

## **PFC George “Ray” Strout – KIA 16 August 1944**

George “Ray” Strout was born in Cherryfield, Oct. 21<sup>st</sup>, 1921, the son of Mr. And Mrs Russell A. Strout. The family moved to Waterville during Ray’s youth where he attended high school for one year. He worked in construction after leaving school perhaps as a painter and was drafted into the US Army in 1942 while employed at Parks Diner in Waterville. He was shipped to South Carolina for basic training at Camp Croft. How long PVT Strout was held at Croft, we don’t know. At some point, he was assigned to the 120<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment of the 30<sup>th</sup> Division. The 30<sup>th</sup> was the South Carolina National Guard Division established in WWI and named the “Old Hickory”. Reactivated in 1940, the Division was mobilized in September to Fort Jackson, SC where the 30<sup>th</sup> built it’s manpower as men were assigned from basic training bases. The Division moved to Camp Blanding, FL and trained there until April 1943 during which time we presume PVT Strout was assigned following basic training. In November 1943, the 30<sup>th</sup> was transferred to Camp Atterbury, Ind. The next winter, the 30<sup>th</sup> shipped out of Boston on 12 Feb 1944 on three troop ships: SS Argentina, SS Brazil and the SS John Ericsson with the 120<sup>th</sup> Regiment (PVT Strout’s) disembarking at Glasgow, Scotland on 22 Feb 1944. The three Regiments (117<sup>th</sup>, 119<sup>th</sup>, 120<sup>th</sup>) were transported by train to Southern England where they underwent intensive and secret training in preparation for the invasion of France. Elements of the 30<sup>th</sup> landed in Normandy on D-Day plus 2 to plus 9. With the beach heads secure, the 30<sup>th</sup> went into combat on June 15<sup>th</sup> south of Isigny relieving elements of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne and the 29<sup>th</sup> Division. 7 July, the 30<sup>th</sup> liberated the 1<sup>st</sup> major town in Normandy and was designated the lead unit in Operation Cobra, to spearhead the breakthrough at St. Lo. During this period, reports indicate that Ray Strout was lightly wounded on 11 July and returned to duty on the 29<sup>th</sup>. It must have been hard for him to go back into combat having already seen so many wounded and dead. He would only have another two weeks to live before joining the ranks of those who made the ultimate sacrifice for our nation – the sacrifice we honor each Memorial Day and today here among his family. On the 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> of July as COBRA was poised for action, allied bombers of the 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force inadvertently dropped bombs on

the most forward elements of the 30<sup>th</sup> Division as the front line between the Americans and Germans was so close. 136 men were killed and another 621 were wounded in this tragic friendly fire incident including Lt Gen Leslie McNair. It would have been disheartening to have so many wounded from the friendly fire bombing arriving at the field hospital while Ray Strout was recovering from his own wounds of the 11<sup>th</sup> of July.

COBRA was launched on the 25<sup>th</sup> as planned with the objective of “breaking out” from the Normandy Beachhead. The Germans had several Panzer (Tank) Divisions fiercely defending the area around Avranches and Mortain with orders to hold at all cost. General Omar Bradley’s VII Corps created a gap in the German lines with three more Infantry Divisions including the 30<sup>th</sup> fighting through the gap followed by 3 armored divisions. By the end of 28<sup>th</sup>, the day before Ray Strout returned to duty, the Germans had fallen back in disarray with enormous losses – 400,000 men and 1,500 tanks and self-propelled guns. Over the next week that Ray was back on duty, the American forces consolidated their positions. General George Patton’s famous Third Army was activated at noon on August 1<sup>st</sup> with Patton writing this poem:

“So let us do real fighting, boring in and gouging, biting.

Let’s take a chance now that we have the ball.

Let’s forget those fine firm bases in the dreary shell raked spaces

Let’s shoot the works and win! Yes, win it all!”

US Forces were relieved to be out of the Normandy Hedgerow country – those barriers that cost our men so many lives and restricted movement.

The German Field Marshal von Kluge launched Operation Luetlich a desperate counter-attack in the area of Avranches, France. It is here that Ray Strout’s 120<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment faced a superior German attacking force spearheaded by the battle-hardened 2<sup>nd</sup> SS Panzer Division. Between 7 and 12 August elements of Strout’s Regiment stopped the German momentum for a remarkable 6 days backed up by artillery and air support. The 120<sup>th</sup>’s Battle of Mortain is considered

one of the outstanding small unit achievements of the War in Europe and earned the 120<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment a Presidential Unit Citation. (There is a framed print of this battle on the Cherryfield Legion Hall wall) In the follow-up continuing action as the Germans retreated under fire, Bradley and British General Montgomery pushed their forces into an encircling movement to trap the retreating Germans. This became known as the Falaise Pocket, August 7-22. On 12 Aug the town of Alencon was liberated, Ecouche, the next day and on the 14th, elements of the 120th liberated Argentan. Gen. Eisenhower ordered the American troops to halt for a day's rest on the following day, the 15<sup>th</sup>. With the resumption of battle against the Germans on the 16<sup>th</sup>, George "Ray" Strout was killed during the fierce action of that day.

PFC Strout would never see the results of his sacrifice. The Falaise Pocket closed a week later by allied troops destroying or capturing large numbers of German forces. It would open the way for Patton's Third Army "dash" across Northern France to the German Border. Forty-eight hours after the Pocket was sealed, General Eisenhower called it one of most destructive battle scenes he had ever seen.

But back to 16 Feb, 1944, "Ray" Strout would be 22 years old forever, leaving his parents and family to grieve until the final good-bye over his grave in the family lot under the pines of Pinegrove Cemetery. It would have been a quiet day in Cherryfield after the War when his remains were returned home. Taps was played, the Flag raised from his casket, folded in the traditional triangle with a spent shell from the rifle salutes over his grave and presented to his Mother with these words:

"On behalf of the President of the United States, the Secretary of War and a Grateful Nation, I am honored to present this Flag to you in memory of the ultimate sacrifice made by your beloved son, Private First Class George Ray Strout. May he rest in peace!"

This ceremony and presentation is important. The State of Maine has made a commitment to assemble the stories and records of the World War II casualties so that their names and sacrifices will not be forgotten even as the personal memories and faded photographs dim. Most of these heroes were young men without children so as the family who remember them as they were, grow older and pass away, as do the details of their exploits if their families even knew what the circumstances of their service and deaths were. We must never forget that freedom is never free and that we will be forever grateful that over 65 years ago, what we now call the Greatest Generation willingly put on uniforms and went out in the world to serve a great cause.

To that end, on behalf of the Governor, General Libby and the Great State of Maine, I am honored to present the Gold Star Medal to the Strout Family in grateful recognition of the supreme sacrifice of your family member, Private First Class George "Ray" Strout during WWII. Along with the medal, I have here a print of the Battle of Mortain where he was killed. Also in the frame is a Presidential Unit Citation patch that Ray Strout earned as well as a photo of his grave in Pinegrove Cemetery. May these items help preserve his memory and story for years of future Strout Reunions.

Thank you

1LT Peter Duston, US Army – retired

Bugler with the Maine State Honor Guard