



On the morning of the event, seven hours prior to the actual battle, reenactors and their equipment rendezvous in a private field outside of town for simulated war games, which is a form of combat dress rehearsal to try out tactical approaches, test weapons, try maneuvers with armored battle vehicles and discuss battle strategy.

The Greatest WWII Battle That You've Never Heard of

**Reenactment in
Tidioute, Warren
County, recalls inten-
sity of Nijmegen clash
75 years later**

Text and photographs
by Daniel Stainer



THE SMELL OF FRESHLY BAKED GERMAN brotchen rolls fills the camp, as I watch a Panzer III tank being offloaded from a flatbed. I am getting ready to settle into the role of embedded war correspondent for the next two days at the reenactment of the WWII battle of Nijmegen.

For the past 10 years, reenactors have come to Tidioute in Warren County to faithfully re-create another WWII encounter called the Battle at Remagen, but a decision was made to change things last year and commemorate the Nijmegen Battle's 75th anniversary instead. Unlike Remagen, the goal for Nijmegen will be to save the bridge rather than destroy it.

Seventy-five years ago, British and American allies fought an extraordinarily bloody battle against the Germans to gain control of the Nijmegen Bridge in Holland. Tens of thousands of lives were lost on both sides. In just under 24 hours, hundreds of armed reenactors from as far away as Massachusetts will be staging a raging public battle in this picturesque borough that culminates in the capture of the bridge and the eventual surrender of the Germans.

Focus on Authenticity

I ARRIVE AT THE encampment at 1500 hours on Friday, the day before the Tidioute



Bridge will be overrun with actors representing the forces who went to battle as part of a larger Allied

operation code-named Market Garden. For the more than 200 reenactors who are descending on the borough of Tidioute, the actual 1944 battle might as well be occurring this weekend. For the four WWII veterans who have been invited to observe the reenactment up close, it probably feels like it has.

In the scorching heat of a steamy August weekend, Allied and German soldiers dressed in long-sleeve wool uniforms are going about the sweaty business of pounding in tent stakes or cleaning rifles. The less-than-forgiving sultry weather makes the experience all the more palpable, and the soldiers seem almost to relish the adversity as a reenactment rite of passage.

Tidioute's 11th annual WWII reen-

(above) Dressed in period-authentic attire and using a working field kitchen with WWII-era ovens and stoves, German SS cooks and servers spent the weekend feeding hungry reenactors at the encampment.

actment is an opportunity for die-hard history buffs and devoted hobbyists to step back in time. They will be the first to tell you that there is more to reenacting than simply putting on a herringbone twill uniform or firing off an M1 Garand rifle. Beneath the camaraderie and pleasantries shared by reenactors on all sides is an unshakable understanding that what they are doing matters.

Among a sea of olive-drab and khaki-colored canvas tents set up at the Limestone ballfields just south of the

bridge, German SS divisions have painstakingly re-created a period-accurate military field canteen to feed their troops. On the Allied side of camp, soldiers in D-company sit around a table playing cards while Bing Crosby's "I'll Be Seeing You" plays on a vintage Zenith tube radio. The baby-faced soldiers of the 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment are busy loading ammunition into their clips. I can sense they are chomping at the bit, anxiously biding their time before the big firefight the next day.

Throughout the encampment, the attention to detail and focus on authenticity are remarkable. Reenactors do not hesitate to hide plastic water bottles or take off their Ray-Ban sunglasses to maintain a

(top) Prior to the start of the bridge battle in town, Lee Lindemuth (not pictured) who heads up the Tidioute WWII Reenactment Committee conducted a ceremony for WWII veterans to honor the courageous soldiers who fought in the actual Nijmegen Bridge battle.

Living WWII veterans Art Hodges, Paul Hannhold, Guy Prestia and James Slupe attended and were able to watch the action from a special VIP viewing tent.

(bottom) Fending off fast-approaching German SS troops, Allied soldiers dig in to protect the bridge from being overrun.

faithful impression. Sleeping quarters are meticulously arranged with blankets, shaving supplies and nostalgic knickknacks to convey a real sense of what it feels like to be a soldier on the front lines in 1944.

Even more notable is the authenticity of



(left) An officer with the German SS Panzer Division gets a bird's-eye view of his troops atop a Panzer III tank. (right) As a German light armor vehicle rounds a corner in town inching ever close to the bridge, Battle of Nijmegen reenactment coordinator Pat Tarasovich instructs Allied soldiers to retreat back over the bridge so that they can regroup on the other side.

character. I feel as if I am looking through a mirror into the past. The reenactors' mannerisms and behaviors embody the essence of the soldiers they portray. It is as if they are channeling the spirits of long-departed WWII soldiers, like a wax cast on a death mask.

"There will be a mandatory officers' tactical meeting at 1900 hours," reenactment coordinator Pat Tarasovich tells an Allied lieutenant who is registering his division

at the 99th Infantry tent, which serves as the camp's makeshift headquarters. About a dozen of Tarasovich's men will be joining the fight, part of the Battle Babies contingency out of Erie.

Operation Market Garden

A BOLD OPERATION MEANT to shorten the war, the Battle of Nijmegen occurred in the Netherlands from September 17 to 20, 1944, as part of Operation Market Garden. If successful, the plan would not only have liberated the Netherlands, but allowed Allied forces to secure the River Rhine crossings and advance deep into northern Germany toward its industrial heartland.

Considered one of the largest and most daring airborne operations in history, the plan involved the capture of key bridges

in the Netherlands by U.S. and British airborne divisions. Although the Allied offensive eventually ended in a tactical defeat, Market Garden is widely considered one of WWII's most famous and ferocious offensives — mainly because of the sheer grit and valor the airborne troops and supporting Allied units showed over the course of the skirmish. In the nine days of Market Garden, combined casualties amounted to more than 17,000, yet few people are aware of the significance of this WWII operation.

Sitting on the banks of the Allegheny River, the small borough of Tidioute closely resembles Nijmegen, Holland, from its similar steel girder bridge construction to an uncanny resemblance to the Rhine River. It provides an ideal loca-

tion to re-create the actual events of 1944.

The day of the reenactment dawns, and German reenactors have crossed the Tidioute Bridge to stage troops on the far end of town past the Do It Best Lumber Yard. Allied troops soon follow, setting the stage for a brutal showdown. Dozens of Allied and German armored military vehicles are involved in the skirmish, including jeeps, half-tracks and tanks.

A large group of women reenactors dressed as Dutch civilians circulate around the special veterans' viewing area that has been set up in town. After the Allies cross the bridge, they pass out cookies and bread to their liberators.

I am hugging the outside wall of an old wooden building when the first shots ring out. Jeeps chaotically scramble around

me as a few 82nd Airborne troops take cover behind a barrier.

Like an approaching thunderstorm, the gunfire increases in intensity and frequency as the German forces push forward toward the center of town, and Allied forces aggressively return fire.

'Don't Leave Me'

A WAVE OF EMOTION overcomes me, and I start to tear up. Pretending to have dust in my eyes, I quickly manage to pull myself together.

Meanwhile, the crowds blur into the background as I sink deep into the action. A soldier collapses in front of me after getting shot by a German combatant. A comrade-in-arms tries to save him, but the ground fire is intense and the fighter

too badly injured to be evacuated without risking more lives.

"Don't leave me" are the last haunting words I remember hearing before we are instructed by commanders to withdraw across the bridge. In that moment, I realize why living-history reenactments like these are so important. It helps me imagine what it must have been like for the actual soldiers fighting in Nijmegen, only they had real bullets whizzing by their heads and heart-pounding fear coursing through their veins.

I now understand the common bond that veterans often feel when they're in the presence of other veterans. There must be an unwavering tie that connects them through a shared battle experience. While I can't pretend that what I am





(above) In a very realistic re-creation, an Allied soldier attempts to save his brother-in-arms after he was shot by a German combatant. (top, middle) Due to their fast speed and ability to drive over rough terrain, German motorcycles often played a large role on the battlefield. (top, right) A British paratrooper reenactor with the 9th Parachute Battalion out of Michigan prepares to deploy to town prior to the start of the main Battle of Nijmegen event. (above, middle) During a period of downtime, encamped German SS soldiers play the board game “Mensch Aergere Dich Nicht,” a game that is very similar to the American game of Sorry!

experiencing this weekend comes anywhere close to being in actual battle, it does give me a glimpse, and sometimes that’s enough to change one’s perspective.

Each day, around 350 American WWII

veterans die, and when they’re gone, their stories will perish alongside them. Public reenactments like this one in Tidioute can help preserve history so that we never forget. They also give younger generations a fleeting opportunity to personally thank and honor veterans for their service while there’s still time.

Back to the Action

WITH THE GERMANS CLOSING in, I follow the retreating Allied troops across the bridge, while a rolling salvo of smoke grenades, explosions and deafening rifle blasts simulates live fire. It feels like a fireworks finale, only a hundred times more intense.

The fierce fighting continues on the

south end of the bridge, while droves of spectators watch in awe from the hilltop, safely out of harm’s way on their comfortable lawn chairs. As the smoke finally clears to reveal the bridge still standing, the Germans reluctantly hold up the white flag of surrender, marking the end of the tumultuous battle. The Allies have successfully taken control of the Nijmegen Bridge.

Carrying American and British flags, a few exhausted Allied soldiers trudge up the hill toward the spectators, weaving around the reenactors who are playing dead. With ceremonial precision, they proudly hoist the flags into the air to the resounding approval of the applauding crowd. Out of the corner of my eye, I

watch a Dutch reenactor gratefully kiss an Allied soldier on the cheek.

With beads of sweat streaming down my forehead, I take off the weighty WWII helmet that the reenactment coordinator let me borrow. I hadn’t noticed it before, but neatly tucked underneath the liner webbing is a letter from home. I don’t know if the letter was authentic, and I never checked, but it easily could have been.

At the end of the weekend, I drive off in my air-conditioned car heading back to my easy suburban life. I can’t help but be reminded of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s quote, “Those who have long enjoyed such privileges as we enjoy forget in time that men have died to win them.”

My experience at the reenactment was visceral, intense, immersive and loud. It shook me to my core. I recognize that it was just a reenactment, but somehow, it was all so humbling.

During the actual Battle of Nijmegen, only two reporters were embedded with the 82nd Airborne Division, but they were both busy covering action elsewhere, so not many written or photographic accounts of the actual battle exist. All that remains is a quilt of memories pieced together from firsthand accounts.

I would like to believe that my presence that weekend as an embedded war correspondent can help keep history alive for WWII veterans, such as Paul Hannhold, Art Hodges, Guy Prestia and

(top) At the start of the reenactment, British and American allies cross over the Route 62 Bridge in Tidioute to the cheers of spectators lined up on the street. (above, left) Allied soldiers in D Company, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment of the 82nd Airborne Division, clean rifles and formulate their battle strategy at their encampment. (above, right) Although no bombs were used during the mock bridge battle, fireworks and smoke grenades add to the authenticity and realism of the reenactment.

James Slupe, who were there to witness the reenactment. After all, if we don’t tell their stories, who will? 🍷

—Contributor Daniel Stainer is based in Slippery Rock.

NOTE: Although the annual reenactment has been canceled for this year due to restrictions around COVID-19 health concerns, it is expected to return at the end of July 2021.