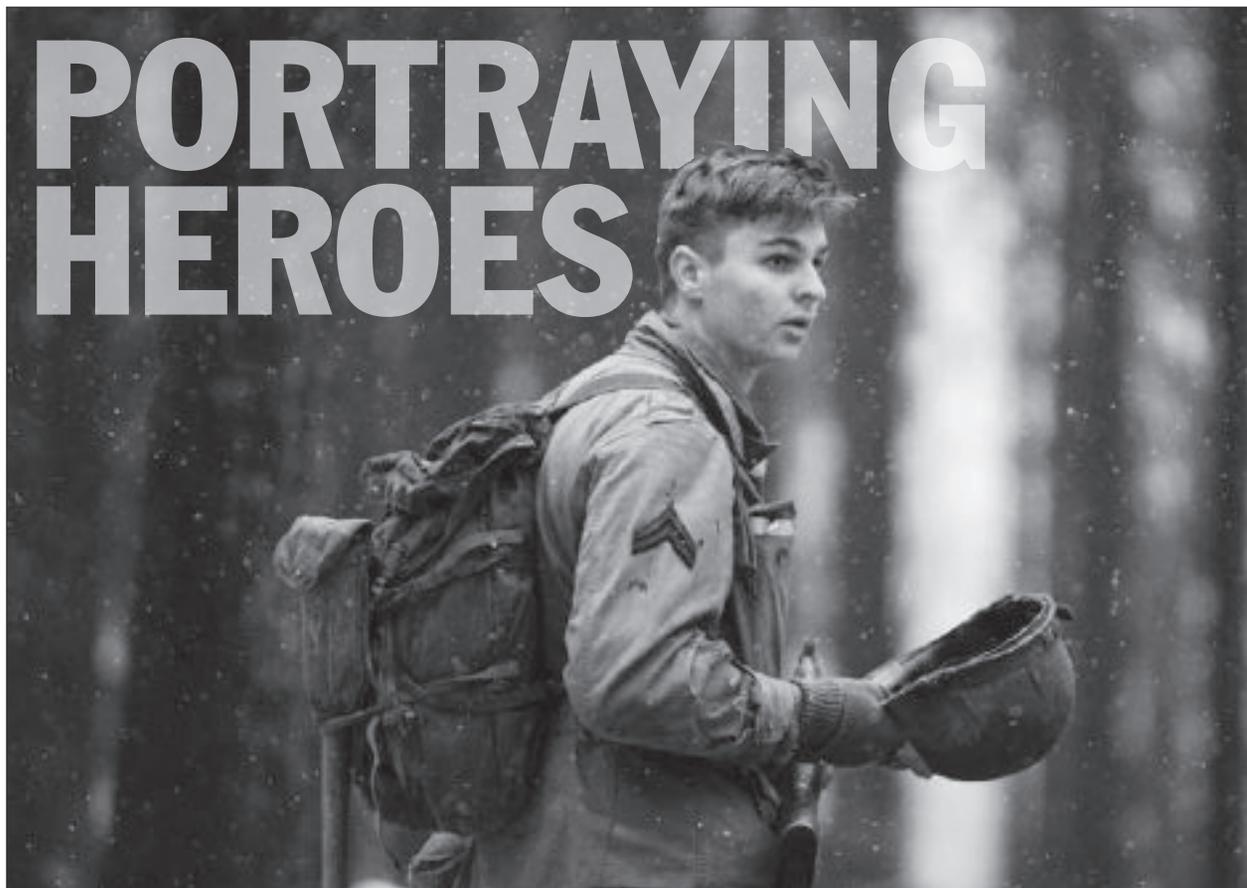


EUROPE

PORTRAYING HEROES



Leonard van Oord takes his helmet off to listen for enemy movement while portraying a squad leader of the 106th Infantry Division as part of a re-enactment Saturday. The 106th fought in the same forest 70 years ago during the Battle of the Bulge.

Re-enactors aim to catch spirit of US WWII troops in Battle of Bulge

By JOSHUA L. DEMOTT'S
Stars and Stripes

ST. VITH, Belgium
Pvt. Edwin Cotter kneels in the cold, wet mud of the Prümberg, a large hill above St. Vith, near the German border, catching his breath as snowflakes float to the ground blanketing the forest around him. Shovels rhythmically break ground and the barking commands of soldiers disturb the otherwise peaceful setting.

"Cotter!" ... schunk ... schunk...
"Use branches for cover, think about camouflage!" ... schunk ...

Soldiers with the 106th Infantry Division begin digging foxholes as they prepare to take their turn on the front lines in the Ardennes Forest. The date is Dec. 13, 2014, yet it feels and looks exactly as it must have 70 years ago when the U.S. and its allies were engaged in war against Nazi Germany. These soldiers are actually re-enactors, mostly from the Netherlands, who commit a lot of time and money to

portray World War II U.S. infantrymen.

‘Those people absolutely look like Americans 70 years ago; it’s amazing what they did out here.’

Herb Shearer
106th Infantry Division veteran of the Battle of the Bulge

Cotter and about 20 others belong to a living-history group called American Patrol and they are the only group out of more than 100 in the Netherlands that portrays infantry divisions who fought in Europe in 1944. According to Leonard van Oord, a 19-year-old World War II re-enactor, American Patrol maintains a high level of authenticity. Focusing on different units every year, the group studies each unit in depth, looking at everything from the uniforms worn to the unit's achievements and everything in between.

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"We don't just want to look good or pose in a uniform," said van Oord. "We want to know the unit we portray and the history. We want to understand their living conditions."

This year, for the 70th anniversary of the Battle of the Bulge, American Patrol teamed up with about five other groups to portray units from the U.S. 106th Infantry Division. According to Carl Wouters, the 106th Infantry Division Association's Belgium liaison, the actions of the 101st Airborne Division at Bastogne overshadowed those of the 106th ID, but St. Vith arguably was an equally important road junction that had great tactical importance for the Germans.

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Mike Struik, portraying a wounded U.S. soldier, lies in pain during a Battle of the Bulge re-enactment on Saturday.



Koen Monnickendam looks back at the line of foxholes he and other re-enactors occupied Monday while portraying the 106th Infantry Division in the very forest that unit fought in 70 years ago.



Wesley van Reen displays his authentic looking cigarette case complete with a family photo, a '40s pin-up girl and homemade '40s replica cigarettes on Sunday.



Dutch re-enactors, from left to right, Wesley van Reen, Rico Peters and Sjoerd Bijsterveld, warm up with small fires near their foxholes. They were portraying the 106th Infantry Division in the heights above St. Vith, Belgium.

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Despite being stretched too thin with little-to-no experience, the young men of the 106th, the last infantry division to be activated in World War II, truly lost their innocence overnight when the Germans attacked them on Dec. 16, 1944. Two of the division's three regiments were surrounded and completely cut off from supplies and reinforcements. After three days of holding out and taking mass casualties, both regimental commanders independently decided to surrender what was left of their regiments on Dec. 19, 1944.

"The actions of the division made it possible for the other units to move in from the rear, join the fight and plug the hole in the 'dam,'" Wouters said. "Against all odds, they put up one hell of a fight. For that, they deserve credit, praise and everlasting respect."

Paying respect and remembering are largely the reasons American Patrol members participate in these re-enactments.

"We do this to remember the people who liberated Western Europe 70 years ago, to make sure

'They would've been real good soldiers back in World War II; they would have. I'll never forget this.'

they are not forgotten by current generations," said van Oord. "They made great sacrifices, they came all the way from their farms in America to liberate us from German oppression and for that we are thankful." Two ID 106th veterans of the Battle of the Bulge, Herb Sheaner Jr., 90, and Dick Lockhart, 91, came to the re-enactment site on Prümberg, where actual fighting had taken place, to see what the young re-enactors were doing.

They were here for the third annual Flag of Friendship Ceremony held in St. Vith on Sunday. The re-enactors also stood in formation, performed a 27-gun salute and carried flowers in the ceremony.

Sheaner and Lockhart saw the men in their foxholes and were given a tour of the headquarters, where they had coffee and talked with the re-actor commanding officer before witnessing a mock battle with an advancing German unit.

According to Sheaner, the young re-enactors could've been his buddies 70 years ago at about the right ages and wearing the same clothing and gear.

"Those people absolutely look like Americans 70 years ago; it's amazing what they did out here," Sheaner said.

"They would've been real good soldiers back in World War II; they would have. I'll never forget this."



The young men of American Patrol, a Dutch re-enactment group, listen to orders from their platoon leader on Sunday in the forest of Proemerberg, the large hill between St. Vith and Schonberg.



Herbert Sheaner visits the mostly Dutch World War II re-enactment groups that are portraying his unit, the 106th Infantry Division, on Monday. Sheaner fought there as a 20-year-old soldier in the Battle of the Bulge.



Dutch re-enactors portraying U.S. soldiers in the 106th Infantry Division march to the front lines above St. Vith on Saturday.



Re-enactors portray German forces on Monday as they fight re-enactors portraying American soldiers.



Leonard van Oord, portraying an American squad leader is taken captive by a man playing the role of a German soldier during a re-enactment.

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