



CH Interview with Robert M. Murphy

82nd Airborne Normandy Combat Veteran from 'A' Company, 505th P.I.R.

505 RCT patch



CH interviewer Ray Tapio caught up with A Company, 505th P.I.R. combat veteran Robert M. Murphy for a July 20, 1998 interview. Bob is the former President of the 82nd Airborne Division's Veterans Association and recently agreed to have his memoirs, *NO BETTER PLACE TO DIE*, published by Critical Hit.

RT: How did the bridge come to be named "Kellam's" bridge?

RM: After the airplane was in there (*the C-47 at the Ste. Mere Eglise museum. Ed.*) I said to Bob Constans, a friend of mine and a former French resistance fighter, 'we ought to name that bridge there'. If you go around the country, everywhere, there are plaques naming bridges and such. We dedicated the spot back in 1989, a whole formation of 82nd fellows, including the commanding general of the 82nd was there. So we had already dedicated that spot with a marble marker. There was a good reason. The big battle was at La Fiere. There really was no other battle like it in Normandy, except maybe St. Lo and Omaha Beach. Our options were to pull out or stay there and not let the Germans to get through to Utah Beach via that bridge. (*We think this is the battle mimicked in the movie "Saving Private Ryan", with the paratroopers holding the bridge at the climax of the film. Ed.*)

RT: Where is the Iron Mike statue on our game map?

RM: Right here (*gestures to hex AA13*).

RT: In addition to the moniker Kellam's Bridge, I understand the battleground around La Fiere has had another memorial dedicated.

RM: The causeway was renamed Marcus Heim, Jr. Causeway at the dedication of the La Fiere Iron Mike statue. Incidentally, that statue was finally got on the pedestal the night before the June 6, 1997 dedication ceremony. Heim

manned a bazooka during the big German tank attack on June 6th.

RT: The night before? That's close!

RM: Six O'clock, the night before. The original Iron Mike is down in Fort Bragg. When we originally started doing this project, which was done by the French Association des Ami Veterans Americain, it was only about four or five years ago that they started getting enthused for it. It was going to cost them a great deal of money, so General Norton (Lieut. General Jack Norton, ret.) told the Brigadier, 'you're spending too much money on the statue with the parachute coming off, you really don't need that'. What you do is something like the Iron Mike down at Fort Bragg.

RT: So that was the beginning of a second Iron Mike being placed at La Fiere?

RM: Yeah. It was going to be a paratrooper with a tommy-gun and a parachute. As if he had just landed. The way the project started out was that we were going to put that C-47 you see on the wall there, that is the one now in the Ste. Mere Eglise museum. It's an original D-Day aircraft (*serial #42-100825*). That's the wine bottle my wife used to christen it. Incidentally, I made my last jump out of that at the 20th anniversary of D-Day in 1964. We spent seven years and a great deal of time and effort to return that aircraft to World War II specifications. That was the start of the Iron Mike statue, too. We did the plane and then got involved in the statue.

Robert was interrupted at this point by an incoming phone call from a newspaper reporter with The Boston Herald seeking veteran's comments about the blockbuster movie, "Saving Private Ryan" about to be released at the time of the interview.

RT: Can you place yourself on the La Fiere battlefield for our readers?

RM: During the attack, the first attack on the morning of D-Day. sixth June, A Company assembled almost to a man. I was not there at that time because I was a pathfinder. Just to give you an eye-witness observation, I was not there until daylight in the morning (*of June 6*) when Mike Chester, my Platoon Leader in A Company, the 1st Battalion 505 pathfinder (there were three pathfinders per aircraft). Chester sent me down about daylight after hearing all the firing going on. We were still in the dropzone, which was relatively easy. There wasn't much going on up there. So I came down, crossed over the railroad bridge and followed the sound of the guns. I got down there and found John "Red Dog" Dolan, down at that corner by that field (*hex DDS*). At that time he told me McGinity was dead and we



Murphy in 'war-paint' at 8:30 PM on June 5, 1944, before boarding for the Pathfinder drop into Normandy.

were still under attack. There was still firing going on. So I told Dolan, 'I'm going back, I've got to tell Lieut. Chester.' Dolan said, 'you're not going anywhere, get in that hole over there and just start firing.'

RT: In your memoirs you talk about the death of Major Frederick Kellam. Any additional insight you can give us?

RM: Frank Buck (*another 505, 82nd veteran*) from Washington State, is in our 505 Association. He was there and gave me a tape on how it happened¹. In Gavin's Book (*On to Berlin*, Bantam Books) he said Kellam was killed that morning² (*the morning of D-Day*). And you can see in my memoirs the letter from John J. Dolan³. Dolan was a very quiet guy and never really gave an account of his experiences until that letter (*a letter dated March 23, 1959 to Robert Murphy*). Here it is forty years later. When I was on the battlefield I saw Kellam and heard McGinity was killed. Gavin has been in this house a few times and his wife is a good friend of mine. Matter of fact I just talked to her the other night. But I'm not going to call Gavin and say, 'General, you're dead wrong.'

RT: It's a normal part of the process of writing about military history, to have these disagreements. What other experiences with historians can you share with our readers?

RM: Take Ambrose, a great author and a great guy too. A wonderful man. In some points there, I can see in his book, he had errors in it. But four hundred pages are accurate, and two pages contain something wrong. There are people that call up an author and say, 'that didn't happen.' Reading it sixty years later, who gives a &%\$#. I remember Corny Ryan (Cornelius Ryan, author of *The Longest Day and A Bridge Too Far* that brought him in ongoing contact with American paratroopers), he sat where you are. I remember he came down to our reunion, was almost in tears, and said he wished he could have been a 505 pathfinder.

RT: On a game-related note, did you get a chance to look at the Kellam's Bridge game materials we sent you?

RM: I did. I just got a letter from Ian (*Ian Daghish, game designer and book author*). Incidentally, did you see that article in World War II magazine? I got a letter from that author apologizing. He had the tanks (American tanks) right up at the bridge. (*Chuckles*)

RT: As long as you are bringing up the point of accuracy, do you have any com-

ments on the accuracy of our AGAINST ALL ODDS game map?

RM: The way that your map comes down is fine. There is no problem there (*on our map*). That's fine. You got the turn in the river after it comes under the bridge. This building (*the manoir in hex AA16*) would be a little closer to the bridge. (*Leaning over, examining map as he speaks; building was moved over one hex for game play reasons.*)

RT: We have one hex between the manoir and the bridge for game terms.

RM: I see you can't get that game spot. It doesn't make any difference. There's a barn right here (*motioning to the building in hex Z15*).

RT: Referring to the photograph in your memoirs, our building here (Z15) is this one (*motioning to photo*). We put the barn there in game terms to be able to fire down this road (*motioning to Y1-Z14 road*). Was that the case? Could you fire down that road from the barn?

RM: That's right. Everything that's staring at me right now (*on map*) was there. The front of this house was all blown away on the second day by the artillery (*motioning to the AA15 manoir on-map*).

RT: Our intent is to map the terrain for the proper effect while working within the limitations of a hexagonal grid.

RM: Back to the story. Gavin is running back and forth to La Fiere, to the Chef du Pont bridge, over here (*gestures to our Shanley's Hill map—yet to be released for ATS; Chef du Pont is south of the AGAINST ALL ODDS map terrain*). The only way to get over there was on some trails they discovered. I think he commandeered a jeep.

RT: Gesturing to the Timmes' Orchard map (*the northern portion of the battlefield, released in ASLComp edition only to date*) and "The Secret Ford" at hex GG1 (*east of the Merderet River*). Trails like this?

RM: Right. He was all over.

RT: The burning question about the battle at La Fiere Bridge is covered in your memoirs. For the sake of our readers, did the German tanks ever reach the far bank of the bridge at La Fiere?

RM: They never did. Never!⁴.

RT: But you are aware that accounts differ?

RM: I can tell you how that happened. It was the people at division headquarters. Captain Robert M. Piper (*retired with the rank of Colonel*) who I just spoke to this afternoon, was the regimental adjutant. Piper did all of the typing from



Combining veterans like Bob, tactical-level game cartography, and game scenario cards is one method for ensuring accuracy.

day one. He's a graduate of the University of New Hampshire, a college guy, and a Captain. He has it in the actual 505 report that the Germans crossed over the river. That we had in effect lost our position on the river. And that's dead wrong.

RT: Was this in an After Action Report?

RM: No, during the battle. And he agrees 100% that it was wrong. It's what he was advised. They were, the division and 505 regimental CP, next to each other and further back. Between the railroad bridge and railroad tracks and Ste. Mere Eglise. Quite a distance. So that the Germans have never got across here, see John Dolan's report³. They didn't cross until the morning of the 8th, until we all got out of there. And the 507 and 325 guys come down into there.

RT: Where were the bazooka teams



The author, now a combat veteran seen above in Garibaldi Square, October 1, 1943 at the surrender of Naples.

placed during the fight for Kellam's Bridge?

RM: Right around here (*gestures around Z13-Z14*). Right next to the bridge. And we had a truck, right across the bridge. A low bed trailer truck.

RT: Knocked out on the bridge?

RM: It wasn't knocked out. We pushed it there. After the manoir was taken. This was after Lt. Marr and Schwartzwalder had been by here. Blocked the bridge. Then we placed anti-tank mines on this side of the bridge. Probably every third man carried an anti-tank mine. We carried them in. I used to fly to Syracuse to see Schwartzwalder (*the long time and revered former Syracuse University football coach, National Champions in 1959*) when Jimmy Brown played.

RT: About those German tanks?

RM: Three of them came up and two of them were knocked out. I was right here (*gestures to hex AA15, a rather smart place to be on this battlefield, in terms of ATTS game Masonry cover provided*). They were smaller tanks. Not the Tiger tanks but French ones. They were firing at us. Then Peterson (*Pfc. John D. Peterson, manning a bazooka with assistant gunner Marcus Heim, Jr. on the left*) gets up and fires a Bazooka into the first tank. They were just bouncing off until he got one into it.

RT: In our game system a hit by a bazooka on a Renault tank will likely knock it out.

RM: Bazooka rounds were hitting the tanks and failed to stop them. The first tank was knocked out here (*gestures to*

hex X8). The second one came right up behind him. Then the second one was knocked out. He steered to the left as if he was trying to go around the first one. Then he was hit.

RT: Did the crews get out of these tanks?

RM: No, they were killed. And the third tank. That guy got hit but he backed off and never came back. He may have been hit by the 57mm gun. He just backed up all the way back up the causeway. Of course there were Germans all along here (*gestures to the causeway, hexes Q11-W14*). And they were coming. They were firing at us, machine guns. Prior to the tanks coming up, they hit us with everything you can think of. Mortar rounds, tree-bursts, eighty-eights. Then they were firing at us from their holes, over here (*gestures to R11 and T12*).

RT: Where was the American anti-tank gun during all this?

RM: Right here (*gestures to BB14*). It was firing on the tanks. And then, I think that what happened was they ran out of ammunition. It was 307th Engineer people that were firing that. I was up near the anti-tank gun on the 7th. Up near the curve of the road, there's a gate there (*gestures to hexside DD14-CC14*). And through that gate, at the curve in the road heading back toward Ste. Mere Eglise, we took our dead and wounded into that field. Just drag them up there (*gestures to hex DD14, used as a casualty clearing station*), the dead guys. They'd come down the hill with a Jeep, trying to pick the men up. And if you had just taken somebody back there,

with a lull in the battle. You'd put a guy on a stretcher back there (*gestures to hex CC14, apparently a blind-zone*). They couldn't fire in there. The medics were in the field.

RT: Killed and wounded would be taken to our hex DD14?

RM: Yes. At night.

RT: Good notes on the anti-tank gun.

RM: You could see them firing the 57 up there. They were right out in the open. I think Eliza Star had a machine-gun up there. Him and this other fellow got a Silver Star medal. They were firing right near that particular 57 gun. That was a British gun, you know.

RT: Our original game scenario had the anti-tank gun in CC14, yet you place it in BB14.

RM: They couldn't fire from around that curve. They had to have complete observation. That's actually where the gun was (*gestures to BB14*). They couldn't see Cauquigny because of the trees (*orchards on the game map. Ed.*). The sole purpose of the anti-tank gun on that day was to fire on that bridge (*which it has a clear LOS to from hex BB14. Ed.*).

RT: What about reinforcements?

RM: When the fellows came in from Utah Beach, they brought in tanks and artillery. They were not much good to us. I never saw any friendly tanks.

RT: What about enemy tank reinforcements?

RM: When we had that bitch of a battle on the sixth, the Germans called for troops. The same people that were down there, 505 guys. No 508. The 507 guys were already across. Schwartzwalder got stuck over there in that orchard (*known as Timmes' Orchard*). The fellow that first heard the tanks coming over was on this side on June 6th, near Cauquigny. The fellow says he hears tanks. He had been down in Italy in combat before. See the 507 and 508 and the 101st (*101st Airborne Division. Ed.*) had never been in combat before. They didn't now the sound of a tank. They didn't get these sounds. They didn't know danger. The officers were over here (*west of the causeway*). So this guy came back over the causeway and told Kellam and so forth, at the La Fiere manoir. Before the tanks had come over, the 507 and 508 guys came over and went up to the orchard. Then they heard the tanks. June 6th the tank battle started. The very next battle was the 7th. Mostly infantry. They had tanks too, though. You could see an armored car firing. They were just loaded over here (*gestures to causeway*).



The view looking west across the causeway, taken during a 1997 visit to the battlefield by Ian Daghish. On the left in the photo is the Leroux Manoir house and outbuildings. This area remains as it was that 60+ years ago.



The Leroux *Manoir* house and outbuildings, seen here in 1997, are just as they were in 1944. The blown-out wall near the front door has been repaired.

I remember they had a truck, like the one we pushed across the bridge. Not armed.

RT: And June 7-8? Let's look over the scenario order of battle (*brings out scenario cards and both parties go over OB details*).

RM: June 7th, the very next day, more German tanks came. The third tank that was hit on the 6th retreated. It zig-zagged. I'm not sure if it was a track hit or he was zig-zagging to avoid further rocket hits.

RT: Did the anti-tank gun hit any tanks?

RM: I think so⁵. The guys that were manning the gun were not artillerymen. They were engineers. (*Note: As an option, you may wish to replace the gun crew with a reduced squad*). They took the gun from the 80th AAA, that came in at 4:05 AM. They had Jeeps and cannons. These guys from the 307th may have gotten the gun from a crashed jeep. But every man knew how to fire every gun in the division. The 57mm was a good piece. The 37mm wasn't worth a darn.

RT: This area, the flooded area (*gesturing to marsh in hexes like S16 and U10*). Could you strike out across here on foot? Was it passable?

RM: Yeah. Part of it you could swim or walk. It was about two feet deep. It was totally missed by aerial reconnaissance. All they saw was a damp area. See that down there (*gestures to his backyard, which has a typical Cape Cod inlet and marsh grass*), that's a marsh. Exactly the same as at La Fiere.

RT: Tell us about the Gammon Bomb? How dangerous was it to the guy throwing it?

RM: The Gammon *grenade*! You throw it like a baseball. Maybe a month and a half ago I was standing by the grave-side of two guys. A Gammon grenade went off at headquarters 1st Battalion,

505, and killed them and wounded about seventeen other guys. It's got a sock around it. You fill the bag with Composition C. All this is a sock. There's a detonator in there. You get the Composition C, like a putty. Pack it in. It has a band of plastic around it. You take the cap off of it. There's a little weight like a little kid's fishing line. You throw it, and bang! It's a very high explosive.

RT: Was there danger to the user of the Gammon grenade during action?

RM: No. Unless you were too close to it. You'd want to be 15-20 feet away at least. When you throw it, you'd hit the ground because something was coming back at you.

RT: So there was an element of danger?

RM: There *was* some small element of danger. Not very much. It could happen. If you had it in your pocket or were playing with it with the cap off. You didn't throw one unless you were close to something. You'd use them against tanks. They'd crack a tank tread. They were good for blowing a door open and we used them like that. If you threw one against the turret of a Tiger tank it would be like a firecracker going off (laughs).



The Airborne returns to the tac-sim battlefield courtesy of Critical Hit and artist Alan Archambault (above). The 505 RCT patch (below).

Footnotes:

1. Audio tape from Francis C. Buck account of combat at La Fiere bridge. Buck places Kellam at the La Fiere battlefield twenty minutes after the shelling that followed the tank attack. "Major Kellam told me that a friend of mine had been killed that morning off to the left of us. I turned and headed toward the body when a mortar round or 88 hit. Major Kellam died then. Captain Roysden was hit and died the next day."

2. On page 108 of *On to Berlin*, it reads, "...the battalion commander, Major Frederick Kellam, was attacking the bridge with the leading company. I learned shortly thereafter that he had been killed in the attack and that the battalion had been taken over by the Executive, Major James McGinity."

3. Letter to Robert Murphy by John J. Dolan dated March 23, 1959. Dolan describes Kellam's role in the fighting during the first German tank attack on the La Fiere bridge, "My two bazooka crews called for more ammunition. Major Kellam ran up toward the bridge with a bag of rockets followed by Captain Roysden. When they were within 15 or 20 yards of the bridge, the Germans opened up with mortar fire on the bridge. Major Kellam was killed and Captain Roysden was rendered unconscious by the concussion. He died later that day."

4. *ibid.* In Dolan's second p.s., he states, "The most glaring inaccuracy is about the bridge being lost. For the record, this bridge was held by Company "A" from the time of its capture on D-Day, until we were relieved."

5. *ibid.* Dolan's account agrees with this point, "The 57mm during this time was firing and eventually knocked out the last tank."



The first post-war civilian jump to the Ste. Mere Eglise battlefield by 82nd AB D-Day veterans Bob Murphy (right) and John F. Lee (middle in photo).