footage was organized and edited, a DVD was produced and distributed to 507th veterans, families and just about anyone else Parker thought might be interested — even his

fellow Foundation board members.

Urged by friends to seek a wider audience for the documentary, Parker sent a copy to the Public Broadcasting System. Much to his surprise — and delight — the neophyte producer's D-Day tribute became one of the 30 or so unsolicited submissions PBS selects for broadcast each year out of about 5,000 entrants.

"D-Day: Down to Earth — Return of the 507th" aired four times last year on U.S. public television stations and once on Israeli TV to commemorate the 60th anniversary of D-Day.

The video also attracted the attention of the U.S. Army. This past July, Parker received the Commander's Award for Public Service from Lt. Col. Aidia Zunde, commander of the 507th, in ceremonies held at Fort Benning, Ga.

The award's inscription reads that Parker's "selfless service for the good of the regiment has done much to preserve the memory of the heroic accomplishments of our predecessors."

Parker downplays the award, preferring to keep the spotlight centered on the 507th Parachute Infantry Regiment.

"The surviving veterans wanted some sort of recognition, so I helped them do that," said Parker. "It was a great experience in my life."

After a pause he added, "It wasn't for their own glory — it was for their buddies who didn't come home." **GT**