



During a weekend of high winds and intermittent showers, a few minutes of what could be perceived as divine intervention offered calm winds and a green light. The jumpers took advantage of this opportunity to honor the World War Two Veterans of the 517th PRCT, the original "Battling Buzzards". Photo (left): Trey Carroll



Photo: Greg Morehead

# Battling Buzzards and the

# Black Sparrow

A Living History Tribute

Story by **Greg Morehead**



**W**ARBIRD DIGEST photographers **Greg Morehead** and **Trey Carroll** had a rare opportunity to travel to St. Louis for the annual reunion of the 517th Parachute Regimental Combat Team, *The Battling Buzzards*; and to record the efforts of the Great Lakes Wing of the CAF and the Commemorative Airborne Jump Team.





▲ (top-left) Corey Mace, co-founder of the CAJT, has his parachute checked by the team's master rigger, Mel Tilley.  
Photo: Greg Morehead

▲ (middle-left) A pre-launch prayer. Standing from Left: Don Roof, Alex Fulle, Josh Kaye, Lucas Vinyard, Matt Crosoli, Corey Mace, Brandon Vinyard. Kneeling: Justin Moody.  
Photo: Trey Carroll

For thousands of years man has used storytelling to pass on traditions and clan history, and to honor the deeds of great ancestors. Great storytellers never rely solely on words. Today, storytellers abound at public events, reminding us of our rich heritage as Americans. To the average American maybe the least known are the many World War Two re-enactors who find airshows a prime outlet for their brand of storytelling. Just as warbird lovers believe that a Mustang sitting under roof in a museum loses some of its meaning, so too do re-enactors believe that a uniform in a closet loses its ability to spark the imagination about what the patches and ribbons really represent, which include duty, honor, sacrifice, camaraderie, and more.

Why are World War Two re-enactors attracted to airshows? Review the history books and see if you can find any World War Two battles in which aircraft didn't play a role! Where the warbirds congregate—that's the place for these modern storytellers. Together they tell a more complete

story about our clan...Americans. It's fitting that a new era of living history seeks to tell the story of the people we now call "The Greatest Generation".

Arguably the most passionate re-enactors actively demonstrating the story of the airborne soldiers of World War Two is the Commemorative Airborne Jump Team (CAJT), a relatively new group of young, devoted individuals. Co-founders Corey Mace and Teri Marrone, have assembled a team that looks, acts, and performs to the standards of the young eager men of the US Army's airborne units. The reason they place authenticity at the top of their priority list is not self-glorification, rather they want to accurately represent the veterans they honor and portray. As co-founder Corey Mace said, "I want the public and most of all the veterans to see we take the extra steps to recreate as close as possible everything they did and had. I tell people, when they are all gone we are what's left to tell their story correctly, and we at least owe them that."





Necessary to the pursuit of their mission are the CAF and other owners of World War Two vintage C-47s. Through this partnership the legacy of the paratroopers of World War Two lives on. *The Black Sparrow*, a C-47 which belongs to the Great Lakes Wing of the CAF, along with its experienced and passionate crew, welcome the opportunity to work with the CAJT, because through their partnership the story of *The Black Sparrow* can be brought to life. This codependency is unique in the world of warbirds and re-enactors, and thank God it is, because what they do together is awesome.

Douglas C-47 N227GB was restored by the Great Lakes Wing of Gary, Indiana, which chose to represent the lead ship of the 302nd Squadron, Troop Carrier Command, 9th Air Force during the D-Day invasion of Europe. Bob Bos, pilot of *The Black Sparrow*, conveyed the story about the plane being named for their pilot, who was called the "Black Sparrow" due to his affinity for wine, women and song!

Asked about the demand for re-enactment jumps, and about the logistics involved Bob Bos noted: "We're getting more requests for jumps all the time. In 2008 we booked about five jumps. Our C-47 is extremely desirable to jump teams, not only because the aircraft is painted in an authentic scheme and have the original static line jump cable, but also because we're uniquely equipped to communicate with the people on the ground during the coordination of the jump. We've worked with the Commemorative Airborne Jump Team several times and I think they're very cooperative and professional. When we're booked for a static line jump we appreciate a sharp group of jumpers. Preparing for a jump involves performing a thorough pre-flight and holding an in-depth briefing with the jump master and other members involved with planning the jump. It's always gratifying to work with commemoration events in addition to other airshows."

The rosters of World War Two veteran organizations are waning but those left carrying the torch still

▲ (top) Just before climbing into the *Black Sparrow* the team gathers for a photo. Left to Right: Corey Mace, Brandon Vinyard, Matt Crosoli, Don Roof, Mel Tilley, Justin Moody, Josh Kaye, Alex Fulle, Lucas Vinyard. Photo: Trey Carroll

◀ (op-right) Matt Crosoli kneels to help tie Josh Kaye's M1 Carbine securely to ensure he lands with his weapon. Photo: Greg Morehead





▲ (left) Adrenaline and anticipation builds as the jump masters commands.

Photo: Trey Carroll

▶ (top-right) Lucas Vinyard stands in the door, eager to jump.

Photo: Greg Morehead

▶ (bottom-right) Looking every bit the part, Lucas Vinyard stands ready.

Photo: Trey Carroll

carry the passion for their unit, their brothers in arms, and their memories. One must wonder if veteran groups with the tightest bonds are those whose members shared the greatest sacrifices together. The 517th Parachute Regimental Combat Team (PRCT) and units assigned to it, have a legion of veterans who are devoted to their unit to this day. It's not surprising when one considers the amount of combat these soldiers saw in Europe.

The 517th PRCT was created in March 1943, trained at Camp Taccoa, Georgia, and served in Europe. They were originally slated to be the 517th PIR, however they were instead combined with the 460th Parachute Field Artillery Battalion and the 596th Parachute Combat Engineering Company. Compared to the much larger airborne divisions, they were a smaller fighting force of approximately 2,500 men. Together the men of the 517th PRCT, known as *The Battling Buzzards*, endured some of the fiercest fighting in Europe. Their major battle campaigns included Italy, Southern France

(Operation Dragoon), the Ardennes (Battle of the Bulge), the Battle of the Hurtgen Forest, and the final push through Germany.

In June of 2008 the annual reunion of the 517th PRCT Association gathered in St. Louis, MO, along with the 517th's Auxiliary group, which is comprised of devoted family and friends. The pinnacle event scheduled for their reunion was a special commemorative jump, performed specifically for them by the CAJT and *The Black Sparrow*. The jump was in great doubt as the flooded Mississippi gobbled up the airport and jump zone. Teri Marrone and Corey Mace called or visited every other airport within reasonable driving distance of the veterans' reunion, but to no avail. None were ready and willing to host the team. But, the first of several divine things happened that week. As they pulled into the parking lot of their last possible location, a small and often overlooked local airport, Corey looked at Teri and said "This is it. This is the airport we're going to jump at."



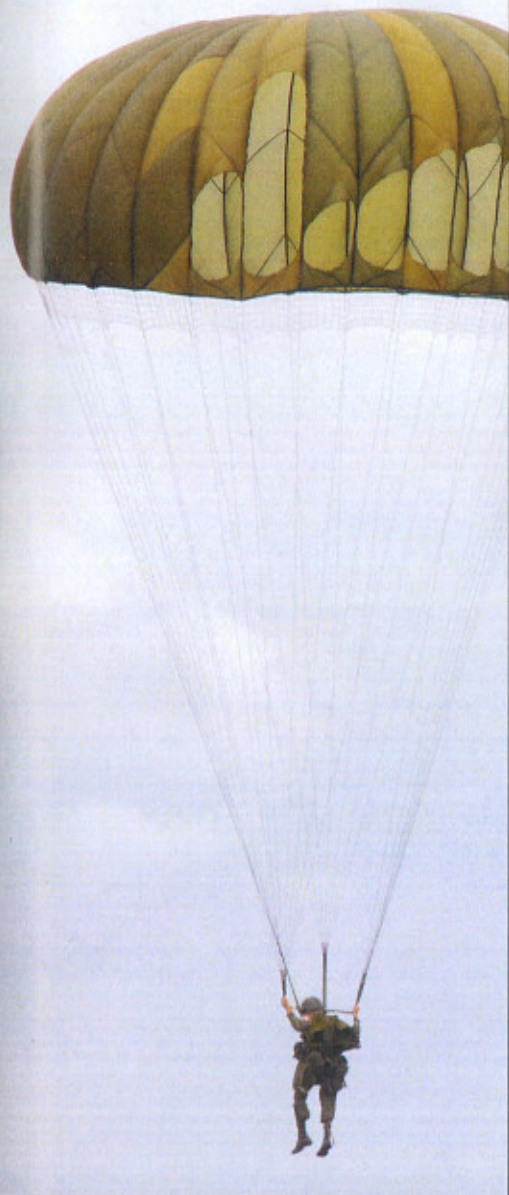


Photo: Greg Morehead



Dennis Bampton of St. Charles Airport (3SQ) confirmed Corey's belief with his reply to their plea for help. "No problem!"

There were two jumps planned for the weekend. The first jump was dedicated to Warbird Digest—a practice jump, for the cameras. Sunday was the jump dedicated to the veterans. Saturday evening Dale Hoffman, photo aircraft pilot, briefed with Corey Mace, jump master Roger Wolf, and the C-47 pilot Bob Bos. The maximum wind velocity for a safe static line jump is about 13 or 14 miles per hour and the winds were gusting over 30. But, the jump team wanted to give the magazine the footage it wanted as well as get another jump in for the weekend, and they were confident they would get at least the most experienced four jumpers out the door. The two airplanes took turns accelerating down the bumpy 50'x3451' runway, first the Warbird Digest photo plane, then *The Black Sparrow*. Jump Master Roger Wolf dropped his streamers as the *Sparrow* turned an assertive left turn so he could watch them fall to

the ground as the ground controllers reported wind velocities. Responsible for the welfare of his men, and with his US Army Special Forces experience and training, Roger was forced to scrub, which was at odds with the adrenaline charged "let's go" attitude of his troopers. It's interesting what a young, aggressive, pumped-up person is willing to do, and it's a perfect example of why wars are fought by young men. Corey Mace explained, "We were energized and ready to go. Roger had us up and connected, and all that was left to do was GO! But the ground reports indicated unsafe winds. I was so mad I removed my helmet and threw it to the floor. It's amazing how much you psych yourself up. We hate landing in the airplane! My feelings were simple. I'm there to jump and on the plane. I'm ready to go and do my job, when suddenly it's a no go. I didn't like it at all, and I hope I don't have any more of those in my career. We can only jump if weather and the good Lord permit. It's the way it was for the veterans, the way it is in today's airborne, and the way it is for us."

▲ (above photo's)  
As veterans stand tall and look skyward from the ground below the jumpers exit the door of the *Black Sparrow*.  
Photo's: Trey Carroll





▲ (main photo) Having successfully unloaded their airborne cargo, pilots Bob Bos and Leigh Smith enter a turn over the still flooded fields near the Mississippi River. Photo: Greg Morehead

(inset photo) The *Black Sparrow* crew: John Kowal, Bob Schickel, Bob Bos, Leigh Smith, and Tony Mireles. Photo: Greg Morehead

The forecasted winds for Sunday were no better, and the chatter among pilots about the probability of a jump was pessimistic. But, the jump team—they didn't see it that way. Teri Marrone shared this: "On Saturday after the scrubbed jump I personally witnessed our three senior jumpers approach the drop zone safety officer and say, "We're going to jump for the vets tomorrow. We will."

Two large motor coaches pulled into the airport and alas they had arrived. Everyone was eager to see the veterans of the 517th PRCT. Veterans and family members made their way to the CAJT and *The Black Sparrow*. A few vets kept a distance and seemed solemn, as if possibly reminiscing—taken back to places only they could go. The expressions of the vets and their families were priceless. It was great fun to witness the connections being made.

Corey Mace shared his thoughts: "It is a very special feeling when a veteran comes and says, 'You guys bring me back to my youth!' It brings tears to my eyes, and when I see an eighty-five

year old man suddenly turn into a twenty year old airborne soldier. I've seen it with my own eyes where a World War Two airborne veteran suddenly picks up his walking cane and stands straight up and starts to strut like he did back in 1943. They stare at you and then start smiling and tugging on their buddy's cuff saying 'Look at this one Hal, he looks like you did!' You have to witness this to totally understand it and grasp what I'm trying to explain. I have seen veterans walk up to team members and touch something and give a whole story on a simple piece of gear. They remember the tiniest details and have stories to go along with them. It's awesome."

"The bayonet story—It's one of my favorites. At the 2007, 517th National Reunion Jump in Manassas, VA a veteran walked up to Lucas Vinyard, one of our members, and started looking him over real good. The veteran started to comment on how good the young man looked and how he reminded him of himself before he boarded his C-47 for the Dragoon jump back in 1944. The veteran continued to look





the young soldier over and noticed his bayonet on one side of his cartridge belt. The veteran smiled, touched the scabbard and stated, 'I had mine over here' as he pointed to the other side of the young jumper's cartridge belt. Right then and there, the jumper unhooked his bayonet and hooked it directly to the very spot the veteran had pointed to. The veteran looked at the young jumper and had a smile from ear to ear. That's what it's all about!"

From a distance a rain cloud moved in, bearing straight for the airfield, which forced the entourage indoors. Between squalls the two aircraft departed and orbited to wait for a clearing. The ground safety officer was reading off wind speeds and direction and it was not encouraging at all. "15 miles per hour... 16 miles per hour..." It was a repeat of Saturday, except Sunday included rain! Ten minutes of flying circles and the rain exited stage right. Bob Bos took the team over the field and began his left turns as the streamers fell earthward. The C-47 leveled out for a bit then turned in for the jump run. Roger Wolf looked to the target from the open jump door, talking

to Bos in the cockpit, giving him corrections to the drop zone. From the ground "six miles per hour, five miles per hour..." In no time four jumpers were out the door and the C-47 repositioned for a second run with the remaining troopers. "two miles per hour. Repeat we are reading two miles per hour. <chuckle over the radio>" Out the door the second stick went. As the aircraft entered the pattern for landing, the winds resumed their clip. It was another case of divine intervention. These precious veterans were not meant to be disappointed today.

Teri Marrone described the scene from the ground: "My eyes watered because the rain kept preventing veterans from standing outside. They'd keep going back to their buses and relax until something happened. Well, let me tell you, when that plane took off with eight jumpers and the jump master, all those vets started running...you hear me! They started running alongside the runway to see that C-47 rumble off the ground. I stopped and turned to see the families trying to keep up with them, with some asking them to slow down!"

◀ (left-top & bottom) The cabin and cockpit of the *Black Sparrow*. She might not win an awards for beauty, but with dependability the *Black Sparrow* serves her dedicated and experienced crew. Photo: Greg Morehead

▲ (top-right) The *Black Sparrow* on a pre-jump pass to drop streamers for wind drift analysis. Photo: Trey Carroll

▶ (bottom-right) Between jump flights the crew of the *Black Sparrow* catered to eager St Louis residents who signed up for a flight experience. Photo: Greg Morehead





Two jumpers approach the DZ for an on-target landing.  
Photo: Trey Carroll



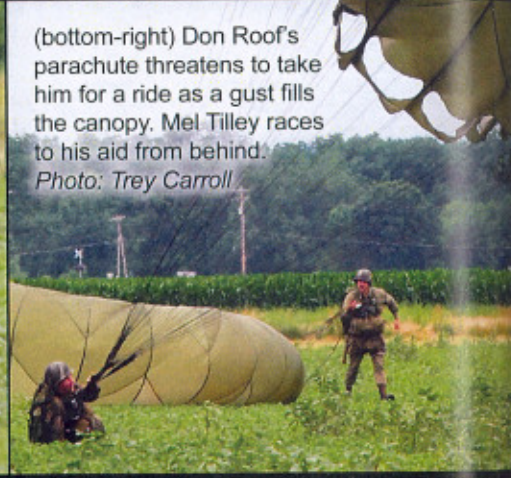
Pilots Bob Bos and Leigh Smith are seconds from lifting off from a bumpy, narrow runway and into smooth air with a load of passengers.  
Photo: Greg Morehead



(bottom-left) Josh Kaye checks his M1 Carbine (foreground) and Matt Crosoli checks his gear (background).  
Photo: Greg Morehead



(bottom-right) Don Roof's parachute threatens to take him for a ride as a gust fills the canopy. Mel Tilley races to his aid from behind.  
Photo: Trey Carroll



(bottom-middle) Don Roof, the oldest member of the CAJT, and an 82nd Airborne Division veteran, looks towards his canopy. Jumping most of his adult life, Don indicated this might be his retirement jump.  
Photo: Trey Carroll

(op-middle) CAJT member Don Roof enjoys a friendly chat with 517thPIR veteran Richard Wheeler.  
Photo: Greg Morehead

In the analysis of the success or failure of the effort, who better to say whether it was an accurate and honorable depiction than the original paratroopers? Certainly their standards are not easily met. Richard H. Wheeler, B-Bty 460th FAB assigned to the 517th, shared his thoughts:

"With the rainy and windy weather conditions, I felt they performed excellently, earning an A+. I personally believe that something like this on the part of the airborne paratroopers of the past played during World War Two, is excellent. As for the memories of sixty-plus years ago, this jump reinstilled what we were like at one time. The thought of loading up and leaving the plane and hitting the ground brought back pains and joys. Pains of landing—the joys of having actually jumped and not frozen in the door. For those of us who were jumpers, in our mind's eyes we went through the experience again with those jumping for us. In our hearts and minds we followed their actions as if they were up there with them. We saw

ourselves in the plane getting ready to jump. The jump re-enactments will not be forgotten. I even wrote two pages about the jump at St. Louis when I got home. This jump will be in my writings for my family to read—in time."

One of the most respected members of the 517th PRCT Association, retired Lt. General Dick Seitz, who during World War Two led the Second Battalion as a Major, had this to say:

"I was highly impressed with all the young men who performed. They did all the things necessary to give the demonstration real meaning. I had considerable face-to-face interaction with all the jumpers and told them how great they are. Their performance was very accurate. I was very impressed with the group and feel they make a profound contribution to keeping alive the legacy of some truly great soldiers."

"I thought it was so important to have the CAJT perform. They forge a link between today and



Commemorating a successful jump and a successful reunion, the members of the CAJT pose with their heroes, the veterans of the 517th Parachute Regimental Combat Team. *Photo: Greg Morehead*



517thPIR vets Darrell Egner, Mel Dahlberg, and Leo Dean take a quick photo break as they "inspect" CAJT member Justin Moody. *Photo: Greg Morehead*



the past heroic paratroopers of World War Two. These re-enactor teams provide an accurate and vigorous vision of the actions of many of our veterans and provide a link from the fathers, grandfathers, and uncles to the present generation. I think it is a real tribute to these young men and women who provide these re-enactments, with very limited resources and a lot of their own time, to create this invaluable link and tribute to our World War Two paratroopers. I personally was impressed with the accuracy, appearance and attitude of these re-enactors. And I don't want to minimize or neglect the people flying the C-47s. They are to be commended for continuing their service to this present generation.

On a personal note, seeing the paratroopers pre-jump stand up and inspection and seeing the expressions on their young faces, I could see and feel in these young men, myself, waiting for a call to load up. I had the same feeling of exhilaration to see these young men as they jumped, and I feel they were experiencing that same exhilaration that I experienced over sixty years ago. It was truly a thrill watching these young men make that jump under marginal conditions. I and my family were very grateful for their outstanding performance." 🇺🇸



The *Black Sparrow* enters a turn with the CAJT aboard, waiting for a wind reading from the ground, hoping all signs indicate good jump conditions.

*Photo: Greg Morehead*

(middle-right) Lucas Vinyard of the CAJT accepts a friendly gesture from 517th PIR veteran Manny Ventoza of Seattle, WA. Manny picked up Lucas' helmet for him, followed by a heartfelt handshake. *Photo: Greg Morehead*