

Trenches to Foxholes

Houmont is getting ready to welcome U.S. WWII veterans

by Cis Spook

USAG Benelux Public Affairs

Houmont, a small village west of Bastogne, is about to welcome five American WWII veterans who fought in the area during the winter of 1944-1945. The U.S. veterans visiting this year were all part of the 17th Airborne Division that, with its attached units, launched the counteroffensive in the southern part of the Bulge, a ridge about 12 miles west from Bastogne. The ridge would later be dubbed "Dead Man's Ridge," since so many Soldiers, both German and American, lost their lives trying to take it.

After the war, Cpl. Walter E. Wrzeszczynski of the 1st Battalion, 194th Glider Infantry Regiment, 17th Airborne Division, recalled his experience.

"The group of men I was assigned to were told to establish a line of foxholes in an exposed area outside of a small village," he said. "The ground was frozen, and the men didn't dig deep enough. The German artillery men observing the activity started to lob shells into our position."

Wrzeszczynski took care of the wounded and evacuated them to the village of Houmont where the forward aid station was located.

"The next night, when I went out on patrol, it was pitch black as we started to enter the forest," he said. "Suddenly, the moon came out and lit up an eerie scene in the draw below. Six G.I.'s were frozen in death where they had sat down to rest, their rifles between their knees, snow gathering on their uniforms and helmets. This scene looked like a sculpture, and it is so embedded in my mind that to this day I wonder if they were really dead or booby-trapped."

Members of the 17th Airborne Division are honored every year by the local residents of Houmont and the 101st Airborne Belgian Friendly. This year, in presence of five U.S. WWII veterans accompanied by 50 of their family members, two plaques will be unveiled and the village square will officially be named "194th Glider Infantry Regiment square" during a ceremony Saturday, March 21 at 4 p.m.

On Sunday, the 101st Airborne Belgian Friendly organizes its annual "Dead's Man Ridge Walk," which also honors the 17th Airborne Division that lost more than 3,000 men in the area. The walk of a distance of either 7.5 or 15 km, will depart from Houmont after a short ceremony at 9 a.m. Just like previous years, the proceeds from the walk will be used to finance a trip back to Belgium for one of the 17th Airborne Division veterans.

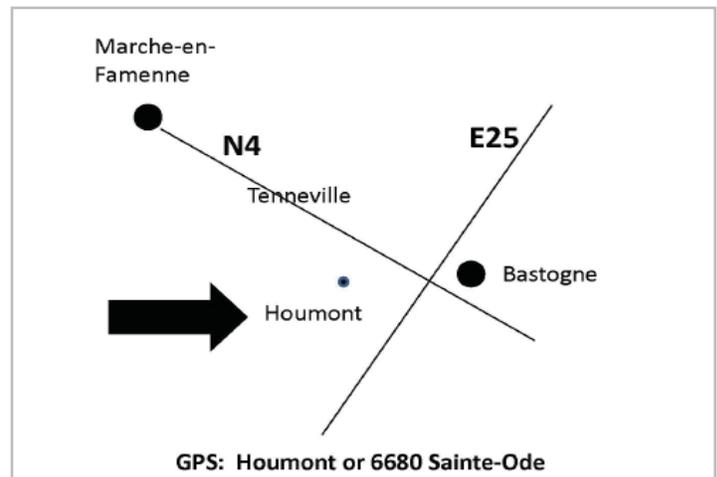
This year, the association was able to finance the trip of Lynn Aas, a 193rd Glider Infantry Regiment veteran who will be accompanied by four other veterans — John Schumacher of the 194th GIR, Daniel Chipeco of the 466th Parachute Field Artillery Battalion, Austin Steen of the 513th Parachute Infantry Regiment and John Kormann of the 517th Signal Company with some of their family members.



John Schumacher, veteran of the 194th Glider Infantry Regiment, 17th Airborne Division signs as "first honorary citizen of Sainte Ode" during his visit to Houmont in 2012. Schumacher will be visiting again this year.



Left: The 17th Airborne Division insignia. • Above: The 194th Glider Infantry Regiment insignia.



Ceremony in Houmont

Date: Saturday, March 21

Time: 4 p.m.

Event: 70th Anniversary commemoration with the unveiling of two plaques and official renaming of the square, in the presence of five U.S. WWII veterans who were part of the 17th Airborne Division accompanied by some of their family members. The USAG Benelux Color Guard will participate in the ceremony.

Dead's Man Ridge Walk

Although prior registration ended March 9, the 101st Airborne Belgian Friendly won't turn down anyone interested in participating in the walk. Payment (€5) can be made on site.

Date: Sunday, March 22

Time: Walk starts after the 9 a.m. ceremony in Houmont

Distance: 7.5 or 15 km

Lynn Aas, a 193rd Glider Infantry Regiment veteran, will be present at the walk.

Info: <http://101ab.be>.