

## **Jumpin Joe's War**



### **The Story of TSGT Joseph R. Beyrle**

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## I. Introduction.

### A. References:

1. Beyrle, Joseph R. **"History of Joseph R. Beyrle Wartime Service September 17, 1942 - November 28, 1945"**
2. Mendenhall, Preston Correspondent, NBC News (MSNBC Dec. 13, 2004). **"WWII hero 'Jumpin' Joe' Dies"** February 24, 2005
3. Simon, Scott. **"Remembrances: Paratrooper Joe Beyrle, a Soldier for Two Armies"** *Weekend Edition - Saturday*, National Public Radio broadcast: December 18, 2004
4. Taylor, Thomas H. **"Behind Hitler's Lines: The True Story of the Only Soldier to Fight for both America and the Soviet Union in World War II"** Random House Publishing Group, 2002

B. This paper represents the results of the author's research into the history and service of World War Two Paratrooper Joseph R Beyrle.

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### **The Wartime Service of Paratrooper Joseph R. Beyrle**

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**Introduction.** Technical Sergeant Five Joseph R. Beyrle was a paratrooper with the 506<sup>th</sup> Regimental Combat Team in World War II. Sergeant Beyrle's military record holds two distinctions; he was both the first American paratrooper to jump into Normandy, completing two combat jumps prior to the D-Day invasion, and he was the only combat soldier to fight in both the United States and Russian Armies against the Germans. After the war, leaders of both nations decorated SGT Beyrle for his valor and tenacity as a paratrooper.

**Background.** Joseph R. Beyrle was a second generation German-American born in Muskegon Michigan. During the depression, his family lost their home and moved in with his paternal grandmother. Since his grandmother spoke only German, he became fluent in the German language. His was a hard working family – his older brothers both left school to help support the family but Beyrle's father wanted him to finish high school. Joe excelled in sports especially basketball and at graduation received an athletic scholarship to Notre Dame University. He enlisted instead into the Army in September of 1942 and immediately volunteered for airborne training.

Joe Beyrle was one of the original troopers assigned to the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division. His unit was India Company, 3/506 Parachute Infantry Regiment (The Blues). Holding the primary MOS of Infantryman, he received training in the sub-specialties of

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communications and demolitions. He worked in the company's Headquarters section as the commander's RTO.

While stationed in Georgia, Joe hired himself out at five dollars per jump impersonating other troopers who were afraid of injuries and jumping in their places for their fifth jump. These soldiers did not want to risk the leg injuries that would result in their re-assignment to non-airborne units. Beyrle earned over one hundred dollars before the jump school cadre recognized him and ended the fraud. Sergeant Beyrle earned a reputation as the company's best paratrooper and the nickname "Jumpin Joe".

**American Paymaster.** Beyrle and 506<sup>th</sup> shipped to England in September of 1943 to complete their training prior to the D-Day invasion. He attended the British Parachute School then went to a special unit that tested new parachute methods for the Americans and British. This was an early version of the Airborne Test Board. The Army was developing the parachute-landing fall (PLF), switching from the "British Roll" method of landing to one considered easier and less likely to lead to leg injuries when jumping with the heavy loads anticipated for the D-Day invasion. The unit also perfected the leg bag and lowering line system used during the Normandy jump.

While training in England, Beyrle volunteered for special parachute missions into Normandy. He jumped twice prior to D-Day to deliver funds to the French Resistance and passed over 1 million dollars in gold coin to various resistance groups. The intent

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of these "Paymaster" missions was boost French morale by demonstrating to the Resistance that America was about to enter the war on the European continent. Beyrle jumped as a uniformed paratrooper, not a spy, but a combat soldier and thus became the first American paratrooper to jump into Normandy.

**D-Day Paratrooper.** Sergeant Beyrle jumped from a C-47 aircraft into Normandy on the night of 5 June 1944 as part of OPERATION NEPTUNE (named for the Greek god who protected the sea). His battalion's mission was to destroy two bridges over the Douve River then defend the crossing to prevent the Germans from counter-attacking against the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division's landing at Utah Beach.

Beyrle landed on the roof of a church in the town of St Come Du Mont – about two miles from his drop zone and five miles from the company's objective. He was the paratrooper furthest from the battalion's objective, separated from his company and the objective by German units. Realizing that he could not make it to the bridges, he disabled his radio to keep it from the Germans. He then used his explosives to destroy an electrical sub-station in St Come Du Mont. His action in destroying the sub-station added to the enemy's confusion and inability to control forces in the area. Beyrle then evaded the Germans until his capture 20 hours later.

**POW XIIA 80213.** The Germans first interrogated then interned Sergeant Beyrle. During his interrogation, he recognized a woman he had seen working near his base in

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England who turned out to be a German spy. He passed this information to his fellow prisoners, one of whom later escaped and carried the information back to England and revealed the source of a serious information compromise.

Since Beyrle had a German surname, the Germans took his dog tags (against the Geneva Convention) and gave them to a German line crosser. They planned for this German soldier, who spoke English, to dress in an American uniform and infiltrate the US positions in order to gain and report intelligence information. However, the German soldier was killed while attempting to cross the lines. Allied soldiers found him dead and wearing Beyrle's dog tags. They reported Joseph Beyrle Killed in Action (KIA) on 10 June 1944 and notified his parents accordingly.

As a POW, Beyrle twice unsuccessfully escaped. During a march between two POW camps, Allied artillery mistakenly fired on the POW column. In the confusion, SGT Beyrle and two other soldiers escaped. He received shrapnel wounds but evaded 16 hours before recapture. The other two soldiers successfully returned to the American lines.

The Germans eventually moved Beyrle to a camp near Krustin, Poland. In this camp, he was a member of the intelligence, security, and escape committee. He and two others cut through the wire in late 1944 – Beyrle's second escape. They sneaked aboard a freight that unfortunately went to Berlin. The soldiers traded their food to a

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German railroad worker in return for hiding in a house on the outskirts of Berlin.

However, the German worker turned them in to the Gestapo instead.

Beyrle was tortured for ten days in Gestapo headquarters in Berlin. During the questioning, interrogators dislocated both his shoulders and fractured his skull. The Gestapo singled Beyrle out for harsher treatment because of his German surname and because he was in the uniform of a paratrooper. The Gestapo considered all paratroopers saboteurs regardless of the situation of their capture. The German Army successfully argued his status as a POW and finally obtained his release and return to the camp.

Beyrle's third escape in January 1944 was successful. He and two other soldiers escaped using the confusion of a fight in the camp yard as cover. The Germans recaptured the other two soldiers soon after the escape. The camp's prisoners knew that the Russians were advancing in Poland so Beyrle decided to travel east rather than attempt to reach the American lines, which were further away to the west. Four days after leaving the camp, he made contact with a Russian mechanized infantry battalion.

**American Comrade.** Beyrle had obvious wounds and still suffered from injuries resulting from his Gestapo torture so the Russians offered to evacuate him through their medical system. Instead, he volunteered to fight with the Russians saying that he planned to visit Berlin to settle old scores. Two days later, as a member of a Russian

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Army tank unit, Sergeant Beyrle helped to liberate the camp from which he had recently escaped. Beyrle remained with the Russian unit as it pushed westward toward Berlin.

Sergeant Beyrle used his communication and demolition training to assist his new comrades. He adjusted and repaired all the unit's radios and taught Russians to maintain them properly. The Russian soldiers were proficient at disabling German land mines and therefore could obtain explosives. However, they had no one with experience in fusing and employing the explosives. Since paratroopers could not carry much of their own demolition materials because of weight, they received training in the use of captured enemy equipment. SGT Beyrle instructed the Russian NCOs in proper demolition techniques.

Beyrle remained with the Russian army unit for two weeks after liberating the prison camp. He was wounded again (in the leg and groin) when Stuka dive-bombers attacked the armored column in which he was riding. While recuperating, he met Soviet Marshal G. K. Zhukov visited and took interest in his story. Zhukov insured Beyrle received the best medical care. He also wrote a letter of instruction to all Russian military forces, which contained orders for them to help Beyrle reach Moscow. The Russian Army evacuated him through its medical system to Moscow and later delivered him to the American embassy.

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**The End of Sergeant Beyrle's War.** American officials at the embassy first arrested Sergeant Beyrle as a spy since he was reported KIA on 10 June 1944. Beyrle returned to the United States in April 1945 and received an honorable discharge due to disabilities on 28 November 1945. Between the time he parachuted into Normandy for the D-Day invasion and arrived at the American embassy in Moscow, the Army reported Beyrle in turn as MIA, KIA, POW, and finally MIA again. His parents held a funeral mass for him on September 17, 1944. In 1946, almost two years to the day after his funeral mass, he married his wife JoAnn in the same church.

In 1953, the Army awarded Technical Sergeant Five Joseph R. Beyrle the Bronze Star for Valor. His United States Army decorations include the following:

The Purple Heart with four oak leaf clusters

The American Jump Wings with three combat stars

The British Jump Wings

The Combat Infantryman's Badge

The POW Medal

The Army Good-Conduct Medal

The American Campaign Medal

The European Campaign Medal with two battle stars and one invasion arrowhead

The World II Victory Medal

The French Croix de Guerre with Palm

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The American Defense Medal

The D-Day Medal and the

Presidential Unit Citation (honor to entire regiment)

**Post-war History.** In Russia, Beyrle was as revered as Audie Murphy was in the United States. He visited as a guest for May Day celebrations. He also toured the site of the prison camp from which he finally escaped in Poland. This month, Russian filmmakers toured Currahee, GA to shoot film for a documentary on his life.

During the 1995 celebration of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary V-E Day, President Clinton invited Sergeant Joseph Beyrle to a joint ceremony at the White House with Russian President Yeltsin. The ceremony honored Russian and American veterans of WWII. During the ceremony, President Yeltsin presented Beyrle with four Russian military decorations; the Order of the Red Star, the Order of the Great Patriotic War, the Medal of Valor (Armored Forces), and the Russian equivalent of the Purple Heart. He subsequently received the Marshal Zhukov Medal, the Russian Victory over Germany Medal, and the 50th Anniversary of the Victory over Germany Medal.

Sergeant Josef R. Beyrle of Company India, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 506<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment died on December 12, 2004 of congestive heart failure in a hotel room in Toccoa, Ga., the small town where he had trained as a Currahee in 1943. He was 81 years old and was in Toccoa to speak to school and veterans groups and to

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promote a book about his life by Thomas H. Taylor, the son of General Maxwell Taylor, who commanded of the 101<sup>st</sup> during the Normandy invasion.

**Conclusion:** Sergeant Joseph R. Beyrle was an exceptional non-commissioned officer. He acted decisively on D-Day even when it became obvious that he would not be able to complete his primary mission. As a POW, he was tenacious in his attempts to escape. With the Russian Army, he integrated himself into his unit's combat operation and used his considerable skills as a soldier to improve the unit's combat efficiency.

Joe Beyrle was a member of what Tom Brokaw called the greatest generation. He participated in many events that have made this country great. Born in 1924, he grew up during the great depression, served his country with valor as a member of its Armed Forces, and after the war contributed to the nation's success. Beyrle worked for 28 years at Brunswick Corp in Michigan, where he retired in 1981 as shipping supervisor. He remained active in veteran's organizations including the 101<sup>st</sup> and 206<sup>th</sup> veterans associations.

Joe's wife JoAnn survives along with two sons, one daughter and several grandchildren. His son John is the Deputy Chief of Mission at the United States Embassy in Moscow. Technical Sergeant Five Joseph R. Beyrle was buried in

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Muskegon, Michigan. On April 22 of this year, the Army will transfer his remains from Muskegon to Arlington National Cemetery for reburial with full military honors.

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