



Soldiers of the 28th Infantry Division parade down the Champs-Élysées in Paris on August 29, 1944. The division was the first American division to enter the capital after its liberation. (Photo courtesy of the National Archives)

Iron Division Maintains the High Standards Set By Benjamin Franklin

By Michael L. Lewis

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From the Revolutionary War to Afghanistan, the NCOs of the 28th Infantry Division have been upholding the high standards of the time-honored corps for centuries. Yet being the U.S. military's oldest division is only part of what makes the Iron Division one of the Army's most unique.

A part of the Pennsylvania National Guard, the division has the only Stryker brigade combat team in the National Guard, and almost all the division's battalions are headquartered in the state, a rarity among Guard divisions. Those facts are just small glimpses into the division's history of leading by example, said its command sergeant major, Command Sgt. Maj. Christopher S. Kepner.

"The vision for 28th Infantry Division Soldiers is that they are fit, resilient and well trained," Kepner said. "When we look back, we think it is very important that we connect our history to that vision, because the 28th

Infantry Division Soldiers have been doing some phenomenal things throughout history."

From Ben Franklin to Pancho Villa

The division's oldest unit, 1st Battalion, 111th Infantry Regiment, was established by Benjamin Franklin in November 1747, nearly three decades before the nation declared independence. Frustrated by inaction by the Pennsylvania Provincial Assembly, then dominated by pacifist Quakers, Franklin organized a group of volunteers to defend Philadelphia from French, Native American and privateer attacks. Today, the unit is part of the division's 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team and is among the very few to have been awarded campaign streamers for combat in the Revolutionary War through Operation Iraqi Freedom.

During the Civil War, Pennsylvania volunteers fought in battles from Antietam, Md., to Vicksburg, Miss. But



Sgt. Benjamin H. Crippen's defiance against Confederate troops during the Battle of Gettysburg is depicted on a monument at the battlefield in Pennsylvania.

perhaps their fiercest fighting was within their own state at Gettysburg. There, on July 1, 1863, the 143rd Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry, made up of Soldiers from Pennsylvania's coal country, was the first infantry unit to arrive. When they were forced to flee from Confederate troops during the ensuing battle, their colorbearer, Sgt. Benjamin H. Crippen, was the last to retreat and was said to have continually stopped to shake his fist at the Confederates, daring them to take his flag. When he was shot and killed, the Confederate general reportedly said he was "quite sorry to have seen this gallant Yankee meet his doom." Crippen's flag is now displayed at the Pennsylvania State Capitol.

Following the Civil War, Pennsylvania militia units were officially organized in March 1879 as the Division of the National Guard of Pennsylvania with a keystone as its insignia. This makes it the oldest division-sized unit in any of the U.S. armed forces.

The division next saw federal service on the Mexican border in 1916 in response to Pancho Villa's deadly raid on Columbus, N.M. Redesignated as the 7th Division, the Pennsylvania units were sent to El Paso, Texas; the Big Bend area of Texas; and Nogales, Ariz. But by March 1917, the division's troops had all been sent back home.

Yet with World War I looming, it wouldn't be for long. Indeed, some of the units returning from the border had their demobilization orders rescinded en route to Pennsylvania. By August, the division had assembled near Augusta, Ga., for training, and in November, the division had its "28th" numerical designation restored along with its red keystone shoulder patch.

'Iron men'

The division was part of the French-British-American



In this artist's rendition, Soldiers from the 28th Division make their heroic stand against German troops outside the village of Château-Thierry, France, in July 1918. Their valor was commended by Gen. John J. Pershing, who called them "iron men." (Art by Don Troiani)

force that held back the formidable German onslaught along the Marne River at Château-Thierry, just 37 miles from Paris, in July 1918. Though most of the 28th's troops took up positions in the second line of defense south of the river and east of the town, four companies were placed in between French units on the front line. Unfortunately, when the French troops abandoned their position, the Pennsylvanians were not informed. They held their ground until Germans surrounded them. Out of the more than 500 28th ID troops at those locations, just 150 survived.

When told of the Pennsylvanians' heroic stand, Gen. John J. Pershing, the commander of the American Expeditionary Force, remarked, "They are iron men," a moniker that was quickly adopted by the entire division and that is emphasized over other nicknames to this day, Kepner said.

"Some Soldiers still say 'Keystone Division,' and it's hard not to associate with that because that's the insignia on our shoulders," he said. "But calling ourselves the 'Keystone Division' doesn't achieve the effect we want of connecting Soldiers with that fit, resilient and well-trained vision of what our Soldiers are and what our Soldiers need to be. 'Iron Division' intuitively does that.

"Gen. Pershing named us the 'Iron Division' after that battle, where there were small pockets of Iron Division Soldiers who were fighting, often in hand-to-hand combat, for days. You can't do that if you aren't fit, resilient and well trained."

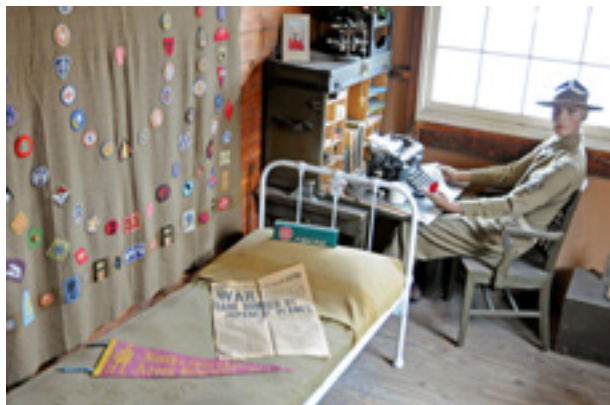
The division would see combat again during World War II when, after a period of training at Fort Indian-town Gap, Pa., and in Louisiana and Florida, the division set sail for Wales, where they prepared to join in the amphibious invasion of Normandy. Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, upon inspecting the division in April 1944,

wrote his formal opinion that the Iron Division was “fit, efficient, serious and determined.”

However, the division did not participate in D-Day on June 6. Instead, the 28th ID crossed the English Channel six weeks later and slogged through northern France in the push to drive the Germans out. In the right place at the right time near Versailles in late August, the division was given the honor of being the first American division to parade in Paris after the capital’s liberation on August 29. An iconic photograph of the division’s troops marching down the Champs-Élysées with the Arc de Triomphe in the background even inspired a U.S. stamp issued that year.

Eschewing a ‘bloody’ nickname

But the battle for which the 28th ID is most known was yet to come. After moving through Belgium and Luxembourg, the division was ordered to attack the Germans in the Hürtgen Forest southeast of Aachen in November. A dense mass of fir trees and undergrowth atop a series of valleys and ridges, the forest was well-known to the German defenders, but would be a nightmare for the 28th ID’s commanding general, Maj. Gen. Norman Cota.



A mannequin dressed as a World War II-era orderly sergeant sits in a mock barracks room at the 28th Infantry Division’s museum at Fort Indiantown Gap, Pa. (Photo by Michael L. Lewis)

Because of the unfavorable terrain and because 28th ID was the only unit attacking on a 150-mile front, Cota was forced to split the division in three for separate attacks. But the German troops knew the area well and fought so tenaciously, the two sides would measure success on the battlefield in terms of inches won. The resulting stalemate and high cost in lives — nearly 6,200 Iron Division Soldiers were killed in the span of little more than a week — was attributed to Cota. But Kepner said such blame is unfair.

“Gen. Cota was directed with a course of action;

he was never allowed to truly command the division,” Kepner said. “And when you talk about splitting your forces, that directive came from his higher [headquarters] — ‘You will attack this way.’ So it opens up a lot of debate about mission command.”

The battle also is where division earned its other oft-mentioned nickname. Upon seeing the red keystone patch, Germans said it resembled a “bloody bucket.” But that moniker is discouraged, Kepner said.

“We don’t like ‘Bloody Bucket’ at all,” he said. “It’s really, in my opinion, a misnomer. It does not do justice to those Soldiers in the Hürtgen Forest. Gen. Patton once said, ‘I am a Soldier. I fight where I’m told, and I win where I fight.’ Well, those Soldiers were damn sure trying to win where they fought after being told where to fight.”

Leading the way in Kosovo and Iraq

During the Korean War, the division was sent to Germany to augment American forces there. But the majority of the division would not serve in a federal capacity again until after the Dayton Accords, the 1995 peace agreement that ended the war in Bosnia. In 2002, the division took command of Task Force Eagle as part of the NATO-led Stabilization Force there.



The 28th Infantry Division’s patch is seen on these uniform jackets from the museum’s collection. (Photo by Michael L. Lewis)

In 2003, the 28th ID became the first reserve component division to lead the NATO peacekeeping force in Kosovo. Kepner, who deployed there as an operations sergeant major, said the mission was well suited to a division of National Guard members.

“Being citizen-Soldiers, what we found when we got into Kosovo was that we brought a lot more diversity in the formation,” he said. “For example, we have police officers, we have electricians, we have all this diversity of these civilian vocations. In our infantry formation, we don’t necessarily have electrician [military occupation-

al specialties], but because we had Soldiers who were electricians in their civilian jobs, we had Soldiers who would see a need and would have good ideas on how to fix some of these infrastructure things.

“I forget who said this quote — that no military service is prepared to do peace and stability operations, but of all the services, the Army is the best prepared,” Kepner said. “But I will tell you that the Guard is even better-prepared to do that piece of stability operations because of our community-based diversity.”

Kepner said that despite the trailblazing nature of the 28th ID’s deployment to Kosovo, making history was not on anybody’s mind.

“We all knew, being the first reserve component rotation in there, that we had to do well,” he said. “But I wouldn’t say it was because it was for posterity’s sake or for historical perspective. We had to do well because we knew that everybody had their eye on us — could the National Guard do this? There hadn’t really been a National Guard deployment taking over something like this since maybe World War II. So we didn’t recognize our involvement as historical, but we did recognize it as setting a precedent for other Reserve and National Guard units.”

In 2009, the division set an additional precedent when it transitioned its 56th Brigade Combat Team into a Stryker brigade, the only one in the reserve component, and deployed it to Iraq. Based at Camp Taji, the brigade followed the division’s 2nd BCT, which deployed to Iraq in 2005. Kepner, who was the Stryker brigade’s command sergeant major in Iraq, said both deployments were a testament to the division’s agility and ability to do whatever it is called to do.



Staff Sgt. Andrew Frengel and other Soldiers and Stryker vehicles of A Troop, 2nd Squadron, 104th Cavalry Regiment, 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 28th Infantry Division, move through the village of Sab al Bour near Taji, Iraq, on July 20, 2009. (Photo by Sgt. Doug Roles)

“It’s very important that our active-duty leaders un-

derstand that the 28th Infantry Division is ready for any mission,” he said. “If there’s one thing that I want them to take away, it’s that we are ready. Our history shows that we are ready, our support of the Global War on Terrorism shows that we are ready, and we are ready to do whatever mission we are given.”

Indeed, the division’s feats in combat are in addition to the work it does as part of the Pennsylvania National Guard — responding to national disasters, civil unrest and during other times at the request of the governor. For the division’s Soldiers today, it is important they realize they are part of the division’s next chapter in history, Kepner said.

“As the command team at the division level, we are being very aggressive in telling the story of the 28th Infantry Division,” he said. “We think it’s important that our Soldiers have something to associate themselves with, that the 28th Infantry Division is more than just a patch on their Soldier.

“It’s really about educating. It’s really about connecting the extraordinary feats of bravery by these Pennsylvanians in our history with what we’ve done in the past 10 years. I also tell the Soldiers that they are a part of writing the next chapter in the future. So to me, it’s about connecting the Soldier to the past, but also the recognition that he or she has the challenge of continuing that.”

“Roll On, 28th”

The 28th Infantry Division’s song was written in the fall of 1944 by Sgt. Emil Raab, a 28th ID bandsman who won a contest sponsored by the division’s commanding general, Maj. Gen. Norman Cota, to develop the march and song.

[Click to hear the 28th Infantry Division Band perform “Roll On, 28th” →](#)

We’re the 28th men,
And we’re out to fight again
For the good old U.S.A.
We’re the guys who know
Where to strike the blow
And you’ll know just why
After we say:

Roll on, 28th
Roll on, set the pace,
Hold the banners high
And raise the cry,
“We’re off to Victory!”
Let the Keystone shine
Right down the line
For all the world to see.
When we meet the foe
We’ll let them know
We’re Iron Infantry,

So, Roll on, 28th, Roll on!

The valor of the 28th ID

Of the three 28th Infantry Division Soldiers who received the Medal of Honor for their actions in World War I and World War II, two were noncommissioned officers:



Sgt. James I. Mestrovitch

Sgt. James I. Mestrovitch, an ethnic Serb from Montenegro who had emigrated to Pittsburgh, was fighting with C Company, 111th Infantry Regiment, 28th Division, in August 1918 in the hamlet of Fismette, France, when he saw his company commander lying 30 yards in front of the line after his company had withdrawn to a sheltered position behind a stone wall. According to his award citation, “Mestrovitch voluntarily left cover and crawled through heavy machine gun and shell fire to where the officer lay. He took the officer upon his back and crawled to a place of safety, where he administered first aid treatment, his exceptional heroism saving the officer’s life.” Mestrovitch’s award was posthumous, however, as he died of Spanish flu three months later, just a week before the armistice. He is buried in his homeland of Montenegro.

Tech. Sgt. Francis J. Clark was a squad leader with K Company, 109th Infantry Regiment, 28th Infantry Division, when two platoons attempted to ford the fog-shrouded Our River on Sept. 12, 1944, on the border with Germany near Kalborn, Luxembourg. When the fog lifted as the second platoon was crossing, German troops decimated the unit, killing both the platoon leader and platoon sergeant. Despite the withering hail of bullets, Clark crawled alone to the stricken troops, led the platoon to safety, then “unhesitatingly returned into the fire-swept area to rescue a wounded Soldier, carrying him to the American line while hostile gunners tried to cut him down,” his award citation reads. Later that day, Clark led his squad and the men of the other platoon in



Tech. Sgt. Francis J. Clark

sorties against enemy positions. Their efforts wounded an undetermined number of the enemy, scattered the German patrols and, eventually, “forced the withdrawal of a full company of Germans heavily armed with automatic weapons,” his citation said.

Five days later near Sevenig, Germany, Clark advanced alone against an enemy machine gun, killed the gunner and forced the assistant to flee. When the Germans’ counterattack killed the leadership of two other platoons, Clark took over their command, moved among the men to give encouragement, then continued with even more acts of heroism: “Although wounded on the morning of Sept. 18, he refused to be evacuated and took up a position in a pillbox when night came. Emerging at daybreak, he killed a German soldier setting up a machine gun not more than 5 yards away. When he located another enemy gun, he moved up unobserved and killed two Germans with rifle fire. Later that day he voluntarily braved small-arms fire to take food and water to members of an isolated platoon.”

Clark received the Medal of Honor from President Harry Truman the following year. He died in 1981 and is buried in Salem, N.Y.

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