



## Surface to Air

**Just down the road from Currahee Club, the site of the 2004 Southern PGA CPC, sits Currahee Mountain, where a special group of young men trained during World War II before taking to the skies to help save their country.**

Stephens County Historical Society volunteer Ray Ward poses near the paratrooper exhibit that has attracted visitors worldwide. (Photo: Bob Denney)

By Bob Denney, PGA.com Contributor

[2004 Southern PGA CPC Official Site](#)

TOCCOA, Ga. -- The words come tumbling out of Ray Ward in staccato-like precision, almost as if he is back in uniform, keeping in step with his platoon as it marches to the bark of a drill sergeant.

But there is no drill sergeant present at the Stephens County Historical Museum, just memories and countless photos and souvenirs on walls and in exhibit cases, plus a life-size model of a World War II paratrooper. The model, in full gear, reminds visitors about a special group of young men who once trained a few miles away and ended up saving a country.

They were the men of Easy Company, a small segment of the 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment, who were activated at Camp Toccoa on July 20, 1942. The newly constituted parachute unit would take the motto, "Currahee," which is the Cherokee word for "stand alone."

Today, Currahee Mountain continues to dominate the skyline as it stands sentinel in the lower reaches of the Blue Ridge Mountains of northeastern Georgia. Currahee also is the name of a street that winds northwest through Toccoa.

And it is the name of a challenging and distinctive golf course, Currahee Club, which lies some 20 minutes east of the 1,000-foot mountain.

Golfers can pause on the back nine of Currahee Club and see Currahee Mountain, with its 3 1/2-mile trail that once was the grueling path on which Easy Company's members ran to prepare for an eventual date with D-Day.

"I was 12 years old when Camp Toccoa was opened," said Ward, now 71, and whose descendants have lived at the base of the mountain since 1784. "Our family roots go deep here. I've always enjoyed living here."

The link between Currahee Mountain and the World War II paratroopers was immortalized by author Stephen F. Ambrose's memorable "Band of Brothers" and in 2001, when director Stephen Spielberg, producer Ivan Schwarz and actor Tom Hanks collaborated to produce an HBO series based on the book.

"The movie premiere was a big thing for this town, and a really special time," said Ward, an Army veteran during the Korean War. "Last week, we had a re-enactment of the paratroopers out at the airport, and we had a great time getting more people interested in the story behind Currahee. The visitors here have been amazing. One visitor from Normandy came in last week."

Currahee remains the word that 101st U.S. Airborne paratroopers yell today when they jump from a plane.

"When the movie was being made, it was too expensive to use the mountain," said Ward. "So they used animation. HBO set up surround sound to make it all seem real. There were four actors who appeared at the premiere."

There is a new mission that Ward and some 20 volunteers carry on at the museum. They are attempting to raise funds to transport all the museum contents to the Southern Railroad Depot in downtown Toccoa. The plan is for the museum to be positioned alongside the new Welcome Center and the Toccoa Chamber of Commerce.

So far, the Stephens County Historical Society has raised \$10,000 to get out of cramped space in an 1898 Victorian cottage on Pond Street.

The Society needs \$275,000, which would include the \$75,000 cost needed to transport an English stable where the paratroopers lodged while awaiting the D-Day invasion. The initials of many of the veterans are carved into the wood. Stephen Sowerby and his son, of Aldbourne, England, who have been commissioned by Queen Elizabeth to restore antiques, are awaiting the time when they may reassemble the stable in Toccoa.

"We've received donations from many veterans, but we have a long way to go," said Ward. "This museum enhances the tourism of this city and we believe that we have a great cause."

Ward said that there were 20 members of Easy Company alive when "Band of Brothers" was released. Today, there remain 14.

"It would be tremendous if we could bring the museum to its new home and the stable with it, and in time for those remaining soldiers,"

said Ward. "That is something we all are working hard to make happen."

Should you leave Currahee Club and drive through the city and southward on Currahee Street, you find your way back to the mountain.

An Airborne Monument is set on a concrete base that was part of the Camp Toccoa entrance. The monument is dedicated to the memory of the four airborne regiments that trained at the camp during its existence.

The 506th and 501st served with the 101st Airborne in Europe. The 511th served in the South Pacific with the 11th Airborne Division. The 517th became the 517th Combat Team because it not only was composed of paratroopers but also engineers and a battery of artillery. They served in Italy and France.

The left side of the monument has the end of a rifle barrel and a pair of jump boots. This represents the ever-decreasing number of paratroopers living today. The small courtyard that holds the granite markers is in the form of a parachute.

A few 100 yards down the road from the monument is a marker, which Hanks contributed to mark the famed "Sink Trail." It was at this spot where Col. Robert F. Sink led his troops on the grueling training runs up Currahee Mountain.

"That was a treacherous, extremely difficult run up that trail," said Ward. "You can imagine what it was like for those boys. Today, they have a 10K race up and down the mountain."

Sink would later set himself apart as someone who could get his troops to do the improbable while training for battle.

Inspired by a piece in *Reader's Digest* that described a Japanese army battalion's 100-mile, 72-hour march down the Malay Peninsula, Sink went a step further with his men.

Col. Sink decided that his Second Battalion should march from Camp Toccoa to Atlanta -- a distance of 118 miles.

On the morning of Dec. 1, 1942, the battalion set out and completed the march in 33 hours and 30 minutes. A proud Col. Sink told an Atlanta news reporter that "not a man fell out; but, when they fell, they fell face forward."

"They were a special breed," said Ward. "They were brothers, and they were the best."

And when you come to Toccoa, you learn how and why they stood alone.

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