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Weekend at War

By BRETT SOKOL

UNIFORMED SS soldiers were the last thing Alexander Kisse ever expected to see again. Especially in a bucolic corner of southeastern [Pennsylvania](#). But nearly six decades after fighting in [Belgium](#) during the Battle of the Bulge — and being shot in the leg while charging a pillbox encampment with a satchel of explosives — the Germans were back.

“There I was, helpless, with no gun and this German platoon walking towards us,” said Mr. Kisse, a 91-year-old former infantryman from [Pittsburgh](#), recalling his encounter in 1999. “I was shaking, getting flashbacks! Then my son told me, ‘It’s O.K., they’re Americans.’”

The soldiers advancing on Mr. Kisse were just some of the more than 1,500 World War II re-enactors who attend the Battle of the Bulge Living History Commemoration every January at the Fort Indiantown Gap military base in Annville, Pa. With a cluster of barracks built as temporary housing in 1941, and little modified since, the Gap is an appealingly hardscrabble setting for re-enactors, who are sticklers about period authenticity, from the insignia on their field jackets to the make of their rifles (modified to fire blanks).

In addition to Mr. Kisse, there were 20 other Bulge veterans on hand this year as the guests of honor for an extended weekend’s worth of activities, both solemn (a public wreath-laying ceremony) and festive (a U.S.O.-themed dance complete with a Glenn Miller-style 18-piece swing band). A flea market was also doing a booming business in World War II-era militaria, selling items like authentic Axis headgear and, for the truly adventurous, a can of 65-year-old Spam.

Indeed, despite all the talk of the Greatest Generation fading from the cultural spotlight, the ranks of World War II re-enactors continue to grow. Almost every weekend, there is a re-enactment somewhere around the country, and while most are invitation-only affairs drawing from several dozen to several hundred participants, last year’s World War II Weekend in Reading, Pa., attracted more than 20,000 to witness the liberation of a faux-French village.

At the Bulge event, re-enactors ranged in age from those still unable to drink alcohol legally to those collecting [Social Security](#), all drilling, marching and bunking together. After several days spent immersed in the 1940s, for most of them the climax was the “tactical” — a simulated clash in a surrounding forest modeled on the real Battle of the Bulge, [Germany’s](#) effort in December 1944 to turn the tide of the war. It was one of the bloodiest battles in [United States](#) military history, with 19,000 Americans killed and 47,000 wounded.

Those numbers were weighing heavily on the re-enactors of the Army’s 28th Infantry Division. Mr. Kisse had just left their barracks after describing the agonizing seven hours he spent lying in a pasture after being shot in late December 1944, waiting until he could be safely dragged out of the line of fire. Brian Kegel, a 45-year-old Navy veteran, was visibly moved.

“As a kid, I read about George Washington crossing the [Delaware](#), and I always wondered what the soldiers were thinking at that exact moment,” Mr. Kegel said. “Well, when you come to World War II, we have the veterans. You can ask them.” Motioning to the rows of bunks around him, he continued, “The whole world was changed by what the guys who got shoved

in here in 1941 did overseas.” Re-enacting offers a way to better understand it, he said.

He broke into a smile. “And let’s face it, we have fun,” he said. “The wives laugh at us, out here in the subzero weather. But here we are.”

He stopped to take in the sight of a soldier meticulously sweeping the floor in preparation for a mock inspection. “I bet he hasn’t swept his own house out like that in years!” he said.

There was just as much admiration for the veterans from the youngest members of the unit. Chris Andrakakos, a 20-year-old college student from Washington D.C., recalled a previous re-enactment when he marched all day and then stood guard in the rain. “I was exhausted, I couldn’t feel my feet anymore,” he said. “But I thought to myself, back in 1944 those guys did this night after night. I’m just in awe of them.”

And what of the other side?

In the middle of a barracks filled with Gebirgsjäger, mountaineering infantrymen, Mr. Kisse had clearly gotten over his Axis jitters. He sat talking animatedly with two men dressed eerily like the soldiers who once tried to kill him. In fact, the mood was downright jolly, with a Christmas tree, an accordion player and plenty of decorations sharing space with the machine guns.

Casting a more ominous vibe was the entrance of Jeremy Burmeister, a young man dressed in a leather trenchcoat. After some persistent nudging, he finally flashed his badge, Gestapo, while Nicki Jaine, the young woman at his side, explained that the Gestapo had just taken over a cafe run by the French Resistance.

Café Trois, a drab shack colorfully redecorated as a Vichy French boîte, would be open that evening — but in light of its new management, only to Axis troops. Ms. Jaine, a [Philadelphia](#) nightclub singer, would be performing there, serving up her best impression of a Teutonic cabaret star. “The Gestapo is real good at kicking in doors,” she said. “We’ll see how well they can run a cafe.”

Theatrics aside, Dave Sisler, a 45-year-old Gebirgsjäger re-enactor from Medina, [Ohio](#), wanted to make his group’s sympathies clear. Underneath their uniforms, “we’re Americans, and we believe in our country,” he said. “We are glad our country came out victorious.”

He was well aware of the emotionally charged ground he was treading. “We are not Nazi soldiers. We are portraying regular German soldiers,” Mr. Sisler said, taking pains to distinguish the latter as apolitical grunts caught up in a larger struggle.

As for any perplexed reactions to his appearance, “There’s always someone who’s going to look at it negatively — and maybe for good reason,” he said. “Maybe they had a loved one who was in a camp. But a lot of people are interested in what the other side did, how they lived their day-to-day lives.”

Dave Shaw, director of the event’s organizer, the World War II Historical Preservation Federation, agreed. “We leave the politics at home,” he said. While a third of the re-enactors portray Axis soldiers, Nazi paraphernalia beyond that native to the 1940s battlefield is forbidden.

Some of the re-enactors eschewed weapons altogether. Over at the press hut, a crew of “war correspondents” had set up a period darkroom, developing black-and-white photos shot with an array of old-school cameras, aiming for prints that looked like they’d fallen out of a 1944 time capsule.

Betsy Bashore, who carries a 1938 Argus C3 into battle, said her fellow correspondents' handiwork "gives you an opportunity to see through a World War II lens." Though that can be a struggle when re-enactors break character. "There is nothing more vexing than setting up my frame and then seeing somebody pop up with their cellphone camera," said Ms. Bashore, 37, a state auditor from Maumee, Ohio.

She holds the combat photographers in particular esteem. "They took really heavy casualties," she said, "because when everybody else is eating dirt, that's when the photographer is sticking his head out taking his shot."

Brittany Gnizak, 23, a paramedic from Millersburg, Ohio, sees her role as a correspondent as just as meaningful as her photos. Though she began her re-enacting hobby as a Civil War figure, with World War II, she said: "I could see myself actually being a part of it. The travel, the sense of adventure seems to fit my personality had I lived back then." She cited female war reporters like Martha Gellhorn and Lee Miller, even though, she said, "the Army really baby-sat them and tried to keep them behind the lines."

That was not the case during the tactical that closed out the Bulge event. Ms. Gnizak joined the surprised Allied troops as they fell back before the German advance. The otherwise deserted woods suddenly filled with the sounds of fired blanks, roaring jeep engines and frantically hollered commands.

"You're kind of at odds with your head," said Dan Kelley, a re-enacting infantryman. "You know you're not going to die, but your body keeps telling you different."

A loose honor system determines combat fatalities, Mr. Kelley explained. Once eye contact is made and you've been "shot," removing your helmet signals you've been killed: "No more story for me. That's it. I'm dead," Mr. Kelley said wryly. A melodramatic collapse to the ground is entirely optional.

This year's Allied counterattack was a little too successful, aided by the limited amount of terrain in use because of a severe ice storm earlier in the week. The bulk of the German forces rapidly found themselves encircled at close range by columns of British, Scottish, Polish and Canadian soldiers, as well as a scrappy female Belgian resistance fighter. But the din of so many weapons being fired at such near quarters was deafening — whistle-blowing organizers called a halt before they were left with an epidemic of blown eardrums. In the end, the only casualties were a broken ankle and a case of hypothermia.

Which raises the question: Despite their desire to honor the sacrifices of World War II veterans, can re-enactors truly understand the cost of war when there's no real risk involved? Or do these war games merely glorify carnage?

Carl Cessna, a 62-year-old Allied re-enactor from Glenville, Pa., was ambivalent as he sat behind the steering wheel of his 1942 weapons carrier, his exhausted unit's members spilling out the back.

"These guys going out, playing bang bang, they think it's fun," he said. "Some of the SS guys are superhuman. They don't fall down no matter how many rounds you put in them. But it's different when there's real lead coming back at you."

It was an experience that Mr. Cessna said he absorbed firsthand as a 21-year-old in [Vietnam](#), trying to keep the airfield at Qui Nhon from being overrun during the 1968 Tet Offensive.

Yet there he was at the Gap, right in the middle of all that fake bang bang.

"Some of these kids come in, and all they know about war is video games," he said. "But you have to start somewhere. Then some old S.O.B. like me comes up and explains the rest of it."

That lesson is more than academic. In prior Bulge re-enactments, Mr. Cessna's son Brian was at his side. In fact, it was his son, a World War II history buff, who first introduced him to the world of "living historians." But Brian, now 27, recently shipped out to Iraq with his Pennsylvania National Guard unit. And his father seemed conflicted about that deployment onto a real battlefield.

"I cannot dictate to my kids," he explained. "But I kept drilling into him, it's not going to be the same," Mr. Cessna said softly.

On that matter, he won't get an argument. In an e-mail message sent from the western outskirts of Baghdad, where he's a staff sergeant on a Stryker assault vehicle, Brian Cessna was quick to dismiss the so-called realism of re-enactments.

"You might get the romantic side of things," he wrote. But he stressed that when it came to his current situation, where the bullets are anything but blank, combat ushered a far different set of thoughts into his mind. "You're cursing and praying to God at the same time, wondering if your wife is awake yet, realizing that the difference between making someone live or die is your trigger finger."

Still, he's keeping his 1944 Army uniform. "Will I continue re-enacting? Absolutely," he wrote. There are all his friends back in the Fourth Armored Division, as well as the opportunity to drive vintage vehicles off road. "But I probably won't go to too many straight tacticals. Sometimes I laugh remembering guys saying 'I got you!,' 'No, I got you!,' 'No, I got you!' I wish that is the way it was for real."

IF YOU GO

Victory in Sight (717-338-1776; www.homefrontgeneralstore.com/events.asp) at Granite Hill Camping Resort in Gettysburg, Pa., on April 18 and 19 features American, German and Russian troop encampments representing the period around spring 1945, armored vehicles and a closing-night dance. Admission for adults is \$5; under 16, \$1.

The World War II Weekend on April 25 and 26 by the re-enactors of the Second Ranger Infantry Battalion (www.2ndrangers.us/wwii_weekend.php) at Jefferson Barracks Park in [St. Louis](#) revolves around several battles against the Germans and Italians, with period tanks and halftracks. Admission is free.

The Mid-Atlantic Air Museum's World War II Weekend (610-372-7333; www.maam.org/maamwwii.html) at Reading Regional Airport in [Pennsylvania](#) is June 5 to 7 and draws 20,000 people to its air show that features 1940s planes, several of which offer rides to the public. There are a re-enacted liberation of a French village, a militaria flea market and receptions with decorated World War II veterans. Daily admission for adults is \$20; \$9 for children 6 to 12.

D-Day Conneaut (www.ddayohio.us) on Aug. 22 features a recreation of the D-Day landing at Conneaut Township Park on Lake Erie in [Ohio](#). The beach is said to resemble the site of the Normandy Invasion. Admission is free.

The 2010 Battle of the Bulge Living History Commemoration (724-627-8545; www.wwifederation.org) at Fort Indiantown Gap, Anville, Pa., is in late January. It is the largest national gathering of tactical re-enactors. There are several public battles, a flea market and a U.S.O.-themed dance. Admission is free.

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