



Looking Back

Airborne's first combat legend

The current War on Terrorism in Afghanistan has been a conflict, which has primarily used special operations forces to spearhead U.S. Military actions.

While this is seen by many as a new and effective way to fight a war that could eventually involve several fronts, it has been in the making for more than a generation and takes the efforts of numerous military professionals to develop. In fairness, the tactic also has its critics as many military professionals view that Special Forces are now being spread to thin because of prior commitments in places like Bosnia, where their role is seen primarily as being that of a policeman.

The making of these special operation units began during and in the wake of World War II and took the efforts of not only military command officers, but also those soldiers in the rank and file, who realized a greater duty beyond their own service. One such man was a Tennessee man from Bradley County who would enter the U.S. Army during World War II and rise to become a soldier regarded as one of the best to ever put on a uniform and a warrior who would become a legend in the Airborne units of America's Military Command.

Paul Bert Huff was born on June 23, 1918 near Cleveland, Tenn. in Bradley County. He was the seventh of ten children born to John Ribben and Dena

if he was ready to shove. Used to long hard work in his mountain home and not one to admit defeat, Huff maintained his vigilance and refused. He continued his training, graduated, and was eventually assigned to a parachute infantry unit.

As the Commanding Officer went down the line during graduation pinning the wings on new soldiers, he placed a pair of wings on a smushed Paul Huff and nothing was ever said of his facial hair again.

Although some military officials may have questioned his rebellious attitude, not one could ever find fault with the Tennessee's military bearing. Pvt. Paul Huff was assigned to the Fifth Army's 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion under command of General Mark Clark.

Huff, who had always had a fascination with flying, excelled as a parachute infantryman and was quickly regarded as one of the best instructors found in the area. Huff could think clearly in the most trying of conditions - a trait essential in the often dangerous assignments the 509th undertook in the war.



Photo courtesy NMAH Museum. From left Sgt. Paul Huff, unknown and WWI Medal of Honor recipient Alvin C. York discuss firearms each Tennessee used in their respective wars. Sgt. Huff, Alvin York and Tennessee's other Medal of Honor recipients from WWII became close friends during and after the war as they tried to keep up the state and nation's moral during the war.

The Fifth Army endured three more days of bitter combat before Allied air power started having the desired effect and the men could begin advancing from their primary positions. The massive air campaign, however, became counterproductive to the Americans and slowed the available resources for ground troops. The Italy invasion began to break down into what looked like a long campaign against an enemy using a variety of desperate tactics to keep the Allies off guard and pinned down.

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from the field of battle. The company under his command killed 27 Germans and captured 21 others with only a loss of three patrol members. His efforts that day near Cassino, Italy earned the admiration and respect of the Fifth Army command, who had feared a devastating casualty rate in the early battle because of the German's strongholds. The Tennessee's fearless actions in the face of a superior force earned him the National Medal of Honor.

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Early on at Fort Campbell, Huff had been assigned to tear down an old plantation home that was located on the base grounds and replace it. Sgt. Huff, however, saw character in the structure and convinced the base officers to renovate the structure instead. Once completed, he and his growing family moved into it. The grounds of the home also allowed Sgt. Huff to indulge in his other love of horseback riding.

When the Vietnam War started, Sgt. Huff volunteered that the Medal of Honor recipient was refused. He eventually received special permission from the Pentagon and served as a General's Aide in 1967 when he worked as an Advisor. Although Sgt. Huff had been offered numerous officer's commissions throughout his military career since World War II, he had steadfastly refused them and preferred to be a non-commissioned officer. His last assignment was as Sergeant Major at the Headquarters Company of the U.S. Army Garrison at Fort Campbell.

In 1975, the Tennessee 5ally retired from military life to Clarksville. In addition to holding the nation's highest military award, he was also a recipient of more than 15 other medals, including the Bronze Star and the Legion of Merit.

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"He was always a modest and private man," said Medal of Honor historian Ann Meyers. "but he would make anybody laugh and was generally liked by everybody he met. He was a poor boy from Bradley County who rose to become regarded as one of America's best warriors, walked with Presidents, and brought undeniable credit to the American soldier - not to mention his contribution to the Tennessee military tradition. He truly led a life of honor and loyalty and it was something he commanded from others. His death in 1994 was mourned by everyone who knew him."

Paul Huff's actions in the 1944 Italian Campaign of World War II were quickly eclipsed by the D-Day Invasion, which occurred four months later. It wasn't until recently that historians started giving a proper portrait of the Invasion of Italy and the fierceness of the fighting that occurred there. The victory that was won came at a high price because of the draining of resources and changes in command that were part of the preparation for the invasion of Europe.

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Paul Bert Huff was born on June 23, 1918 near Cleveland, Tenn. in Bradley County. He was the seventh of ten children born to John Ribben and Dena Belle (Sipe) Huff. His father supported the family by working for the local railroad company and the earnings allowed them to barely get by in the then-woodable economy.

Although poor, the Huffs were an old family who had immigrated to the region in the 1840s from Greene County and had numerous relatives. The young family then helped them through many tough times and, when Paul Huff's mother passed away due to childbirth complications, his older sister took over raising the seven-year-old and the two youngest twins.

With nine other brothers and sisters, his family says, the one thing which set Paul apart from his siblings was his growing personality. As he grew up, he, the most boys in these days, lived a rough-and-tumble childhood and was given to his own ways. When he was around 11 or 12, years-old, here over, Huff dropped out of high school in Bradley County and went to work for the railroad to help out his family. The new responsibilities grew fast up quickly, but he still retained a local character in Bradley County and never lost sight of the region about his

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The parachute infantry was new to warfare and their effectiveness was remarkable. For military command, they recognized that, regardless of how many tons of explosives could be dropped on a target, nothing could take the place of foot soldiers on the ground securing enemy red areas. The paratroopers, most often jumped into completely hostile territory surrounded by the enemy and were engaged to fight their way through to the target. When they held their own, conventional forces could relieve the target and strengthen the line. This divide and conquer tactic became one of the most effective techniques of the war.

Pvt. Huff and the men of the 509th engaged in conflicts throughout the Mediterranean region in World War II. While the Tennessee didn't hold command rank, he proved to be a natural leader among his men and developed close ties with those he supervised.

In late 1943, Huff's company was dropped towards the coast of Italy to be part of what was to become the Allied Invasion of the nation. It would be a difficult task to see resources and men were being pulled away from the region in preparation for the upcoming Normandy Invasion. After a successful campaign in Sicily, thousands of German troops had been moved into Italy, and, although Britain's Prime Minister Winston Churchill had called it the "soft underbelly of Europe's Axis command," German fortifications and their fighting abilities showed that the fighting capabilities for the

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Sgt. Major Paul Huff and his wife Betty went on to raise five children and put them through college. Throughout his retirement, many people tried to get Sgt. Major Huff to discuss that day in Italy where his actions had earned him the Medal of Honor, but the Tennessee, like most recipients, would's easily discuss the incident in any detail - even in his closest family members. He requested himself simply as a professional soldier and considered such conversations inappropriate.

Sgt. Major Paul Huff maintained an active life outside the military until his death on Sept. 21, 1994. He was laid to rest with the military honors due a soldier of his status in Cleveland's Hillcrest Cemetery near his family home in Bradley County. He was survived by his wife Betty, four children and two grandchildren. Numerous people from across the nation turned out to pay their final respects for the Tennessee and perhaps no greater tribute for his service to his nation could be stated better than the words of Special Forces Col. and Korean Medal of Honor recipient Lee Mow of Gadsden, Ala.

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"He was always a modest and private man," said Medal of Honor historian Ann Meyers. "but he would make anybody laugh and was generally liked by everybody he met. He was a poor boy from Bradley County who rose to become regarded as one of America's best warriors, walked with Presidents, and brought undeniable credit to the American soldier - not to mention his contribution to the Tennessee military tradition. He truly led a life of honor and loyalty and it was something he commanded from others. His death in 1994 was mourned by everyone who knew him."

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The units would eventually evolve into one of the elite fighting units of the United States Army and, as proven in the current War on Terrorism, one of the most effective. Their mobile abilities among the most feared warriors on the battlefield. Although they possess an elite status in the military, they still regard themselves as first soldiers with only the largest term "paratrooper" to differentiate between them and regular infantry.

Sgt. Major Paul Huff's high regard for the average soldier is believed by many to be the reason he consistently refused an officer's commission. He, like many soldiers, knew the backbone of the military is always found in the common soldier and the honor and respect of being one must be maintained if any military branch of service is to be successful.

The Fort Campbell home the Huff family lived in until Huff's retirement in 1973 is still standing and today serves as office quarters for his base command. A street on the base is also named in the Tennessee's honor. The military installation is still today a vital part of the American armed forces.

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Although poor, the Huff family was a family who had immigrated to the region in the 1840s from Greene County and had numerous relatives. The strong family ties helped them through many tough times and, when Paul Huff's mother passed away due to childbirth complications, his older sister took over raising the seven-year-old and the new-born twins.

With nine other brothers and sisters, his family says, the one thing which set Paul apart from his siblings was his gracious personality. As he grew up, he, like most boys in that day, lived a rough and tumble childhood and was given to mischief and pranks. When he was around 15 or 16-years-old, however, Huff dropped out of high school in Bradley County and went to work for the railroad to help out his family. The new responsibilities grew him up quickly, but he still remained a local character in Bradley County and stories still abound in the region about his colorful youth. One of the most notable qualities among those who knew him, however, was his extreme loyalty to friends and family.

The late 1930s found Paul working in an upholstery factory and, as the sounds of impending World War began reaching the sleepy mountain region, so did the call for men to join the armed forces. Paul Huff was among those drafted into the service and left his home in Cleveland, Tenn., to join the Army.

In basic training, Huff's drill instructors got their first example of the Tennesseean's resolve. As the D.I. walked down the line, he stopped in front of Huff and cited to him military regulations regarding the wearing of facial hair and informed him he would have to shave off his mustache. Huff refused saying he had grown the mustache on a \$5 bet and wasn't about to shave it off. The D.I.'s then put him on punishment detail after daily training pulling weeds and working kitchen detail on weekends. At the end of every day, they would ask Huff

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In late 1943, a newly promoted Corporal Huff and the 599th were shipped towards the coast of Italy to be part of what was to become the Allied invasion of the nation. It would be a difficult task in that resources and men were being pulled away from the region in preparation for the upcoming Normandy invasion. After a successful campaign in Sicily, thousands of German troops had retreated into Italy, and, although Britain's Prime Minister Winston Churchill had called it the "soft underbelly of Europe's Axis command", German fortifications and their fighting abilities almost guaranteed heavy casualties for the American forces. The distance between Sicily and Italy was such that fighter planes could only carry enough fuel to fight for fifteen minutes over Italy before returning to refuel. The plan devised was for the Eighth Army to invade in the southern part of the nation with the Fifth Army landing at Salerno to cut off any German retreat.

At 4 a.m. on 8 September 1943 and after a heavy bombardment from ships and planes, the Fifth Army made its landing at Salerno. The fighting was much more fierce than what the Americans had thought it would be. For four days, British and American forces fought a determined enemy and prompted Commanding General Dwight Eisenhower to write to his Chief of Staff Gen. George Marshall: "At this time, we are very much in a touch-and-go stage of this operation... We have been unable to advance and the enemy is preparing a major counter-attack... I am using everything bigger than a rowboat... In the present situation our great hope is the Air Force."

They were launching an effective defensive fire at the right flank of Huff's advancing force. The Tennesseean's commander knew that someone would have to first pinpoint the enemy strongholds before his force could advance towards the enemy position. Cpl. Huff volunteered to lead a six-man patrol on the mission.

With his men assembled, Cpl. Huff began inching across the level terrain towards the entrenched Germans. As his men approached, small arms fire, machine gun, and mortars began targeting the advancing force. With shells flying up within five to ten yards of the group and bullets striking the ground in front of them, Cpl. Huff took point on the patrol and relied clear of them to draw the fire away from his men. Cpl. Huff halted the men at a reasonably safe location and advanced alone towards the enemy fire. Bullets flew past his head as he moved through a mine field and within 75 yards of a German machine-gun nest. Under direct fire from the machine-gun's position, the Tennesseean crawled on his stomach the remaining 75 yards and threw himself into the machine-gun nest firing. He killed the crew with his machine-gun and destroyed the gun. With the nest secured, Cpl. Huff raised up to a kneeling position and opened fire at the other enemy gunners trying to kill his men. The Germans, who were shocked by the location of the sudden enemy fire, immediately started turning their guns on the Bradley County native, which gave him the positions of the enemy guns. Cpl. Huff had accomplished his mission of identifying the German guns. He slipped out of the machine-gun nest and started working himself back to his men. German gunners kept pouring fire at Huff, but he remembered his path through the mine field and made it back where he led his men to safety. The information he provided his commanding officers allowed them to regroup their forces and organize an effective assault.

That afternoon, an organized advance, with Cpl. Huff leading a company of 125 men, attacked the German fortifications routing the

them in a field ceremony with the 509th Parachute Infantry standing - making him the first American soldier in American history to be awarded the nation's highest military award.

Cpl. Huff remained in the action throughout World War II, but was eventually sent stateside. He was hit twice by enemy bullets in the war. One hit him near the chest, but was prevented from injury by a metal sewing kit in his breast pocket. On another occasion a bullet pierced his helmet and ricocheted around it - leaving a shaved injury on his head, but causing no injury whatsoever.

In 1944, one of his last wartime duties was his participation in a massive parachute jump in Knoxville to help raise money for the war bonds.

In 1946, he left the service and returned to Bradley County where he met and fell in love with the woman who would become his life-long love. They married with fellow Tennessee W. W. II Medal of Honor recipient Charles Coolidge, who became a long-time family friend, in attendance at the ceremony. Cpl. Huff, although out of the military, found little time for himself as he and the wife time for himself as he and the other Tennessee Medal of Honor recipients from the war were subjected to numerous receptions, dinners, and other special events honoring them for their service. During their time out of the Army, he had purchased a small gas station, but soon found himself missing the Army life.

Paul Huff resumed the service in 1948 and started building a life for himself and his wife in the military. He continued his education in the Army and earned his General Equivalency Diploma as well as certification in a number of military sciences.

In 1949, he served as an instructor at the Non-Commissioned Officers Academy and went on to work with the Veterans Administration in Knoxville. He and his wife Betty lived on North Ash Street in the city and Sgt. Huff also achieved one of his life-long dreams of earning his pilot's license. In addition, he worked as an Army recruiter and Counselor

for several years with the United States Army, but the Tennesseean's early focus on the military was not to be his only career. He is also a member of the Tennessee State Bar and has been a member of the Tennessee State Bar since 1954. He is also a member of the Tennessee State Bar since 1954. He is also a member of the Tennessee State Bar since 1954.

Sgt. Major Paul Huff maintained a close life outside the military until his death on Sept. 21, 1996. He was laid to rest with his family in Cleveland's Hillcrest Cemetery near his family home in Bradley County. The four children and two grandchildren, numerous people from across the nation turned out to pay their final respects for the Tennesseean and perhaps no greater tribute for his service to this nation could be stated better than the words of Special Forces Col. and Knoxville Medal of Honor recipient Les Moss of Gadsden, Ala.

"Paul one of my best friends and a great American," Col. Les Moss, USA, ret. stated. "He was a model soldier and a credit to his uniform and this nation's armed forces. To anyone joining the armed forces, I would hold him up as an example of what they should try to become in their military career."

In 1996 through the efforts of the National Medal of Honor Museum and the local government, a stretch of Interstate 75 in Bradley County was named the Sgt. Paul Huff Memorial highway to commemorate the Tennesseean's service. In addition, the veteran's section of the Hillcrest Cemetery where he was laid to rest was also named in his honor.

Sgt. Paul Huff is well regarded in military circles as the model soldier and as one all others should study who strive to become a member of the legendary Airborne Division of the U.S. Army.

Those who knew Sgt. Major Paul Huff say he never forgot who he was and admired his ability, both as a soldier and his

family, they still regard themselves as first soldiers with only the junior term "straight leg" as differentiation between them and regular infantry.

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Special credit for this story must be given to Mrs. Betty Huff of Clarksville, Dr. Dawn Huff Branch of Knoxville, and Paul Huff, Jr. of Morris Island, FL. Throughout his life, his family says, Sgt. Major Paul Huff had an impact on all those he touched as a soldier, friend and citizen.

The National Medal of Honor Museum of Military History in Chattanooga has artifacts from Sgt. Major Paul Huff's brilliant military career and maintains a special display on the Army Airborne's first Medal of Honor recipient commemorating his life and service to America. Included in the display is his uniform, other medals he has received, and papers from his lifetime of service. Sgt. Major Huff was a close friend of the museum's founder Les Smith and spent a lot of hours in the museum during its formative years. Museum officials are still actively collecting and researching facts about his life and military service and will make the Sgt. Huff display a permanent part of the new museum's display.