

MEMORIES OF THE GHOST ARMY



Soldiers from the 603rd Camouflage Engineers Headquarters Company. Seymour Nussenbaum standing in a white T-shirt.



SEYMOUR NUSSENBAUM

If you ask centenarian Seymour Nussenbaum to name one of his greatest accomplishments while serving in the Ghost Army during World War II, he would say with a smirk, “That I got out alive.”

The Ghost Army was a critical part of the Allied victory, fusing psychological trickery with military magic. While not officially a combat unit, the Ghost Army operated on the front lines of misinformation, engaging in all kinds of deceptive tactics, from painting signs and numbers on trucks to impersonating different military divisions, to convince the Germans to keep their assets right where the Allies wanted them, in active defense of a military force that didn’t exist.

A native of Manhattan, Nussenbaum spent his formative years in the Bronx. After high school, Nussenbaum studied art at Pratt Institute. When war broke out, the university started offering a non-credit course in camouflage, anticipating that its students would need this knowledge on the battlefield. The forward-thinking

Nussenbaum took the camouflage course to prepare for the Army and progressed in his studies. “I wasn’t quite sure about enlisting,” he says. “But I thought that if I would enlist or be drafted, I wanted to be doing something that I knew something about, not just become an ordinary soldier. I would have liked to wait until the end of the semester to make up my mind, but it didn’t work that way.”

Still unsure how such a unit would fit into its broader strategy, the Army selected 1,100 soldiers, choosing artists and actors—people with imagination and creativity. With his new-found knowledge, Nussenbaum was identified as an ideal match for this role. There was no rulebook for this kind of work, Nussenbaum says. A lot of it was invented on the spot, and spontaneity was king, adding to the unit’s mystique. “We had a lot of talented people in the unit,” he explains. “Most of them were college graduates and their IQ was exceptionally high for any unit in the service.” He continues, “We didn’t know the scope of what we were doing. The average soldier didn’t know anything. Afterwards, when we found out what it was that we actually did, you had a little pride in it.”

Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, 20-year-old Nussenbaum left college to join the 23rd Headquarters Special Troops as a member of the 603rd Engineer Camouflage Battalion, where he served from February 1943 to November 1945.

In June 1944, Nussenbaum and his company arrived on the shores of Normandy at Omaha Beach, a mere three days after D-Day. Nussenbaum recalls the raw conditions of the time: “We hadn’t captured a port yet, all we had was the beach.” They made their way through the water, passing the bodies of fellow soldiers and climbing the sloped beach. “We stayed on the beach and spent the night in a foxhole, finding a place to be out of trouble.”

The next day, they boarded US Army



Nussenbaum shares a moment with fellow Ghost Army veteran Bernie Bluestein at the WWII Museum in 2020.

trucks that brought them eastward toward Germany. There, they went straight to work as set designers, artists, engineers, and architects. “We followed the troops, and wherever we were needed, we were used,” says Nussenbaum.

Their objective was to mimic combat units that were moving on and create the impression of an entire Army Division. This forced the Germans to devote resources to fend off this supposed threat, while the Allies used the time gained to push further into the Continent against a weaker opponent.

Nussenbaum himself worked at Headquarters and Service (H&S) company, spending much of his time in the factory section, responsible for the maintenance of inflatable decoys and producing counterfeit shoulder badges. Originally, his team found themselves severely limited in supplies. Forced to improvise, they foraged for old khaki canvas shelter halves, which proved to be the perfect style and color for their deceptive purposes. Creating shoulder badges was a tedious process that required

tracing the badges, dividing the colors, and separating them into printing batches. To complicate matters, they could only print six versions of one color at a time. Obviously, attention to detail was grueling, yet mission critical. As the soldiers gained experience, they churned out the counterfeit badges at lightning speed, ultimately producing between 30,000 and 40,000 badges.

The Ghost Army had a variety of other tricks up their sleeves. They painted inflatable tanks, with false unit insignias. In order to keep the deception power at the max, the Ghost Army camouflaged the trucks and other inflatables, but made sure to do it poorly so the Germans would see them and simply think the Americans did a bad job on the camouflage, and thereby expend significant effort to counter the threat. The camouflage units would then take these inflatables very close to German positions, sometimes only 1,000 feet away!

Their techniques involved audio ruses as well—the soldiers would play recordings of battle sounds, and play false radio broadcasts that the Ger-

mans could easily decode. They started by listening to radio transmitters and becoming familiar with specific officers and their particular style and pattern of speaking.

Ghost Army soldiers even impersonated their own military officials in case Nazi spies were still skulking around the region. According to Nussenbaum, it wasn’t hard to impersonate someone. The unit always found people to play the part of a high ranking commander. For instance, a group of soldiers would go into a town, spreading misinformation that the “general” wanted to talk to them. Nussenbaum’s group would create fake badges for this event, and a Ghost Army actor would dress up and go talk to people as the general. “Everyone in town thought he was the real thing, and if any spies were there, they’d think the same,” Nussenbaum says.

Sometimes their efforts worked perfectly, but not every mission proceeded smoothly. Occasionally, their attempts ended in a firefight, but “not too often, just enough to make you feel uncomfortable,” says Nussen-



Pages from Seymour Nussenbaum’s Scrapbooks



Seymour and Montana Police Honor Guard

baum wryly.

Another tactic was to use their scant resources to appear to have more troops than they were. The unit would take their trucks and assign two to three people to sit on each bumper while the rest of the truck would be empty. The drivers would take the trucks all over town before returning to base and swapping the soldiers out for others. Then they'd take the same route again. Although there were only a few people per truck, they tricked the enemy into believing the trucks were full.

One thing that helped was the implementation of up-to-date information compiled into what the Army affectionately termed "poop sheets" to keep track of bumper markings, shoulder patches, MP uniforms, and so on. They had everything on file so that any plan would be ready to design when the Army wanted to create a specific deception.

For his part, since Nussenbaum worked in the factory, he only participated in the larger missions when everybody went. "I didn't know too

much about operations because I was attached to the headquarters company, and our job was to keep unit supplies and do paperwork," he says. "I only went on about four or five missions out of around twenty. It was enough to show me what it was like, and I was very proud of the work we were doing."

For a boy who had never been out of Brooklyn, the whole experience was rather exciting. "If we came to a certain village, you were able to go in as the Army allowed a certain number of people out," he adds. "They gave you a pass and said don't go further than this-and-this spot. We'd go into town, have a couple of beers and talk to people. I knew enough high school French to get along."

One of the biggest challenges during the war was keeping the Ghost Army a secret. To deal with this risk, the men were instructed not to go off by themselves. Whenever they had leave, they always went with a friend to make sure they did not give away important information.

As the war progressed, the unit be-

came a mishmash of personalities. When people went on leave or were discharged, it was harder to find creatives, so a good portion of their replacements were regular soldiers.

Nussenbaum became friendly with one particular soldier in his unit.

One day he said to his friend, "There's so much talent here, why don't we get together and put on a show?" They got permission from the CO and wrote hilarious Army parodies to popular songs, none of them complimentary. "We had a lot of fun doing that, and we put on a show for our outfit," he says. "Not everybody could get in, so we put on the show for a second night. Some of the higher ups from other outfits heard about it and came." Impressed by the show, the higher ranking audience members even discussed the idea of taking the show on the road to boost morale.

While serving in France, Nussenbaum attended a touching Rosh Hashanah service, arranged by Chaplain David Max Eichhorn in fall 1944. Around 400-500 service members attended, he remembers. After searching for some time, Chaplain Eichhorn finally secured a venue—an old synagogue that was dirty and in disrepair. Although German POWs cleaned it out, the synagogue was not in good shape. Eichhorn went ahead with services anyway. The roof had a leak, and it rained the day of the service. It was cold, but no one complained. They were overjoyed to be celebrating Rosh Hashanah together.

The Ghost Army's efforts were key in liberating France from the Nazis. Indeed, one of Nussenbaum's most memorable experiences was the liberation of Paris, although he wasn't there for long. He remembers arriving a few days after the liberation when the atmosphere was euphoric, full of happy chaos; citizens ran after the Americans' trucks as US soldiers tossed chocolates to Parisian youth. Being in Paris, even for a short while, was a dream come true for the sensitive soldier-artist.



Seymour with Ghost Army Legacy Project folks—Rick Beyer, Richard Mark, Roy Eichhorn.

After the war, Nussenbaum returned to Pratt Institute and earned his degree in illustration. Soon after, while working as a counselor in an art camp, he met his wife, Vera, who was born in Germany and remembered Kristallnacht. She had been sent to England on the very first Kindertransport at age 12. She remembered Nazis coming onto the trains and taunting the children. The couple went on to have two daughters and three grandchildren. “Outside of the military, I think my greatest accomplishment was raising a family and living a good life. My wife and I traveled, we had nice vacations, and we spent time with the children and the grandchildren. I still do.”

For decades, he didn’t talk about his wartime experience with his family, as the Ghost Army’s activities remained classified. When people asked what he did during the war, he would say ironically, “I blew up tanks,” in-

conspicuously leaving out the “inflatable” part. “Even my wife knew nothing about it,” he says. “I couldn’t tell her anything. When it all came out after 50 years, it really sprang open then. I was amazed myself!”

The only information the public had about the Ghost Army was from an article published right after the war, and a 1985 article in Smithsonian magazine. Yet the records remained sealed for another 10 years. Everyone was told to keep quiet because of the Cold War with the Soviets. “We didn’t want to give anything away that would help the enemy,” Nussenbaum remarks. “But by the 1990s, that type of warfare was highly improbable.” By then, even if a variation of the Ghost Army was implemented, the technology used and battle tactics from World War II would be very different. It was only a few years later, in 1996, that the mission was declassified. Rick Beyer, an author and

filmmaker, took on the mission of sharing this story with the world. Over the span of ten years following the release of the Smithsonian article in 1985, he dedicated his efforts to producing and directing the documentary “The Ghost Army” in 2013, and co-authoring the book “The Ghost Army of World War II” in 2015.

Over the years, Nussenbaum found himself working in various creative positions, as a designer and manager for a carton folding company, then art director, and freelancer to name a few. He created beautiful scrapbooks from his wartime experience, which are preserved by the Ghost Army Legacy Project. “I’m a collector at heart,” he says. “I collected bits and pieces of everything and sent them home.” When he returned to the states, schools were in the middle of their semesters, so to pass the time, Nussenbaum put together a couple scrapbooks. His family was very interested in looking at them, but they eventually went into a closet and no one looked at the scrapbooks again until historian Rick Beyer, president of the Ghost Army Legacy Project, asked to take a look. He was blown away by the scrapbooks and arranged for Nussenbaum to take a trip to the New Orleans World War II Museum. The museum interviewed him and expressed interest in the scrapbooks, so he decided to donate them. He kept a few choice pieces because he used to go around speaking about the Ghost Army, and he liked having items to pass around at his talks. Now at 101, Nussenbaum doesn’t travel to deliver his talks anymore, so his grandson brought the rest of those items to the World War II Museum.

Later, the Nussenbaums retired to Old Bridge, New Jersey where Vera passed away in 2016 at age 90.

Today, Seymour Nussenbaum lives in Monroe, New York. He and six other surviving Ghost Army veterans were thrilled when Congress passed a bill that granted the Congressional Gold Medal to members of the Ghost



Seymour signed photo

Army. For most, it was awarded posthumously, but three of the surviving veterans, including Nussenbaum, traveled to Capitol Hill to receive their medal in person. The official ceremony took place in March 2024.

Nussenbaum himself made the trip with his family alongside him, ac-

companied by his kids and grandkids. "They were all so thrilled, and I wanted it to be that way. I wanted to see them happy." he reflects.

When asked what it felt like to receive the medal, Nussenbaum shares, "I was a soldier then, and I listened to what they told me to do—now is no

different. I never expected anything. I was just serving my country. That is it."

The pursuit of wealth or recognition never felt like a priority, instead, Seymour values the simple joys of family and service. "Life has its moments," he continues. "I think what people should do more of is sit back and think about what they have, and not what they don't have. For some people, it's about money, getting rich. That was never important to me."

With nearly a lifetime dedicated to safeguarding a national secret and reminiscing on memories of war that only he and few others intimately understood, Seymour remains grateful for the opportunity to have served his country.

In his trademark modesty, he concludes: "We saved a lot of lives, and I was very happy I could help. What more can I say?"

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