

Modern-Day Reenactors Honor Blue Devil Accomplishments

Blue Devil World War II history is alive and well with some modern-day historical reenactors in Toledo, Ohio.

“The 88th Reenacting Group” was founded in March 2001. According to its own website, the group is “dedicated to preserving the memory of our WW2 generation by accurately portraying a World War 2 division.” The group currently has nine members, plus a war correspondent, and usually fields six at reenacting events.

Most of the members of the “88th” are enrolled in college, so their participation at reenacting events is usually limited to the summer. The group says it usually attends four major events per year along with three minor events, generally in the Ohio/Indiana area. The average age of the 88th reenactors is 19—just about as it was in 1944.

Why the 88th?

When asked why the group decided on the 88th Infantry Division as the unit it wanted to recreate, group member Patrick Costa said, “Well, when we first started off, we realized there were a lot of units in this hobby (meaning World War Two reenacting) that are either specialized (airborne, ranger, etc.) or all saw action in France, German, Belgium, etc. While, these men deserve their due, we felt that the Italian Campaign was overlooked (not only in this hobby but the history books as well)! With Italy in mind, we decided on the 88th because the more research we did on this infantry division, the more we realized that the men of this division have not gotten their dues. They were draftees, men without any formal military training, and they fought harder, longer, and faster than some Army and National Guard units. Yet, these men were overshadowed by events in Europe and even their greatest capture (Rome) was underplayed because of D-day two days later. These men did great things and help to liberate a nation, yet the

history books pretty much state that the fighting in Italy was over with the capture of Rome and the focus of the text in the books shift to France, Belgium, Germany, etc., without acknowledging that fighting in Italy that still continued all the way to the end of the war. This is not justice to the men who fought.”

The unit has aligned itself specifically with the 350th Regimental Combat Team. By doing this, the members say, it gives them some leeway as to what they want to portray at an event; for example, they would be able to choose whether they would want to portray a .30-caliber team, a regular infantry squad, or run communications.

Website

The group has created its own website, which is found at <http://www.angelfire.com/extreme2/ww2reenacting/>. According to the group’s president, John Pittner, [we] “have received several e-mails from veterans who have visited our website. I must say it is the greatest feeling in the whole world to get e-mails from these men telling us how honored they feel. After all, they are why we started the organization and it is their memories and sacrifices we want to preserve.”

Recreating the 88th

The “88th” participates in two kinds of reenactment events. One is a living history event, the other is a public battle, meaning they battle the “Germans” in front of the public so the public gets an idea of what it was like during WWII on a full-fledged scale. Sometimes at battles, there are American and German tanks, jeeps, and halftracks all attacking. Sometimes planes do flyovers and dogfight each other in the sky.



Left: NEED GROUP IDs

Above: Brandon Tharpe and Ryan Wikstrom in their foxhole.

Living History

Unlike some reenacting groups—which use non-period tactics and go “cowboy” style into battle—the 88th Reenacting Group does not do this. Its members focus on living and doing what the WWII GI went through. They are so thorough in their reenactment that when they attended a reenacting event in Conneaut, OH, they took second place in the Living History Contest. When asked how they won this award, group member Patrick Costa said, “the Conneaut event was judged by the public who visited [our encampment]. We were assigned a number and the public voted. While there wasn't specific criteria to vote on, we interacted with the public to the best of our abilities. We allowed them to try on gear, handle equipment ([children] were allowed to handle firearms [only] if their adult was present and they gave consent; even then, we still had one hand on it), pose pictures with us, we informed them of what the GI ate, the uniform layout, and explained to them what it was like being back in World War Two.”

“I think we stood out,” Patrick continued, “because we focused on interacting with the public, rather than putting out a display of various items and having the public look at them and never understand the connection. We let the public handle equipment and try on the uniform, so they can get a feel as to what the GI had to wear and use. We used an interactive display as well, meaning we would be doing various GI activities, like cooking, cleaning the rifle, writing the letters, etc. And another member would explain to the public what we were doing. We also had a “war correspondent” who is a female member of our group. She was able to provide the public with insights on reporting and journalism in World War Two, and what it was like to be female and involved actively in the war.”



Patrick said he was excited to meet actual veterans,. “On a side note, we were delighted to meet several World War Two veterans who showed up that day. One we talked to was in a Signal Corps assault battalion. His job was to go in on the beach and direct the naval gunfire and communications during the beach attack. Another veteran was actually in the 88th! He went in, in 1945 and helped guard POWs on the train. He mentioned that whenever he went into a restaurant, if there weren't enough tables, other GIs would give up their seats to the 88th.”

Attention to Detail

To help recreate battles, living conditions, and equipment realistically, the group has compiled a rather impressive listing of period field manuals and research books that they use on a regular basis. Much of this information has been posted to their website so that it is not only a useful resource for reenactors, but for veterans who just want to remember.

What is remarkable is the attention that these reenactors give to even the most minute details. They want to give their members and other interested parties the details that will make their participation the most authentic—and hence the most rewarding—for themselves and for those who view their events. To get an idea of the level of detail they try to recreate, here are some of the topics they carry on their website:

- Formations of Squad—Diagrams showing the 3 common formations
- Army Songs—A selection of WW2 Songs (including the 88th's song)
- Books Go to War—About those little “hip-sized” pocket books; Editions for the Armed Services Inc.



Taken in the morning before the reenactment at Knob Creek, a private battle (closed to the public). Steven Cooper, sitting, is trying to stomach down some c-rations and Ryan is trying to enjoy a smoke before the battle starts. Above: Patrick Costa, running a switchboard for the Allied camp



At a reenacting event. John Pittner, standing, directs fire to Steve Cooper (with stripes visible), an unknown man, and Matt Plascsak (foreground) listening.

Manual of Arms—WW2 manual of arms (just text no pictures as of yet)

The 3 Major Rations—An article about the 3 major (C, D, K) Ration types in World War II and individual articles about how to make them

Gum Wrappers in WW2—An article on how to make them

Restoration on an SCR300/BC1000—Tips and information on how to restore one

The Green Lucky Strike Myth—All about those famous WWII Lucky Strikes

How to speak Italian—Because the 88th was in Italy, the reenactors try to learn some Italian phrases

Scouts in World War II—The #2 and #3 men in a squad and their functions

Sending Message—An article on how to correctly send messages, both written and verbal

Making a Message Book—How make a message book

Undergarments Go to War—Undergarments in World War II

Slang Terms—A listing of some 1940s and World War II slang and expressions

Craps and Cards Lists—1940s card games; includes a manual on the Armed Forces #1 sport, Craps!

M1 Carbine usage and accouterments

World War Two Quartermaster—All about the QM and its function in an Infantry Division



This close-up view of Ryan Wikstrom at the Knob Creek private battle shows the level detail he went to in putting together his equipment.

The 88th Reenactor Group members immerse themselves so completely into their 88th heritage that they have taken on WWII-era personalities and list their roster on the website, complete with names, birthdates, hometowns, former occupations, when they came to the 88th, job descriptions with the 88th, and so on.

When asked if the members would appreciate contact with their WWII counterparts in the Association, Patrick said, "I would love to be in contact and I am sure our President and the rest of our group will agree also! Speaking of being in contact, we were recently in contact with Leonard Dziabas. I had bought some 88th paperwork at a military show and decided it would serve the veteran association more than it would serve me. And so we (me and John Pittner) meet him and his family over lunch. He was great to talk to and his stories are amazing. It really speaks volumes about war and how it was.

Patrick summed it for the group, "We appreciate the thankless job these men did in order to preserve freedom, order, and sanity so that their country and their grandchildren could live in an era of peace and tranquility."