

WWII veterans wind up reunion

526th reminisces on Patton, Battle of Bulge, more

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By [Larry Weist](#)

The 60th anniversary of World War II's Battle of the Bulge is just three months away, and a small group of men who played significant roles in that battle, members of the 526th Armored Infantry Battalion, are winding up a reunion in Salt Lake City.

The veterans of the 526th, the most "unheralded outfit of the war," as one man said, was comprised mostly of soldiers from Utah and neighboring states, but the battalion had no historian assigned to it during the war to record its remarkable deeds. The men meeting at the Salt Lake Plaza Hotel, however, have a plethora of head-shaking stories to tell.

The mission of the 526th — that of working alongside tanks with 13-billion candlepower British-designed lights — was not declassified until 1958, and the men were sworn to secrecy while training in Arizona and were not allowed to travel on passes unless they were in groups of five. The powerful lights, the brainchild of a World War I British officer, were perfected during the wars, and the idea was to use the lights to blind and confuse the enemy while allowing infantrymen from the armored battalions to attack on foot.

The 526th was sent to Wales for additional training. The unit didn't get to continental Europe until August 1944. However, as things worked out, the European terrain was not flat enough for the high-powered lights, dubbed "Gizmos," to be practical. "They would have worked fine if we had been sent to Africa," said Gerald Johnson, Rexburg, Idaho. "The idea of putting lights on tanks was to allow war to be fought 24 hours a day."

During the Battle of the Bulge, A and B Companies were heavily engaged with the Germans in the Belgian towns of Trois Ponts, Stavelot, Hedomont, Baugnez, Geromont and Malmedy. They were the first American troops to enter the towns.

A Co. burned 2 million gallons of gasoline stored just north of Stavelot to keep it out of Germans hands as they advanced toward Amsterdam. The Germans were unable to continue their advance because they were counting on capturing the fuel, said Charles Mitchell, Sparta, Tenn., who commanded the company at the time.

Company C of the battalion was driven hard by a super-strict captain who demanded the men observe military discipline to the point of driving many of them crazy. "He may have been disliked by many guys, but he kept a lot of us alive," said Duke Shain, Carthage, Mo., of Capt. V.J. Gianelloni.

Because of Gianelloni's discipline and the company's reputation, C Co. was selected by Gen. Omar Bradley as his guard in Luxembourg City.

Ed Piccone, Cupertino, Calif., recalls guarding the front door of Bradley's hotel and challenging a lieutenant who apparently had fallen asleep in a nearby theater and was returning to the hotel. "I cocked my grease gun (M-3 submachine-gun) and told him to advance and show ID. He did and then went inside. Minutes later, Gen. Bradley stuck his head out the door and asked, 'Is there a problem, soldier?' I told him about the lieutenant and a few minutes later he opened the door and said he had just gotten a package from home and there was some hard candy in it and asked if I wanted some. I told him I couldn't take it while on duty, and he said to take it, 'That's an order.' "

Shain recalled standing guard outside Bradley's Luxembourg headquarters just as the Battle of the Bulge began. Lt. Gen. George S. Patton Jr. drove up with an escort of four jeeps and jumped out of his vehicle and drew his two ivory-handled revolvers cowboy-style. The people walking on the sidewalk weren't sure what it meant, he said.

"Late that night, Patton and Bradley came walking down the marble stairs of the hotel, and I heard Patton ask Bradley what units he had attached to his headquarters," Shain said. "He ran off the names of the units, and Patton said he'd take our battalion. Bradley said, 'Calm down George, we've been through a lot of thick ones, and we'll get through this one.' "

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