

WWII History:

Editor's Note: Following is an article on a project I personally encourage you to take part in. Even small contributions allow for the continued maintenance of memorials. Such tributes to American citizens and soldiers who died for our country and its' people are very tangible reminders to history of their sacrifice and the ideals they believed in.

The Wereth 11 Remembering the Invisible Soldiers of the Battle of the Bulge

By: Norman S. Lichtenfeld M.D.

Submitted By: Steve B. (3rd Armored)

Few realize that a decisive factor in the defense of Bastogne, during the Battle of the Bulge, rested in the artillery support of the surrounded town. One of the heavy (155mm) artillery units was the segregated 969th Field Artillery Battalion joined by a few howitzers and survivors of the segregated 333rd Field Artillery Battalion. For their actions the 969th FAB received the Presidential Unit Citation, the highest award a military unit can receive. In spite of this meritorious service, participation by Black G.I.'s in the Battle of the Bulge, or for that matter in the Second World War, is not well known or recognized.

Everyone knows of the Tuskegee Airmen and some know of the 761st Tank Battalion and the Red Ball Express. However, the majority of the Black G.I.'s in World War II, 260,000 in the European Theatre of Operations, were not forgotten to history; they were simply never acknowledged. They are the 'invisible' soldiers of World War II. They include eleven young artillerymen of the 333rd Field Artillery Battalion who were murdered by the SS, after surrendering, during the Battle of the Bulge.

The 333rd Field Artillery Battalion was a 155mm Howitzer unit that had been in action since coming ashore at Utah Beach on June 29, 1944. Typical of most segregated units in World War II, it had white officers and black enlisted men. At the time of the Battle of the Bulge, the unit was located in the vicinity of St.Vith, Belgium. Specifically it was northeast of Schonberg and west of the Our River in support of the Army VII Corps and especially the 106th Infantry Division.

On December 16, German artillery began shelling the Schonberg area. With reports of rapid German infantry and armored progress, the 333rd FAB was ordered to displace further west but to leave 'C' Battery and Service Battery in

The snow covered the bodies and they remained entombed in the snow until mid-February when villagers directed a U.S. Army Grave Registration unit to the site. The official report noted that the men had been brutalized, with broken legs, bayonet wounds to the head, and fingers cut off. Prior to their removal an Army photographer took photographs of the bodies to document the brutality of the massacre.



Memorial Site

An investigation was immediately begun with a "secret" classification. Testimonies were taken of the Graves Registration officers, the Army photographer, the Langers and the woman who had been present when the soldiers arrived. She testified that she told the SS the Americans had left! The case was then forwarded to a War Crimes Investigation unit. The investigation showed however that no positive identification of the murderers could be found (i.e. no unit patches, vehicle numbers, etc) except that they were from the 1st SS Panzer Division. By 1948 the "secret" classification was cancelled and the paperwork filed away. The murder of the Wereth 11 was seemingly forgotten and unavenged!

Seven of the men were buried in the American Cemetery at Henri-Chapelle, Belgium, and the other four were returned to their families for burial after the war ended. The Wereth 11 remained unknown, it seemed, to all but their families until 1994. Herman Langer, the son of Mathius Langer, who had given the men food and shelter, erected a small cross bearing the names of the dead in the corner of the pasture where they had been murdered. This private memorial from the Langer family and the rural community of Wereth remained basically obscure. In a tiny hamlet with no school or shops, there were no signs on the roadways to indicate the memorial, and it was not listed in any guides or maps to the Battle of the Bulge battlefield. Even people looking for it had trouble finding it in the small German speaking community.

position to support the 14th Cavalry and 106th Division. By the morning of December 17, these two positions were rapidly overrun by the advancing German troops and armor. While many personnel tried to escape through Schonberg, eleven men of the Service Battery went overland in a northwest direction in the hopes of reaching American lines. At about 3 p.m., they approached the first house in the nine-house hamlet of Wereth, Belgium, owned by Mathius Langer.

The men were cold, hungry, and exhausted after walking cross-country through the deep snow. They had two rifles between them. The family welcomed them and gave them food. But this small part of Belgium did not necessarily welcome Americans as "Liberators." This area had been part of Germany before the First World War and many of its citizens still saw themselves as Germans and not Belgians. The people spoke German but had been forced to become Belgian citizens when their land was given to Belgium as part of the First World War repatriations. Unlike the rest of Belgium, many people in this area welcomed the Nazis in 1940 and again in 1944 because of their strong ties to Germany. Mathius Langer was not one of these. At the time he took the Black Americans in, he was hiding two Belgian deserters from the German Army and had sent a draft age son into hiding, so the Nazis would not conscript him. A family friend was also at the house when the Americans appeared. Unfortunately, unknown to the Langers, she was a Nazi sympathizer.



Memorial Service for the Wereth Fallen

About an hour later, a German patrol of the 1st SS Division belonging to Kampfgruppe Hansen arrived in Wereth. It is believed the Nazi sympathizer informed the SS that there were Americans at the Langer house. When the SS troops approached the house the eleven Americans surrendered quickly, without resistance. The Americans were made to sit on the road, in the cold, until dark. The Germans then marched them down the road. Gunfire was heard during the night. In the morning, villagers saw the bodies of the men in a ditch. Because they were afraid that the Germans might return,

Members of the 333rd Field Artillery Battalion killed at Wereth

- Curtis Adams
- George Davis
- Thomas J. Forte
- Robert Green
- Jim Leatherwood
- Bradley Meagler
- Nathaniel Moss
- George W. Moten
- William M. Pritchett
- James A. Stewart
- Due W. Turner

In 2001, three Belgium citizens embarked on the task of creating a fitting memorial to these men and additionally to honor all Black GI's of World War II. With the help of an American physician in Mobile, Alabama, whose father fought and was captured in the Battle of the Bulge, a grassroots publicity and fund-raising endeavor was begun, and has had modest success. There are now road signs indicating the location of the memorial, and the Belgium Tourist Bureau lists it in the 60th Anniversary "Battle of the Bulge" brochures. Currently three families of the murdered men have been located as well as one of the soldier's gravesites in Camden, Alabama.

Enough money has been raised to purchase the land the current memorial is on and further monies are needed to provide for a modest monument, which can be easily accessed by the public. It is believed that this will be the only memorial to Black G.I.'s of World War II in Europe. The dedication of the memorial is planned for the 60th anniversary year of the Battle of the Bulge in 2004. Your assistance is needed and would be greatly appreciated. All contributions go to the construction and preservation of the memorial. There are no administrative costs.

The goal is to make the Wereth 11 and all Black G.I.'s "visible" to all Americans and to history. They, like so many others, paid the ultimate price for our freedom.

Send donations (U.S. Wereth Memorial) and any information on members of the 333 FAB or their families to:

U.S. Wereth Memorial
c/o Norman S. Lichtenfeld, M.D.
6701 Airport Blvd., Ste B-110
Mobile, AL 36608

E-Mail: Info@Wereth.org

Website: www.wereth.org

Related Links:

- Online Newspaper article:
www.bjmjr.com/ww2/hinson_comm.htm

they did not touch the dead soldiers.

< TOP >

- Online Newspaper article:
www.newsmax.com/commentarchive.shtml?a=1999/2/23/084023

- Listen online to a report on this story from NPR:
www.npr.org/features/feature.php?wfId=1436809

Last Page

Next Page