



# 503<sup>rd</sup> PRCT Association, WWII, Inc.

## The Rock

Volume 2, Issue 2 May, 2017

503<sup>rd</sup> PIR \* 462<sup>nd</sup> PFAB \* 161<sup>st</sup> PEC

## A Message from the President

I'm looking forward to our Reunion in Killeen, Texas in September and I hope that you will join us there. I realize some of us can't get around like we used to, but we will be there as long as we are able. The trip to the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame and Museum in Waco sounds interesting!

I Hope to see as many "Old Guys", who can get there and as many Associate Members, Family and Friends who can be there to make our 61<sup>st</sup> Reunion a big success.

Sincerely,

Nelson Gatewood, President

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**Virgil Franklin Surber, F Co. 503rd PRCT - KIA**

## Operation Preservation

Help us preserve and honor the brave men who served in 503<sup>rd</sup> PRCT.

We are looking for images, documents, rosters, letters, paraphernalia, stories, etc. relating to the 503<sup>rd</sup> PRCT, 503<sup>rd</sup> PIR, 462<sup>nd</sup> PFAB and 161<sup>st</sup> PEC to archive and preserve.

We're not looking to obtain the originals, just high quality digital scans and copies to use to help tell the story of 503<sup>rd</sup> PRCT.

If you have anything that you would like to share, please let us know.

We Can Help!

Contact us as [Treasurer@503rdPRCT.org](mailto:Treasurer@503rdPRCT.org)



**Join us in Killeen, Texas!**

**503rd PRCT Association, WWII  
National Reunion  
September 13 -17, 2017**

**Rick Miller - Reunion Host**

More details to follow  
[Treasurer@503rdPRCT.org](mailto:Treasurer@503rdPRCT.org)

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A great way to connect! Like Us on Facebook

## 503<sup>rd</sup> PRCT Association Officers for 2016 – 2018

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The above can be reached by emailing [Treasurer@503rdPRCT.org](mailto:Treasurer@503rdPRCT.org). This is the main email address for the Association. All emails sent to this address will be forward to our Secretary/Treasurer, Nancy Young. If need be, she will contact/forward to the appropriate person.

## Mail Call

Have some news to share, drop us note at [Treasurer@503rdPRCT.org](mailto:Treasurer@503rdPRCT.org).

## Virgil Franklin Surber, F Co. 503rd PRCT – KIA by Todd Mayer

Like many young veterans of WWII that gave their last full measure for their country, Virgil Surber was never given the chance to grow old and experience the pleasures of a full life. Not having a family of his own, his memories and stories were left to those who knew him best; his parents, siblings and perhaps those he served with. But as the years pass, these memories are becoming lost with those who knew him well, as they themselves pass on. Below is my contribution to his memory that will help provide a glimpse into Virgil's time in the US Army.

As I begin researching my grandfather's own service with 503<sup>rd</sup> PIR, I came across Virgil's name as a casualty and his name on a roster, which put him in the same platoon as my grandfather Richard E Gruver, Company F, Mortar Platoon. I remember as young child hearing some of his stories and found them fascinating, but as I grew older and became pre-occupied with my own young life, I never thought to set down and talk more in-depth with him about his time in the service. My grandfather passed away in 1994, so I had start doing my own detective work to find answers. I didn't know it at the time, but my grandfather's personal photo collection contained a picture of Virgil. Like most photos, it was not labeled, but through various sources I was able to identify the individuals on this particle photo, which included Virgil. As I dug deeper into my grandfather's service, I started interviewing various family members and collecting any stories that may have been shared over the years. Through these causal interviews, my aunt shared a story, the only one my grandfather, her dad, had ever told to her. Without mentioning names, he simply stated the fact, that during the war he was standing next to a guy who was hit by exploding shell and died. I as investigated the manner in which Virgil was killed and added up the facts and evidence, I realized the individual my grandfather was referring to was Virgil Surber, thus began my research on who Vigil was and his time with 503<sup>rd</sup> PIR.

Hailing from Enterprise, Oregon, Virgil enlisted in the Army Air Corps in January 1942 at Pendleton Army Air Base in his home state of Oregon. He was 20 years old at the time, six foot tall and weighed 150 pounds. Before enlisting, he had spent some time in the Civilian Conservation Corps and worked as a farm hand. After his induction, he was sent to Chanute Field, where he trained as an airplane mechanic and later served as a ground mechanic in the Army Air Corps before transferring to the Paratroops in late 1943. As with many of the new Paratrooper recruits, Virgil was probably enticed by recruiting posters and the

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*Virgil Franklin Surber, after completing his parachute training and before being shipped overseas, late 1943 or early 1944 (Image- Family photo, Inthe503rd.org collection).*



*WWII Paratrooper recruitment poster (Image- US Army, InThe503rd.org collection).*

extra fifty dollars in pay per month that paratroopers were paid. To a young man with no family obligations, the thought of spending the rest of the war on a runway or hanger in the United States or possibly overseas, did not compare with the adventure of jumping out of plans and fighting the enemy.

Upon completing his paratrooper training, at Fort Benning, Georgia, Virgil was sent overseas in January or February of 1944 to join up with the 503<sup>rd</sup> PIR as a replacement. He probably caught up with the Regiment at Camp Cable; 30 miles outside Brisbane Australia, where he was presumably assigned to 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, F Company, Mortar Platoon. Following the Nadzab Jump on September 5, 1943, the 503<sup>rd</sup> PIR was sent back to their base camp at Port Moresby, New Guinea. The conditions at the camp were not ideal and men of the unit were slowly succumbing to the various tropical diseases of the jungle. After some period of inactivity, besides training and day to day activities, the newly named Colonel of 503<sup>rd</sup>, Colonel Jones requested that the 503<sup>rd</sup> be given a mission or return to Australia for rest and relaxation. The later was granted and the entire regiment was sent back to Australia, finally reaching their destination on February 2, 1944.

In early April, 1944, the 503<sup>rd</sup> left Brisbane and headed back to New Guinea, near Dobadura. Virgil most likely received his first taste on combat during the Hollandia Campaign in early and late June of 1944. Although contact with the enemy was light, experience was gained. During this period the 503<sup>rd</sup> PIR secured the Tami airstrip and conducted daily patrols in area until they were called upon to reinforce the invasion force at Noemfoor Island, New Guinea.

The operation to help secure the island of Noemfoor called for the whole regiment to be lifted and dropped. Not enough transport plans were available to lift and drop the entire 503<sup>rd</sup> PIR on Noemfoor, so each battalion was scheduled to be dropped separately. After the injury laden drops of the first and third battalions on Karmari Airfield, the decision was made not to drop the 2<sup>nd</sup> battalion. The 2<sup>nd</sup> battalion would instead arrive by LCI's a few days later.

After a few months of patrolling and clearing the island of Japanese, the 503<sup>rd</sup> was ordered to the Island of Leyte in preparation for seizure of Mindoro Island. But this time, they would not be alone. In mid June Company C of 161<sup>st</sup> parachute engineers, followed by the 462<sup>nd</sup> parachute field artillery battalion in late August joined up with 503<sup>rd</sup> PIR forming the 503<sup>rd</sup> PRCT. Sizing the island of Mindoro, would provide airfields that would enable air support for the Army's invasion of Luzon and eventually provide a staging area for the 503<sup>rd</sup> PRCT liberation of Corregidor.

It was during this time on Leyte that Virgil wrote his final letter home to his parents. The letter was received around Christmas time and stated, that he was subject to bombing attacks. These bombing attacks were more than likely the one's the unit were subjected too during their stint on Leyte. Upon their arrival on Leyte, the men were ordered to dig trenches and foxholes next to their tents for easy access. The bay was full of US support and warships, which made irresistible targets for the Japanese fighters and bombers in the area. They would occasionally make strafes at various targets along the beach, which warranted the troopers to take cover.

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On December 15, 1944 the 503<sup>rd</sup> made an amphibious landing on the island of Mindoro. The original plan called for the 503<sup>rd</sup> to assault the island by air, but inadequate airstrips on Leyte were cause to cancel the air assault and the 503<sup>rd</sup> PRCT was ordered to assault the island by shore alongside the 19<sup>th</sup> RCT. Years later this assault would be become a bone of contention with members of the 503<sup>rd</sup> PRCT. Members of the 503rd PRCT who made the assault were never recognized with a bronze arrowhead signifying an assault from land or air, whereas other units who came ashore before and after the 503<sup>rd</sup> PRCT were.

While on Mindoro, the units set up a defensive perimeter and counter landing defenses in case the Japanese tried to counter attack. During this time the airdromes were being constructed to support fighter plans and bombers for the push into Luzon. Late in January the unit was placed on alert for a possible mission that was later entrusted to the 511<sup>th</sup> PIR. On February 6<sup>th</sup>, the unit was alerted again. This time, it was for real and on February 8<sup>th</sup> Colonel Jones made the official announcement that Corregidor would be the unit's next objective. The days to follow found the troopers and commanders planning and preparing for the upcoming mission. Weapons were cleaned and adjusted, jump bundles were laid out, maps and plans studied, squads and platoons briefed and unit organization checked.

Being in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, Virgil and the rest of Company F would have been dropped on the 2<sup>nd</sup> lift, starting around 12:40pm with their target being the golf course, which was now littered with bomb craters. No longer having the element of surprise, the planes of the 2<sup>nd</sup> battalion and elements of 503<sup>rd</sup> PRCT, who were on the 2<sup>nd</sup> lift were greeted with machine gun and rifle fire as their plans passed and the troops descended to the ground. Upon hitting the ground, F Company setup their command post and gathering point at building 28-D, the westernmost house on Senior Officers row. Officer's row was a long line of bombed-out two story houses that sat along the southeastern edge of the parade ground and adjacent to the golf course.

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Items wanted for Auction at our National Reunion in Texas

A long standing tradition to help generate monies for the organization

&

To help offset any costs

Monetary Donations Welcomed

Contact us at [Treasurer@503rdPRCT.org](mailto:Treasurer@503rdPRCT.org)



*Landing Field B, Corregidor golf course situated adjacent to the officers quarters. The jump was made about 400 feet above the ground. Besides being shot at on the way down, the paratroopers had to contend with all the debris and bombed out buildings on the ground, missing the drop zone would prove to be hazardous to many troopers (Image- National Archives, Inthe503rd.org collection).*

Virgil's biggest night on Corregidor probably occurred on the night of February 18 and early morning on the 19<sup>th</sup>. During the afternoon of 18<sup>th</sup>, F Company commander split his company in two, to protect the sector his company was assigned to. Each force numbered approximately 70 men and included attached reinforcements. Once force was sent to Battery Hearn and the other force was sent to Way Hill. The mortar platoon was split. First squad was at Way Hill and the second and third squads were at Battery Hearn. Virgil was a member of the 3<sup>rd</sup> squad, which was headed by PFC Burl Martin. My grandfather, Sgt Richard Gruver led the 2<sup>nd</sup> squad. The force defending Battery Hearn was led by 1<sup>st</sup> Lt Bill Calhoun. During the night, two battalion size forces tried to make

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their way to topside and one of the attacking forces ran straight into the path of the F Company force on Battery Hearn. After a night of repeated banzai attacks, the attacking columns in this sector were repelled. With little to no ammo left to repeal another onslaught, the troopers on Battery Hearn were weary as they heard more chants off in the distance. Fortunately for them, the additional attack never came. It was also during this night that Lloyd McCarter, F Company Scout earned the Medal of Honor for his actions during the attack.



*Battery Hearn. Image taken by the 312<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group surveying bomb damage prior to the 503<sup>rd</sup> PRCT jumping on Corregidor. Elements of F Company occupied the top of the magazine near the three vent covers during the night of February 18 and early morning on the 19<sup>th</sup> (Image- PacificWrecks.com, InThe503rd.org Collection)*

After the 503<sup>rd</sup> PRCT stint on Corregidor, they were summoned to reinforce the 40<sup>th</sup> infantry division on Negros Island. The action Negros would seal Virgil's destiny. The 503<sup>rd</sup> PRCT was sent to Negros in what turned out to be a "mopping up" campaign, where the highly trained elite troops of 503<sup>rd</sup> PRCT were used as standard ground infantry. The prolonged action along with tropical diseases slowly ground down the 503<sup>rd</sup> PRCT. On the morning of April 26, 1945, Virgil Surber met his fate. While the mortar platoon was heating up some meal

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rations a few hundred yards from the CP, fragments from a Japanese incoming round burst overhead and found their way into the chest and abdomen of Virgil. After being hit, Virgil was taken to the aid station, where he later died of the wounds.



*George Montoya and Virgil Surber. Photo taken the morning on February 19<sup>th</sup>, 1945 near Battery Hearn, Corregidor (Image-REG, InThe503rd.org Collection)*

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## Virgil Franklin Surber, F Co. 503rd PRCT – KIA *continued*

Company F Morning Report Entry for April 26, 1945 States the following;

26 April 1945

Suber, Virgil F. 19061607 Pfc 7504

SWA to DOW Negros PI Parachute and COMBAT Inf pay.

Buckner, Horace 34997094 Pvt

Ab sk hosp to atch unasgd det Pats hosp unknow USADDE reg  
50-25 (EDCMR 26 April 95).

Station and Record of Events

Co Hq, 1<sup>st</sup> plat, and mortar plat move up to consolidated position.

Enemy threw aerial burst and cause casualties very slight

Strength : 118

Following Virgil's death, his body would have been taken to a collection point, from there; members of a Graves Registration Unit would have handled his remains. Once properly identified, his remains would have been buried in a temporary cemetery and his personal effects and other records sent to various collection points, until they made their way back to the US. The Army would have notified the next of kin of this death and perhaps his company commander or someone close to him may have written a personal letter to his family.

After the fighting ended in South Pacific, the bodies were exhumed and re-interred into larger regional cemeteries. During the fighting in the South Pacific, there were close to 200 temporary cemeteries scattered across the Pacific set up to hold fallen soldiers. Once the fighting ended, the bodies were exhumed and re-interred into larger regional cemeteries. In 1946, the US Government began notifying the "Next Of Kin", of those soldiers who had been identified. The goal was to make every effort to find a final resting place for those soldiers who gave their life during the war. A letter of inquiry with a questionnaire and pamphlet outlining what the government plans to do was sent to those family members who had the right to make that decision. In that letter, the family members were given four options for final interment.

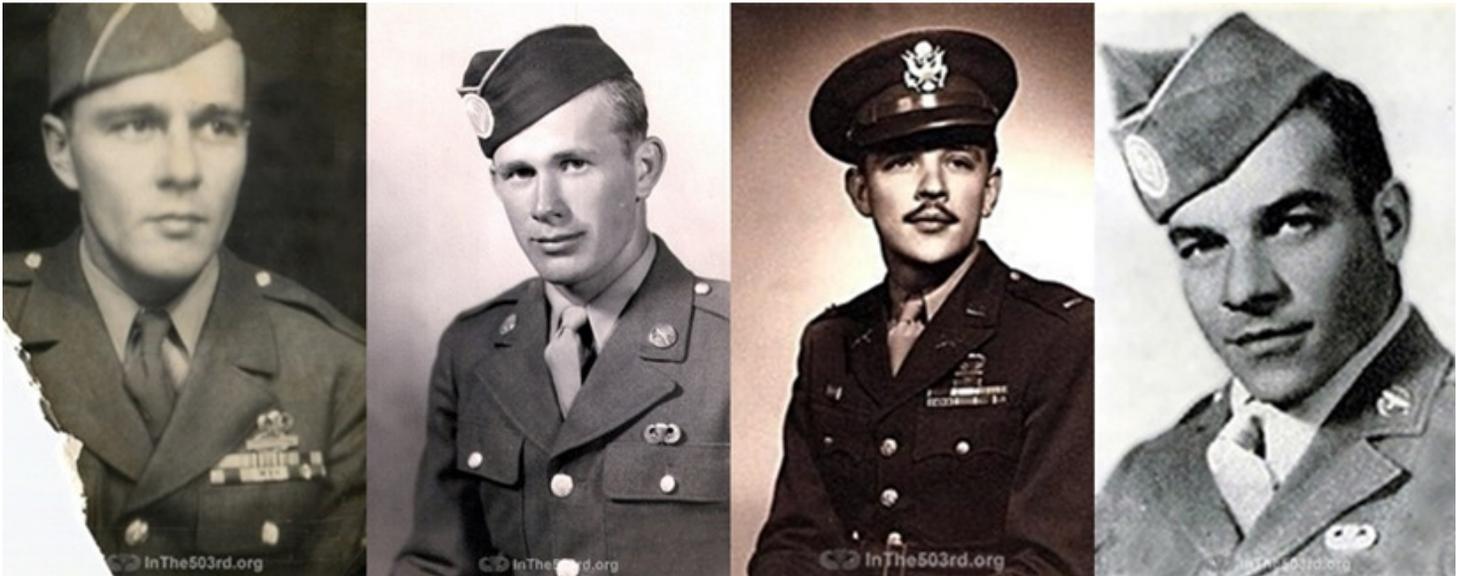
The four options were:

1. Remains may be returned to the United States or any possession or territory thereof, for interment by next of kin in a private cemetery.
2. Remains may be returned to a foreign country, the homeland of the deceased or the next of kin, for interment by next of kin in a private cemetery.
3. Remains may be interred in a permanent United States Military Cemetery overseas.
4. Remains may be returned to the United States for interment in a National Cemetery.

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Vigils family chose to have his remains returned home to Enterprise and re-interred at Enterprise cemetery. Following the return on Virgil's remains, a memorial service was held for Virgil in his home town at the Enterprise Christian Church, where relatives and friends gathered to pay him tribute. Graveside services were handled by the American Legion.

In 2014, I had the honor of meeting Burl Martin at the 58<sup>th</sup> annual 503<sup>rd</sup> PRCT Association reunion in Terra Haute Indiana. It was a chance encounter that I will never forget. Burl was 91 years old at time and has since passed away. As stated above, Burl was member of the mortar platoon and knew both Virgil and my Grandfather Richard. I spent as much time as I could with Burl at the reunion and he shared many emotional memories with me. In regards to the death of Virgil, Burl remembered the day. After Virgil was hit with shrapnel, Burl went to go see him at the aid station. He said Virgil was giving away all his stuff, his watch, trench knife and other belongings. Burl thought to himself "why you giving all your stuff away", but he (Virgil) knew he wasn't going to make it.



*Richard Gruver, Burl Martin, William Calhoun and Lloyd McCarter (Images – InThe503rd.org collection).*

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Virgil Franklin Surber

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Various interviews with family members and members of the 503rd PRCT.



**InThe503rd.org**



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**Invites Paratroopers, Family and Friends  
To attend the 61<sup>st</sup> Annual Reunion of the  
503<sup>rd</sup> Parachute Regimental Combat Team  
Association WWII**

**Wednesday, September 13 -  
Sunday, September 17, 2017**



**Union registration materials will be sent out in the next "mailed" newsletter and posted on our Facebook page.**

**All are Welcome... Join Us In Texas!**



**Our Condolences go out to the families**

Lawrence Beck, 503<sup>rd</sup> D Company

Samuel Ross, 503<sup>rd</sup> G Company

Anthony Cicchino, 503<sup>rd</sup> RHQ Service Company

Richard Castillo, 462<sup>nd</sup> Btry A

Guy R. Larry, 503<sup>rd</sup> F Company

Ford Albritton Jr, 462<sup>nd</sup> HQ Btry

Roscoe Corder, 503<sup>rd</sup> E Company

Dorothy Anderson, widow of George Anderson, 503<sup>rd</sup> RHQ.

Betty Zenock, widow of Ray Zenock, 503<sup>rd</sup> D Company.

**THE 503<sup>rd</sup> P.R.C.T.  
HERITAGE  
BATTALION** **Online**



**503<sup>rd</sup> Parachute Regimental Combat Team Association, WWII, Inc.**  
**Membership Registration Form/Membership Update Form**

Mr. / Mrs. / Ms. First Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Initial: \_\_\_\_\_ Last Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address 1: \_\_\_\_\_

Address 2: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_ State/Province: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip / Postal Code: \_\_\_\_\_

Nation (If Not USA): \_\_\_\_\_

Home Telephone: \_\_\_\_\_ Work or Cell Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

E-Mail Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Membership Type (please check one), A complete description of membership types can be found on 503rdPCT.org

Active, I am a veteran of 503<sup>rd</sup> PRCT, Unit \_\_\_\_\_ Years served: \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_

Wife's name (if applicable) \_\_\_\_\_

Associate, I would like to be considered for membership on the following basis:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Widow, My husband served in the 503<sup>rd</sup> PRCT, Unit \_\_\_\_\_

I'm already a member, I just want to update my contact information and/or pay my annual dues.

**Annual Membership Fees are \$20.00**

**Widows are not required to pay dues**

**Membership Dues are due each January 1<sup>st</sup> and are considered delinquent on April 1<sup>st</sup>**

Payment may be made via personal check (U.S. bank only), money order or international postal order, made out to the order of "503<sup>rd</sup> PRCT Association, WWII, Inc."

**Send Completed Form And Payment To:**

**Nancy Young, Secretary/Treasurer; 10445 Old Telegraph Road, Ashland, VA 23005**

**For Questions, Email Treasurer@503rdPRCT.org**