ROBERT MASON MATHIAS

A FEW COMMENTS BY THOSE WHO KNEW HIM BEST
THE MEN OF THE 508th PARACHUTE INFANTRY REGIMENT



Bob was born, November 9, 1915 and was named Robert Mason Mathias (Patrick was his confirmation name). He was the second child in a family of three sons and three daughters. He grew up in Washington, D. C. and attended Central High School (now Cardoza H. S.) and Wilson Teachers College (now defunct). He attended Sacred Heart Church.

Bob began boxing while in high school and earned an excellent reputation in the Washington, DC area. He won the National Welterweight Title in the Hearst All-American amateur in 1937 (they preceded the Golden Gloves). Bob later turned pro, won his first two fights but decided to retire soon after taking a job with The Washington Post as a commercial artist. He was concerned that he might injure his hands.

Bob joined the Marine Reserves, transferred to the National Guard and was activated in February of 1941. He applied for O.C.S. and later asked for the paratroops.

Bob was buried in St. Mere Eglise but was transferred, at the request of his wife, the former Doris Habig of Cumberland, Maryland, to the St. Peters and St. Pauls Cemetery in Cumberland, Maryland in 1949.

WHO WANTS A CASKET MADE OP BRONZE
WROUGHT TO COVER KINGS AND KHANS?
LET THE WORMLING HASTE DECAY,
NEW YOUNG MEN ARE MADE OP CLAY.

I SHOULD HAVE THE UTTER CRUST
TO KEEP MY BULK FROM WORM OR DUST?
GOD MAY NEED MY ASH, YOU SEE,
TO MAKE ANOTHER CHAP LIKE ME!

Written by Robert Patrick Mathias circa 1938-39, while a student either at Central High School, Washington, D. C. (now Cardoza H. S.) or at Wilson Teachers College, Washington, D. C.

Boston Evening American
Tuesday, December 14, 1937
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# AUSTEN LAKE

## Joe Palooka Comes *Through in the* Hearst Fight Finals

OF ALL THE KILN-BAKED KIDS IN the final fights of the Hearst All-America amateurs, the one who took most of the people's fancy was a boy built like a human hairpin with the real-life face of that comic strip character, Joe Palooka. That was Bobby Mathias of Washington who won the welterweight title but looked less like a fist fighter than one who should have been helping his mother mind the kiddies.



AUSTEN LAKE

If you were not one of the 17,000 who packed the Garden, try to picture a kid with flamingo legs and a cellophane skin, ears like the handles on a sugar bowl, a mop of hay-colored hair and a way of compressing his mouth in a perpetual O.

At first Bobby seemed pretty presumptuous to come into the ring with his betters, but when he did not come unhooked in his first collision with a tea-colored Negro named Isaiah Lewis, the crowd stopped being sympathetic and began to root him home with warwhoops.

Bobby did it with his stomach, sucking in his jiblets and letting the blows scud by, or by stretching his neck away. And all the while he kept pecking his opponent silly like a dressmaker punching buttonholes with a bodkin. There wasn't any poison in his punches. He was like a slight case of measles. And so he licked Isaiah and later a hefty and muscular curmudgeon named Earl Dugan of Seattle.

THE WASHINGTON D.C.
BOXING HALL OF FAME, INC,

FIRST ANNUAL AWARDS BANQUET

TOUCHDOWN CLUB — NOVEMBER 27, 1979

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SIXTH JUDICIAL CIRCUIT
OF MARYLAND ROCKV1LLE, MARYLAND

JOSEPH M .MATH I AS
ASSOCIATE JUDGE

April 11, 1968

Dear Mom:

I am enclosing a xerox copy of a most extraordinary tribute to your son, Bob, by a paratrooper who trained under him and who made the Normandy invasion with him. I am sending copies to Justin, Marjorie, Mary Lou and Edwina so that their children will realize what a man of courage and principle Bob was and try to follow his example.

This tribute to Bob came into my possession unexpectedly and in quite an unusual manner. One night about a month ago a Mrs. Florence Cavanaugh called while I was not at home and Marilyn answered the phone. Mrs. Cavanaugh was calling from her home in Woodcliff Lake, New Jersey. She told Marilyn she wanted to talk to me about my brother, Bob, with whom her husband, Harold, had served in World War II. She said her husband, a paraplegic most of his life because of wartime injuries, had died on December 31, 1967, leaving among his papers a letter which I had written him in October, 1946, asking for information about Bob. In their 18 years of married life, she said, because of his terrible injuries, she had encouraged him not to dwell upon the war, and, perhaps for this reason, he had never answered my letter. However, she did want me to know that Harold had been a great admirer of Bob's, and at one time had thought of writing a history of the 508th Parachute Infantry, in which Bob would have figured as one of the great names. Although he never wrote such a history, Harold Cavanaugh, back in the late 1940's, did write the enclosed three single-spaced typewritten pages about Lt. Mathias. Later this remarkable ex-paratrooper, Cavanaugh, despite his being confined to a wheelchair, obtained a degree in English literature and another degree in accounting. He went to work for Esso-Standard Oil, where he worked himself into a very responsible position. Then, in about 1956, because he wanted to have a business of his own, he resigned from Esso and established his own accounting firm. He had been wounded four times during the fighting in France. The last wound was to his spinal column, causing the paralysis of the lower part of his body. He and his wife adopted two children, Virginia who is now 11, and Tommy who is 7.

Several nights later, when I had an opportunity, I returned Mrs. Cavanaugh's call and made arrangements to stop by her home on April 6 when we would be en route back from taking Mark to Camphill Village. Mrs. Cavanaugh and her two children live in a delightful house in a beautiful wooded residential section of New Jersey. Despite his terrible handicap, her husband left her with insurance, social security, pension and a business that had been so successful she was able to sell it for a good price. She turned over to me this copy of her husband's tribute to Bob and told me that there were many other references to Bob amongst her husband's papers which she would, in time, get together and send to me. Her husband was 47 years old when he died. She had been a secretary and had met her husband in a Veterans Hospital in Bronx, New York. They were married in 1949. You can see that she must be something special, too, to have been willing to marry a man who was at the time so badly crippled. Ruth and I took Mrs. Cavanaugh and her two children out to lunch. She and the children are going to be in Washington for a wedding in May. Ruth and I extended an invitation to them to spend a night with us. If possible, of course, I would like for all to meet the Cavanaughs.

Isn't this an unusual happenstance——————the story of a letter written in 1946 and answered 22 years later?
I will see you this weekend.

-with love,
/s/ Joe

# Lt. Mathias

While waiting for an assignment to a platoon in my newly assigned company I heard about the character that I was soon to meet, know and never forget. The old boys of the outfit were giving us the lowdown on our most recently acquired officers. When they got to Lt. Mathias, interest picked up.

Yarn after yarn was reeled off about this man. I heard feats concerning his ruggedness, his fairness and his sincereness. "This boy was combat-minded." they said, and that about epitomized his individuality. They related in great detail of how this man trained himself and his men for the difficult task of jumping behind the German Lines. My mind was incapable, however, of grasping at the time, the extent of the effort exerted by this unique person in his preparation for the ultimate defeat of the Boche.

In questioning me the boys learned that I had boxed and played football. These facts coupled with my Irish heritage were sure to place me in Lt. Mathias' platoon, they said. - They were right.

A few minutes after meeting him, the boys had the gloves on us and I was getting a sample of his ruggedness. The gloves were indicative of some of the rough times they went through with my platoon leader. He had carried them with him from Fort Blanding through the North Carolina and Tennessee manuevers and thence here to Northern Ireland. They were out of shape and it's a wonder I didn’t break my thumb. After a while they accustomed themselves to me and we got along, fine. This fact proved fortunate since they donned my hands many times from then until we jumped in France. Similar to my reflections pertaining to the looey, they will be remembered very affectionately.

As the number of days spent in my new outfit increased, I began to see myself, the tremendous amount of thought and energy this man had put and was putting behind the job that was to begin on D Day and end when the Krouts cried "uncle"

The excellence of the physical phase of his preparedness became most pronounced upon meeting this man. The guy's skin was pulled taut around his large-boned six foot frame. It didn't take a gymnastic expert to discover that Mathias was in the condition that a boxer or football player would like to be in when he enters the ring or takes his stance before the kickoff.

On an intra-platoon competitive hike, we were on the last mile. Things were nip and tuck. To say that every part of us was hurting would be putting it mildly. I was calling on an old infantry saying "you can always take one more step", to keep me going with the terrific pace. Evidently a lad in the platoon had used up all his incentives because he folded up on us. Our Bossman carried him the last three quarters of a mile on his back. Golly, I had seen everything. Boy, I was glad that this man was on my side.

Little things rounded out Mathias' fine character. He had the small gadgets that put over an expensive apartment. When the Lt. said that he would do something for you, it could be considered done; or else Heaven and Hell would be in different places. When it came to censoring the mail, he took extreme pains so that all that he would see were the contents of the missive. If something were written that should not have been, then and only then would he look to see the author of the letter. It was personally taken back to the writer with an explanation of why certain sections should be deleted. After the required corrections, the letter would go merrily on its way. The least time possible was lost and a person always knew what would be read by the addressee.

Any task that he undertook was done correctly; but best of all with the right spirit. Many a dry lecture was made tolerable by his show of enthusiasm and timely witty remarks. As a tactician he was well schooled. Every maneuver from Genghis Kahn to the battle that appeared in today's newspaper was studied and devoured by my platoon leader. However, he was far from a book soldier and tactics of Lee and the like were skillfully varied to suit the hedgerows of England that were similar to those of France. Every now and then he would point something out like, "foxholes will be easy to dig in France. They have ditches along the Hedgerows." England hadn't, or "there will be more covering in France because the hedgerows fit on four feet dirt mounds." When I got to France and saw for myself the important things that Mathias had pointed out, it proved difficult for me to realize that he had never before the jump, been in France.

To best compete against an enemy it is wise to speak their language. Mathias adhered to this belief and followed it implicitly. He could speak German fluently. In order that we might pick up some German, he drilled us using German commands and held classes where he taught useful phrases. French was another important language so he added that to his unlimited

talents. Much of this proved very important to his fortunate platoon.

Lt. Mathias was afraid the Germans might use Gas. We weren't going to be caught flat-footed. He gave us *a* very thorough schooling in vesicants, lacrimators, sternutators and the like. This knowledge later proved useless. However, he wasn't overlooking a single phase of warfare.

Mathias had the philosophy of a chaplain — Live a morally good life here and enjoy an infinitely greater one when you pass on. I have yet to see a coward who truly believed that. He went to church as often as he possibly could and did everything in his power to make church convenient for the men under him. He was mild and considerate. Our company commander once said: "He can hold more than his own with the toughest man alive; yet you won't ever hear him use hell or damn.”

In many of our bull sessions Mathias[1] name would be often mentioned. One time a guy said "Mathias will be 508th's first hero." Another ironically added; "That or he will be 508th's first killed." Little did either know that both statements would be proven true.

The day we had been training for was coming close. We were taken to an airfield, there to lie around and prepare our equipment for the takeoff and jump. It was too late to start cramming as we used to do for an examination. Thanks to Mathias, I felt pretty confident. The boys with whom I was going into battle were good. They would make short work of any outfit that we might meet on equal terms. These guys had the stuff to compensate for the difficulties offered by any operation of this kind. After landing we had the assembling to contend with and even more annoying would be their motor equipment. God, you couldn't carry a tank on your back. That I know because, if there were a possible way, Mathias would have one with him. "

Mathias was leading the other stick so he wasn't going to be in my plane. He came over to shake hands and wish us luck. There was an air of deserved confidence about this grand fellow. We shook hands and he said: "We'll show them. Won't we Irish?" - That was the last time *I* saw him alive.

That night we jumped the Boche really poured it on. The assemble didn't come off as planned. By morning, however, we were in pretty strong groups. The gang I hooked up with decided to take the town which was our platoon mission. On the way, we found Mathias dead, - still in his chute. My God, how could those Krauts be fortunate enough to kill this man before he turned his unlimited talents towards their destruction? That was D Day, and as everyone knows their luck ran out on them from that day on.

Different incidents indicated to me that I was not the only one who had been greatly impressed by Mathias. Every time we ran into something tough, like a well-placed machine gun, a guy was sure to remark: "Too bad Mathias isn't with us." One time while we were eating some pumpernickel bread and cheese taken from a converted Jerry who would have no more use for such food, a buddy expressed my thoughts. "Mathias would sure like this German bread."

Mathias' stick was nearly completely wiped out. As far as we could understand, he was just killed in his chute. However, there was more to it than that.

It wasn't until a year later that I found out what had really happened. A chap in my platoon who had been wounded, taken prisoner and later liberated by the Russians told me the true story. He visited me at the Veterans' Hospital and we naturally began to gab about the old gang.

Mathias' name naturally came up. When it did my visitor said: "'Oh yes, he was quite a guy. Do you know that he was hit with a burst of flak as he stood in the door? He was knocked over, but he got to his feet and, when the light shone green, he led the stick out the door."

That was Mathias all right. He was finished but there were fifteen guys behind him (not to mention the other plane load which he had trained) and he wasn't going to deny them the opportunity to strut their stuff.
My memory reverted to my previous bull-session. Mathias, that extra ordinary character, was not only 508th first killed; he was definitely our first hero.