

# HONORING AMERICAN LIBERATORS



UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM

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For almost two decades, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the U.S. Army's Center of Military History have worked together to define, recognize, and honor all the U.S. Army divisions that took part in the liberation of prisoners from Nazi concentration camps and other sites of incarceration.

In February 1985, two Holocaust survivors, Sigmund Strochlitz and Benjamin Meed, then serving as co-chairpersons on the United States Holocaust Memorial Council's Days of Remembrance Committee, formally requested permission from the Secretary of the Army, John O. Marsh, Jr., to display in the future Museum the flags of all the U.S. units that participated in the liberation of the Nazi camps. They also requested permission to present these colors at the Days of Remembrance ceremony held annually in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda in Washington, D.C. Several weeks later, the U.S. Army agreed to cooperate with the Museum in this important joint program.

In 1985, the Museum and the Center of Military History recognized some army divisions as liberating units: the 3rd, 4th, 6th, 10th, and 11th Armored Divisions and the 42nd, 45th, 80th, 90th, and 103rd Infantry Divisions.

Within two years, this program generated so much interest on the part of veterans' associations that the Museum and the Center of Military History developed further guidelines and procedures for handling future requests for liberator status. It was decided to recognize units only at the divisional level; to accord the honor of liberator status on the basis of unit records housed at the National Archives and Records Administration, not oral testimony; to accord liberator status to those divisions arriving at the site within 48 hours of the initial division's encounter. To further facilitate this process, requests for recognition were to come through a formal petition to the Center of Military History or the Museum from the divisional association or individual members of a division. As a result of these new guidelines ten more U.S. Army divisions were recognized as liberating units: the 12th, 14th, and 20th Armored Divisions, and the 4th, 8th, 71st, 89th, 99th, and 104th Infantry Divisions, along with the 82nd Airborne Division.

In the 19 years since this program was inaugurated, the Museum and the Center of Military History have recognized 35 U.S. Army divisions for their heroism, gallantry, and help in liberating prisoners from brutal Nazi rule. Each year, the names and flags of these units are presented in a moving tribute at the U.S. Capitol Rotunda for the Days of Remembrance ceremony. In addition, the Museum displays 20 divisional flags at its 14th Street entrance. The flags are rotated so that all the liberating units' colors are prominently exhibited for the two million visitors who walk through our doors each year.

To commemorate the unveiling of the National World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C., in 2004, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum once again honors the brave men and women who risked their lives to free their fellow human beings from bondage.

# U.S. Army Divisions Recognized as Liberating Units by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Center of Military History

## INFANTRY DIVISIONS

1st Infantry Division  
2nd Infantry Division  
4th Infantry Division  
8th Infantry Division  
26th Infantry Division  
29th Infantry Division  
36th Infantry Division  
42nd Infantry Division  
45th Infantry Division  
63rd Infantry Division  
65th Infantry Division  
69th Infantry Division  
71st Infantry Division  
80th Infantry Division  
83rd Infantry Division  
84th Infantry Division  
86th Infantry Division  
89th Infantry Division  
90th Infantry Division  
95th Infantry Division  
99th Infantry Division  
103rd Infantry Division  
104th Infantry Division

## ARMORED DIVISIONS

3rd Armored Division  
4th Armored Division  
6th Armored Division  
8th Armored Division  
9th Armored Division  
10th Armored Division  
11th Armored Division  
12th Armored Division  
14th Armored Division  
20th Armored Division

## AIRBORNE DIVISIONS

82nd Airborne Division  
101st Airborne Division

For further information about the origins of this program, see Edward J. Drea, "Recognizing the Liberators. U.S. Army Divisions Enter the Concentration Camps," *Army History. The Professional Bulletin of Army History*, Fall/Winter 1992/1993, 1–5.

# 45TH INFANTRY DIVISION

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The 45th Infantry Division was formed in 1924 from National Guard units in the southwestern United States. In 1940, the "Thunderbird" division was reactivated and deployed in late June 1943 to North Africa. The following month, the division landed in Sicily, where it engaged Axis troops in combat. After advancing up the Italian peninsula, the 45th landed at Anzio in February 1944, where it withstood repeated German assaults against its positions. Cutting across the country, the unit was sent to southern France in August 1944. It quickly advanced through western France, reaching the German border by the end of the year. In March 1945, the "Thunderbird" division crossed the Rhine River and headed south. On April 20, it captured the city of Nuremberg and on April 30, Munich.

As the 45th Infantry Division completed its drive on Munich, the unit was ordered to liberate the Dachau concentration camp. On April 29, 1945, three U.S. Army divisions converged on the camp: the 42nd Infantry, the 45th Infantry, and the 20th Armored. When the three units arrived at Dachau, they discovered more than 30,000 prisoners in the overcrowded camp. Just days before, about 2,000 inmates evacuated on a death march from the Flossenbürg concentration camp had arrived at Dachau and the SS guards had forced almost 7,000 Dachau inmates to move southward. On April 28, the day before liberation, a train bearing about 40 or so railway cars arrived at the camp. It had left Buchenwald four weeks earlier on April 7, filled with more than 5,000 prisoners. With few provisions, almost 2,000 inmates died during the circuitous route that took them from Thuringia through Saxony to Czechoslovakia and into Bavaria. Their bodies were left behind in various locations throughout Germany. When U.S. troops arrived in Dachau on April 29, they found 2,310 additional corpses on the train. The 816 surviving prisoners were taken to barracks within the camp.

The proximity of the U.S. Army gave hope to the prisoners in the camp and to anti-Nazis outside it. In the town of Dachau, German opponents of the regime, including a few escaped concentration camp prisoners, took over the town hall, but the local SS put down the small rebellion and executed those among the insurgents whom they caught. In the Dachau camp itself, an international committee composed of representatives of the various nationalities imprisoned there was established to organize resistance.

## 45TH INFANTRY DIVISION

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News of Dachau's liberation spread swiftly. The delegations of journalists and congressmen who had been viewing the Buchenwald concentration camp were quickly diverted to Dachau to see the camp. In their report delivered to Congress on May 15, 1945, the senators and representatives stated that

As we visited Dachau we saw on a railroad sidetrack paralleling the main highway, and close to the gates of the prison camp, a train of cars which had been used to bring additional civilian prisoners to this camp. These cars were an assortment of odd boxcars, some of which were locked, and some were coal-car type. In each of them the floor of the car was covered with dead, emaciated bodies. In some of these cars there were more than enough to cover the floors. In size, these cars were of the small European type, which, when used for the movement of troops, would never accommodate more than 40 men. Nevertheless, the Army officials in charge of this camp advised us that there were 50 of these cars in this 1 train and that at least 100 of these civilians had been jammed into each car . . .

We saw many dead bodies on the ground. These prisoners had apparently crawled out of the cars and had died on the ground. Our officials advised us that many of the others who had survived the trip had died since in the camp, and many more, although still alive, were starved beyond redemption.

Lieutenant Colonel Felix Sparks, who commanded the 45th Infantry Division troops, later recalled his first impressions of Dachau:

The initial shock was experienced even before entering the camp. The first evidence of the horror to come was a string of about forty railway cars on a siding near the camp entrance. Each car was loaded with emaciated human corpses . . .

The scene near the entrance to the confinement area numbed my senses. Dante's Inferno seemed pale compared to the real hell of Dachau. A row of small cement structures near the prison entrance contained a coal-fired crematorium, a gas chamber, and rooms piled high with naked and emaciated human corpses. As I turned to look over the prison yard with unbelieving eyes, I saw a large number of dead inmates lying where they had fallen in the last few hours or days before our arrival. Since all the many bodies were in various stages of decomposition, the stench of death was overpowering.

Immediately after Dachau's liberation, U.S. Army authorities and other Allied representatives began treating the sick prisoners, implementing health and sanitary measures to curb the typhus epidemic, and bringing in tons of food to feed the starving prisoners. The local townspeople were brought in to give the dead prisoners a proper burial.

The 45th Infantry Division was recognized as a liberating unit by the U.S. Army's Center of Military History and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in 1985.

# 45TH INFANTRY DIVISION

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*Casualty figures for the 45th Infantry Division, European theater of operations*

Total battle casualties: 7,791

Total deaths in battle: 1,831

## *Division nickname*

The 45th Infantry Division gained its nickname, "Thunderbird" division, from the gold thunderbird. This Native American symbol became the division's insignia in 1939. It replaced another previously used Native American symbol, a swastika, that was withdrawn when it became closely associated with the Nazi party.