

HONORING AMERICAN LIBERATORS



UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM

HONORING AMERICAN LIBERATORS

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.

42ND INFANTRY DIVISION



The 42nd Infantry Division was created in August 1917, just months after the United States entered World War I, and was sent overseas to France in November. In 1943, the "Rainbow" division was reactivated for duty and deployed to Europe in December 1944, when it landed in the French port of Marseille. By mid-December, the "Rainbow" division had advanced into Alsace, closing in on the Strasbourg area. In March 1945, the 42nd drove into Germany and crossed the Rhine River by the end of the month. In April, the "Rainbow" division captured the cities of Würzburg, Schweinfurt, and Fürth. By war's end, it had completed its drive into Bavaria and had entered Austria.

On April 29, 1945, the 42nd Infantry Division entered the Dachau concentration camp, the earliest and longest-functioning SS-controlled camp in Nazi Germany. On that day, 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 with about 40 or so railcars 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 on 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.

42ND INFANTRY DIVISION

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.

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 42nd 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.

Casualty figures for the 42nd Infantry Division, European theater of operations

Total battle casualties: 3,971

Total deaths in battle: 655

Division nickname

The nickname of the 42nd Infantry Division, the "Rainbow" division, reflects the composition of the division during World War I. The division was drawn from the National Guards of 26 states and the District of Columbia. It represented a cross section of the American people, as the rainbow represents a cross section of colors.