

Memorial Museum Honors Abilene's Greatest Generation

Why is the 12th Armored Division important? In the same way that General Dwight D. Eisenhower told the troops upon discovering the concentration camps, "Expend every frame of film documenting this," someday people will forget about this.

The mission statement of the Memorial Museum is "To preserve the history of the 12th Armored Division for future generations and to remember the stories and feats of those who fought for our freedom." The museum aims to establish study grounds for World War II and its impact on the American people.

Bill Lenches, curator of the 12th Armored Division Memorial Museum, is moving forward with history. Untold war stories pour in, while Lenches seeks new alternative means of distribution. As Abilene veterans become scarce, a curious new generation asks the question of proper historical preservation.

The answer: the digital age – uploading war documents and artifacts online for students and historians to use as a primary source for information. The museum's distance learning initiative hopes to attract users of all ages. By targeting kids from 5th to 12th grade, Lenches aims to form a technological bridge between the museum's collection and students' database resources.

"What better way to learn about World War II than real, original documentation from the men that were there," said Lenches. "Much of our museum's collection has yet to see the light of day, and it is my goal to make this data accessible in the form of digital archives."

The term "greatest generation" is not a misnomer – it is absolutely accurate. The troops of the 12th Division, also known as the Hellcats, are the men who survived the Great Depression and then traveled halfway across the world to protect those who could not defend themselves. We owe our freedom to the members of the 12th, as well as all veterans, who endured extreme fatigue, privation, starvation, trench foot and other horrors for our liberty.

"We must never forget what these men endured," Lenches said. "What you see in the films is not always 100 percent accurate, and it is our job to keep history truthful and honest, unlike the sometimes glamorous war movies from the 50s and the more dramatic films of today. We must show people to whom they owe their liberty."

The 12th Division's origin dates back to Sept. 15, 1942. The original Camp Barkeley was one of the United States Army's largest training installations during World War II. The base was located southwest of Abilene, Texas, near what is now Dyess Air Force Base. The base was named after David B. Barkeley, a Medal of Honor recipient during World War I. The camp was 70,229 acres in size and had a population of 50,000 at its peak of operation.

Construction of the camp began in December 1940 and was completed in July 1941. Before it was finished, the 19,000-man 45th Infantry Division began to occupy the camp. Other units that trained at the camp include the 11th Armored Division, and the 12th Armored Division. The Medical Administrative Officer Candidate School was established at Barkeley in May of 1942.

On February 1, 1944, the 1846th Unit POW Camp was activated at Camp Barkeley. At its peak, in March 1945, the POW camp housed 840 German prisoners. The 12th Armored Division operated under the command of Maj. Gen. Roderick R. Allen. Allen had the foresight and initiative to appoint historians to document and save critical artifacts and documents.

Camp Barkeley was officially closed in September 1945 and dismantled. The land, which was leased, reverted back to the original landowners. Today, only the original concrete roads remain to mark its location.

To learn more about Camp Barkeley and the 12th Armored Division, visit the 12th Armored Division Memorial Museum, located at 1289 North Second Street in Abilene. Open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Tuesday through Saturday. www.12tharmoredmuseum.com