



Looking Back

The Soldier's soldier The story of SGM Paul Huff



Paul Huff was born on June 23, 1918 near Cleveland, Tenn. in Bradley County. He was the seventh of ten children born to John Robert and Della 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-prosperous economy.

Although poor, the Huff's were an old family who had immigrated to the region in the 1840s from Greene County and had numerous relatives. The young 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, there was one thing that set Paul apart from them and it was his magnetic personality. As he grew up, he, like most boys in those days, lived a rough and tumble childhood and was given to mischievous pranks. When he was around 13 or 14 years old, however, dropped out of high school in Bradley County to go to work for the railroad and help out his family. The new responsibilities grew him up quickly, but he still retained a local character in Bradley County and stories still abound in the region about his antics. One of the most notable qualities among those who knew him was his extreme loyalty to his friends and family.

remained firm, he proved to be a natural born leader among his men and developed close ties with those he fought beside.

In late 1940, a newly promoted Corporal Huff and the 50th were shipped towards the coast of Italy to be part of what was to become the Allied invasion of the Mediterranean region. It would be a difficult task in that resources and men were being pulled away from the region in preparation for the upcoming anti-air assault on 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 Italy the "soft underbelly of Europe's Axis command", German fortifications and their fighting abilities almost proved insurmountable for the American forces. In fact, 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 eventually devised for the assault was for the Eighth Army to invade in the southern part of the nation while the Fifth Army landed at Salerno and cut off any German retreat.

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Courtesy National Medal of Honor Museum of Military History
Command Sgt. Major Paul Huff

positions of enemy positions. Cpl Huff had got what he came after and he was scheduled to leave Italy and return to the states with other

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 Medal of Honor recipient Charles Cookidge, who became a close family friend, in attendance at the ceremony. Cpl Huff, although out of the military, found little time for himself as he and the other Tennessee Medal of Honor recipients from World War II were asked to numerous receptions, dinners, and other special events honoring their heroic service. During his 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 skills for himself and his wife. 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 always had the life-long dream of earning his pilot's license. In addition, he worked as an Army recruiter and Counselor and spent a year in Japan on assignment in 1956. Being Airborne, he was assigned to their headquarters at Fort Campbell and eventually Clarksville.

this story must be given to Mrs. Betty Huff of Clarksville, Dr. James Huff Broad of Knoxville, and Paul Huff Jr. of Morris Island, FL. Throughout his life Sgt. Major Paul Huff had an impact on all those he touched. He was regarded in military circles as the model soldier and as an example to all others who would strive to become a member of the legendary Airborne Division of the U.S. Army. Outside the military, he was a beloved husband and father who is greatly missed. Of all the people I have met, who know him in both Bradley County and the military, their comments always revolved around his generosity and friendliness.

"Paul was a great man," said a retired Tennessee veteran. "He was always a modest and private man, but he could make anybody laugh and was generally liked by most people 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 last was felt by everyone."

Paul Huff's actions in the 1943 Italian Campaign of World War II were quickly captured by the Division, which earned four months later a Medal of Honor.

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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 military draft. Paul Huff was drafted into the service and sent to basic training at Camp Gordon in Macon, Ga. He was assigned to the 50th Infantry Division as a private in the 1st Battalion, 50th Infantry Regiment. As the D-Day walked down the list, he stepped in front of Huff and tried to dissuade 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 D-I hat and wasn't about to shave it off. The D-I then put him on punishment detail after daily training pushing weights and working kitchen detail on weekends. At the end of every day, they would ask Huff if he was ready to be sent. Used to long hard work in his mountain home, Huff maintained his vigilance and refused they after they to shave his mustache. 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 the new soldiers, he placed them on a mustache Paul Huff and nothing was ever said of his facial hair again.

Although some may have questioned his rebellious attitude, no one could ever find fault with the Tennessee's military bearing. Paul Huff was assigned to the Fifth Army's 50th Parachute Infantry Battalion under the command of legendary General Mark Clark.

Huff, who had always had a love for feet and a fascination with flying, excelled as a parachute infantryman and was quickly regarded as one of the best. He was found to have a good head under fire and could think clearly in the most trying of conditions - a feat that was no easy in the often dangerous assignments the 50th

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Around 4 a.m. on Sept. 8, 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 pinch and going to this operation. We have been unable to advance and the enemy is preparing a major counter attack. I am using everything I have got that is available. In the present situation, our great hope is the Air Force."

The Fifth Army evaded three more days of the bitter combat before Adolf Hitler's order had the desired effect and the men could begin advancing. The massive air campaign, however, sapped the available resources for ground forces, which caused the Italy invasion to break down into a long campaign against an enemy using a variety of tactics to keep the Allies off guard.

Cpl Huff and the 50th were in the thick of things and, as Paul began to give way to Wilson, the weathered leader for the men. On Feb. 8, 1944, the men found themselves pinned down under heavy enemy fire of unknown strength. The countryside in front of them comprised of level rolling hills where enemy observers had great visibility and were launching an effective defense from the right flank of Huff's advancing force. The Tennessee knew that someone would have to first penetrate the enemy stronghold before his force could advance on more. Cpl Huff volunteered to lead a five-man patrol with that very mission.

With his men assembled, Cpl Huff began walking across the level terrain as his men approached, small arms fire, machine guns, and mortar began targeting the small force. With shells striking up within five or six yards of the group and bullets striking the ground in front of them, Cpl Huff took point on the patrol to draw the fire away from his men. Cpl Huff



Courtesy National Medal of Honor Museum of Military History
Command Sgt. Major Paul Huff

positions of enemy positions. Cpl Huff had got what he came after and he was scheduled to leave Italy and return to the states with other recipients to receive the medal at the White House ceremony, but the "Tennessee" regulations would allowed Huff again when he refused to leave his men in the field. While the other men of the 50th were in the field, Huff remained on the ground with the 50th and their Infantry making him the first Airborne soldier in American history to be awarded the nation's highest military award.

Cpl Huff remained in the area throughout World War II and eventually sent overseas. He was twice hit in his own chest, but never allowed himself to be wounded. On his last day in the service, he was given a bullet wound in his chest and a bullet wound in his arm and discharged as a sergeant. Following a short period in the hospital, he was discharged as a sergeant.

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Early on at Fort Campbell, Huff was found to be a natural leader and old-fashioned sense that was based on the ground and respect of his men. Huff was a natural leader and old-fashioned sense that was based on the ground and respect of his men. Huff was a natural leader and old-fashioned sense that was based on the ground and respect of his men.

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Command Sgt. Major Paul Huff and his wife Betty were on to raise three children and pursue through college. Throughout his service and into his retirement, many people tend to go Sgt. Major Huff in places that day in Italy where his actions had earned him the Medal of Honor, but the Tennessee, like most recipients, would discuss the incident in any detail - even to their family members. He simply regarded himself as a professional soldier and considered such conversations unhelpful. However, Paul Huff, Jr. was to graduate from the University of Tennessee at Knoxville with an Air Force commission working at Cape Canaveral, his middle daughter works at a store in Lee Venable.

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The during periods have information of World War II would not only give their service work in combat and help lead the Allied Forces in victory, they would go on to become one of the elite fighting units of the United States Army. Their noble actions as individual soldiers made them among the most admired and best-loved warriors on the battlefield. Although they possess an air about in the military, they will regard themselves as just soldiers with only the jargon were "straight-up" in difference between them and regular infantry.

Sgt. Major Paul Huff is 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. It is still a philosophy held by military leaders around the world.

The Fort Campbell home the Huff family lived in until Huff's retirement in 1973 is still standing and today serves as officer's quarters for the 101st Airborne Division. A street on the base is also named in the Tennessee's honor. The military installation is still today a vital part of the upper Middle Tennessee and lower Kentucky communities.

The National Medal of Honor Museum of Military History in Clarksville, Tenn.



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Although some may have questioned his rebellious attitude, no 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 the command of legendary General Mark Clark.

Huff, who had always had a love for fast cars and a fascination with flying, excelled as a parachute infantryman and was quickly regarded as one of the best. He was found to have a cool head under fire and could think clearly in the most trying of conditions - a trait that was necessary in the often dangerous assignments the 509th undertook in the war.

The military reliance on parachute infantry was new to war and their effectiveness was remarkable. Parachute command, the airborne soldiers proved 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 the region. The paratroopers often jumped into completely hostile territory and were expected to fight their way to key targets and hold them until conventional forces could relieve them and strengthen the line.

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

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Cpl. Huff and the 509th were in the thick of things and, as Fall began to give way to Winter, the weather turned brutal for the men. On Feb. 8, 1944, the men found themselves pinned down under heavy enemy fire of unknown strength. The countryside in front of them comprised of level rolling hills where enemy doctors had great visibility and were launching an effective defensive fire at the right flank of Huff's advancing force. The Tennessee knew that someone would have to first propose the enemy stronghold before his face could advance forward. Cpl. Huff volunteered to lead a six-man patrol with that very mission.

With his men assembled, Cpl. Huff began looking across the level terrain towards the entrenched Germans. As his men approached, small arms fire, machine guns, and mortars began targeting the small force. With shells blowing up within five or six yards of the group and bullets striking the ground in front of them, Cpl. Huff took point on the patrol to draw the fire away from his men. Cpl. Huff halted the men in a reasonable safe location and advanced alone to watch 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 nest machine gun, the Tennessee crawled 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 moved up to a landing position and opened fire at the other enemy positions. The Germans, who were shocked by the location of the sudden enemy fire, immediately turned their guns on the Bradley County native, which gave him the

The afternoon an integral of voice with Cpl. Huff leading a company of 125 men attacked the German fortifications causing the enemy from the field of battle. The company under his command killed 27 Germans and captured 21 other with only a loss of three patrol members. He acted that day near Cassino, Italy earned the admiration and respect of the Fifth Army command, who had feared a devastating enemy one in the early battles because of the German's strength. The Tennessee's heroic actions in the face of a superior force earned him the National Medal of Honor.

When the Vietnam War started, Sgt. Huff volunteered but the Medal of Honor recipient was refused. He eventually received special permission from the Pentagon and served as a General's Aide in 1967 where 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 Command Sergeant Major at the Headquarters Company of the U.S. Army Garrison at Fort Campbell. In 1973, the Tennessee finally retired from military life in Clarksville. In addition to holding the nation's highest military award, he was also recipient of more than 15 other medals, including the Bronze Star and the Legion of Merit.



Courtesy National Medal of Honor Museum of Military History

This photograph shows troops from the Fifth Army entering Rome. The invasion of Italy proved to be one of the hardest fought campaigns in the Mediterranean. German soldiers had retreated during the Sicily invasion and reinforced German positions on the Italian mainland. Allied forces had to overcome each position and do so with draining resources as the Allies prepared for the D-Day Invasion.

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Command Sgt. Major Paul Huff and his wife Betty went on to raise three children and part-time through college. Throughout his service and into 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, wouldn't discuss the incident in any detail - even to his closest family members. He simply regarded himself as a professional soldier and considered such conversations unglorified. However, Paul Huff, Jr. went on to graduate from the University of Tennessee at Knoxville and became an Air Force chemist working at Cape Canaveral, his middle daughter works as a nurse in Las Vegas, and his youngest daughter Dawn Huff Brandy became a pediatrician and now resides in Knoxville. Command 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 stature in Cleveland's Hillcrest Cemetery near his family home in Bradley County. He was survived by his wife Betty, three children, and two grandchildren. In 1996, a stretch of Interstate 75 in Bradley County was renamed the Sgt. Paul Huff Memorial Highway to commemorate the Tennessee's service and the veteran's sacrifice of the Hillcrest Cemetery was also named in his honor.

Editor's note: Special credit for

campaign, including the Medal of Honor recipient in World War II - Lt. Edward Colburn.

The following are the recipients of World War II medals and only prove their service in combat and help lead the Allied Forces to victory, they would go on to become one of the elite fighting units of the United States Army. Their noble actions as individual soldiers made them among the most effective and close-knit warriors on the battlefield. Although they pursue an elite status in the military, they still regard themselves as five soldiers with only the proper sense of "straight-up" in differences between them and regular infantry.

Sgt. Major Paul Huff's high regard for the average soldier is reflected 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. It is still a philosophy held by military leaders around the world.

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The National Medal of Honor Museum of Military History in Clarksville has a few artifacts from Sgt. Major Paul Huff's illustrious military career and maintains a special display on the Army Airborne's first National Medal of Honor recipient commemorating his life and service in 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 Lee Smith and gave 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 museum's display.