

History on display

TABLE BUILT IN TRIBUTE TO THE BATTLE OF THE BULGE LEAVES FORT MEADE LIBRARY

October 18, 2018 Alexandra Snyder SoundOff Cover Story 0

Two veterans of World War II gathered around a large wooden table at the Fort Meade Medal of Honor Memorial Library.

During the informal meeting on Oct. 11, retired Lt. Col. Alfred Shehab and Belgium native Paul Goffin reflected on their experiences before the table was transported Monday to the United States Army Center for Military History in Washington, D.C.

The table is a tribute to the deadliest battle the U.S. Army has ever waged — the Battle of the Bulge. More than 100,000 Soldiers were killed in this World War II battle, which began on the bitter cold morning of Dec. 16, 1944, and spread across Western Europe, lasting into the new year.

German troops, outnumbering Americans Soldiers in Europe two to one, launched the attack with nearly 1,000 tanks in an effort to stem their impending defeat on the western front, which began when Allied troops landed in France on D-Day, June 6, 1944.

Seeking to split the Allied forces into two separate sections of Europe, as they had done in May 1940, the Germans struck in the Ardennes Forest in eastern Belgium, a 75-mile stretch of the front characterized by dense woods and few roads, held by four battle-worn American divisions.

The Germans quickly broke through the American front, seizing key crossroads and advancing toward the Meuse River, creating the projection that gave the battle its name.

According to USACMH, as the battle raged, stories spread of the massacre of Soldiers and civilians at Malmedy and Stavelot, of paratroopers dropping behind the lines, and of English-speaking German soldiers, disguised as Americans, capturing critical bridges, cutting communications lines and spreading rumors.

Belgian townspeople put away their Allied flags and brought out their swastikas. Police in Paris enforced an all-night curfew. British veterans waited nervously to see how the Americans would react to a full-scale German offensive, and British generals quietly acted to safeguard the Meuse River crossings.

Even American civilians, who had thought final victory was near, were sobered by the Nazi onslaught.

Goffin was just 15 years old when Germans invaded his small Belgian town in 1940, approximately 30 miles from where the Battle of the Bulge would take place just a few years later.

“We were very afraid,” Goffin recalled. “But when the Americans came in, they were so nice, so generous, so open. It was eye-opening.”

When Goffin was 19, the U.S. began recruiting young Belgians to supplement American and British troops, offering six weeks rapid training. Goffin signed up and was attached to an American unit during the Battle of the Bulge.

Now on the board of trustees for the Battle of the Bulge Historical Association, Goffin said his time with the Americans was a large factor in his decision to immigrate to the U.S. in 1965. He is now a naturalized citizen, and works to ensure the legacy of the Battle of the Bulge for future generations.

“The only witnesses of the battle that will remain in the future is the trees,” Goffin said in the library, running his hands along the unit seals embedded in the tabletop commissioned by the association. “That is why we wanted to make this table.”

And what a table it is.

Commissioned in 1993, the table was created by local artist Vincent Gaspar and given to Fort Meade in 1994. It has been on display in the Battle of the Bulge Conference Room at the post library ever since.

Made of solid oak taken from trees in the forests where the battle took place and hand-selected by those who fought there, the table is approximately 20 feet long and 4 feet wide. Forty-five unit patches from those who fought in the battle are encased in the tabletop.

Along the sides, an engraving of 157 trees stands testament to the same number of Belgian civilians killed in the fight at Stavelot.

Stavelot is Fort Meade’s sister city, established because of the relationship between the installation and the local chapter of the Battle of the Bulge Historical Association.

“The table contains the full story [of the battle],” Goffin said. “Ask a question and the table will give you an answer.”

Shehab could also tell you the full story.

Shehab was a lieutenant with the 38th Calvary Reconnaissance Battalion in Monschau, Germany when the battle broke out. At 99 years old, Shehab wants to make sure that story of sacrifice, loss and ultimately, victory, is not lost.

Like Goffin, Shehab sits on the board of BBHA.

“For us, the battle started on the night of the 15th of December,” Shehab recalled. “We had taken a hunting lodge in the woods, and were heavily armed. That evening, German parachuters landed nearby. It was a severe bombardment, but we had no indication of the size of the battle at that time.

“We held our position for several days and captured many Germans. There were casualties.”

Eventually, Shehab instructed his men to move from the lodge. They marched toward the Belgian border and moved into an old mill, which they preferred to the waist-deep snow that blanketed the country at that time.

“Our front had become quiet. We had outposts on top of the hill above us, manned by two men. Six posts,” Shehab said. “One late afternoon they called and said a German patrol was coming through and I told them to let them come through.

“They stopped in front of the mill, and their intent was to capture it or possibly mine it. There were 22 of them. We [defeated] them.”

Eventually, Shehab and his team left the mill, intent on reaching their squadron headquarters across a river.

“It was a blinding snowstorm,” Shehab said. “At that time, I had a unit of Rangers who acted as our dismounted element. We’d been told the Rangers had built a bridge across the river, and they’d been told we had. There was no way across, so we waded.

“When we got to the other side, we got into a firefight. Our clothes were soaking wet and they froze to us. Later that day, our vehicles were blown up. It was very cold, very miserable.”

When the war ended after the German surrender on May 8, 1945, Shehab and his men spent the rest of 1945 liberating Jews and other survivors from concentration camps. The evidence of atrocities that he witnessed during that time was unbelievable, he said.

“It’s amazing when you’re looking at something, but your brain refuses to accept that one person could do that to another,” said Shehab, in an interview with the Odenton Patch in 2011. “Germany was supposed to be a civilized, Christian nation. It was unbelievable. They were bones. I don’t know how they even moved.”

After returning to the U.S., Shehab remained in the Army. He served another two decades, eventually reaching the rank of lieutenant colonel and finishing his service at Fort Meade.

“We didn’t talk much about [the Battle of the Bulge] after the fact,” Shehab said. “It was just another battle.”

Eventually, however, it became apparent that by not talking about it, Soldiers from the battle were ensuring their sacrifice and that of their fellow service members would someday be forgotten, said Shehab.

“The cost of the battle was very high,” he said. “The original Battle of the Bulge Historical Association was established by the veterans to remind people the cost of liberty and freedom, and the importance of discipline, training and dedication of the military.”

The table, which acts as a physical reminder of those ideals for all future generations who see it, will now be housed in the USACMH building at Fort McNair in Washington, D.C., before heading to its permanent display location, which has yet to be determined.



Encased in glass on the table are 45 patches representing many of the units that fought in the Battle of the Bulge, the deadliest land battle in U.S. Army history. (Ben Rogers/Visual Information Office, Directorate of Plans, Training, Mobilization and Security)



The Battle of the Bulge Conference Room, in the Fort Meade Medal of Honor Memorial Library, housed the table and the scale models of World War II artifacts since 1994. (Alexandra Snyder/Fort Meade Public Affairs Office)



Retired Lt. Col. Alfred Shehab, age 99, points to where he was stationed in December 1944, when the Battle of the Bulge began. (Alexandra Snyder/Fort Meade Public Affairs Office)



The table, commissioned by the Battle of the Bulge Historical Foundation in 1993, was moved Monday from the Fort Meade Medal of Honor Memorial Library to the United States Army Center for Military History in Washington, D.C. (Ben Rogers/Visual Information Office, Directorate of Plans, Training, Mobilization and Security)