



U.S. barracks in Germany named for Beverly war hero

By Paul Leighton

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November 11, 2008 12:01 am

BEVERLY — Today is a day to honor veterans. More than 60 years ago, my late uncle, Capt. John Leighton of Beverly, received one of the greatest honors when the U.S. Army named a military base in Germany after him, officially calling it Leighton Barracks.

You might think such a distinction would become the stuff of family legend, passed down from one generation to the next and celebrated on a day like today.

Except the Leighton family, including my uncle's son, brothers and sister, never knew Leighton Barracks existed until a few weeks ago, when my sister accidentally discovered it on Google. And almost as soon as she made that discovery, we learned that the Army, on Sept. 30, had officially closed Leighton Barracks and turned it back over to the Germans.

It was a dizzying turn of events. As we came to find out, Leighton Barracks was no small Army outpost. It was a 340-acre military base with an elementary school, middle school and high school and the largest U.S. military shopping mall in Europe. For 10 years it was home to the 1st Infantry Division, the oldest division in the U.S. Army. You can even buy "Leighton Barracks" T-shirts online.

How could this place have existed for more than 60 years, with thousands of soldiers and civilians serving and living there, without us knowing about it? How could my father, a World War II veteran himself, be unaware of the honor that had been bestowed on the older brother he so admired?

My father said his parents would have told him about Leighton Barracks if they knew. John Leighton's son, Jack, who was born a month after his father died, said his late mother would have told him. Maybe the Army never informed the family. Maybe they sent a telegram and it never arrived. We'll probably never find out.

But the search for those answers led me to learn more about my uncle, from his days growing up in Beverly during the Depression to the day he lay dying in the woods of France with stomach wounds, insisting that his men leave him behind so they wouldn't risk their own lives.

Excelled at everything

John Leighton was the oldest of six children of Andrew and Ellen Leighton. The family grew up in a triple decker on Grant Street in the Gloucester Crossing section of Beverly.

My father, Paul, said John excelled at everything he tried. He was so smart he skipped the first and third grades and graduated from Beverly High School at age 16. He won a ballroom dancing competition at the United Shoe Country Club, the golf championship at Wenham Country Club, and became a foreman at the Hygrade Incandescent Lamp Co. in Salem at age 18.

When the war broke out, John volunteered to join the Army. He enlisted as a private, then applied for and graduated from Officer Candidates School. In a ceremony at Fort Hood, Texas, he married Gertrude Hayes of Lynn, a secretary at Hygrade Lamp. Before leaving for Europe, John stopped home in Beverly and got a letter notifying him that he had been promoted to captain. The last image my father has of his brother is of him pinning his new captain's bars onto his uniform.

Capt. Leighton was assigned to the 10th Armored Infantry Battalion, a tank unit that was part of the 4th Armored Division led by Gen. George S. Patton Jr. At age 25, Leighton became the commander of Company C, responsible for the lives of about 300 men.

His unit landed at Normandy, France, in early July of 1944 and took up a defensive position just south of the town of Carentan, according to "Patton's Vanguard," a book about the 4th Armored Division written by Don Fox. Fox told me that the officers of the 10th Battalion kept one of the best diaries of the war and he sent me a copy of a few pages.

On July 19, 1944, according to that diary, Capt. Leighton's company and four others were given orders to "execute plan 'A,'" which called for moving forward through an area filled with enemy snipers. The snipers climbed trees and tied vines around their bodies from head to foot to make them difficult to spot. They also tied themselves to the tree so they wouldn't fall to the ground if they were shot, leaving the Americans to wonder whether they were still alive.

Missing in action

Eugene "Lucky" Luciano was a 27-year-old sergeant serving under Capt. Leighton in Company C that day. Although he was two years younger, Luciano admired him as a man of leadership and compassion. He said my uncle let him off the hook one time when Luciano returned late from a night on the town.

"He was a great guy," Luciano, now 92 and living in Torrington, Conn., told me. "He was a brave guy. He was nice and tall, a good-looking guy. He looked like a soldier to me."

Luciano said my uncle led two squads on an attack in the town of Raids that day. Luciano's squad went off to the right. Capt. Leighton's squad went straight ahead. According to the 10th Battalion's diary, this is what happened next:

"The company was under heavy fire and the captain was hit in the stomach. This serious injury did not deter him from his duty. He continued to direct the operations of his company and when their position became untenable he directed the withdrawal of his company to a better position. Captain Leighton insisted on his being left there so as not to endanger the lives of any other men in his unit. It was only upon his assuring the men in his company that friendly medics would pick him up shortly that they left him there. The company made a successful withdrawal. Captain Leighton was reported missing in action as the medics did not bring him in that day."

Luciano said most officers took positions near the back of their squads. But sensing the fear in many of his men that day, Capt. Leighton took the lead.

"He should've been at the back," Luciano said. "He never should've died."

I asked my father about this story — about his brother dying a hero's death — and he said he'd never heard it before. He said he and his parents had been told after the war only that John had been shot between the eyes by a German sniper. Maybe the lieutenant who told them that didn't know the real story. Maybe he wanted to spare John's family the thought of him lying alone in the woods of France, slowing bleeding to death.

The next mention of John Leighton in the 10th Battalion diary comes nine days later, on July 28. His body

had been found by a search party.

"This was a hard blow to this unit as Capt. Leighton had been with the unit from the time of its activation on 10 September 1943 until killed in action in the preceding operations," the diary entry said. "He was a capable, understanding and courageous leader, well liked by those who served under him and worked with him. His body was removed to a rear division burial collecting point."

'Your son is not forsaken'

Capt. Leighton's body was buried next to other American soldiers in a temporary cemetery in Sainte Mere Eglise, the town in Normandy that had been the landing point for U.S. Army paratroopers during the D-Day invasion. In May of 1947, a woman from France wrote a letter to John Leighton's mother, saying she had met a man who had served with Capt. Leighton.

"Very often, he spoke to me about your dear son, John," the letter says. "He loved his friend so dearly. He told me how deep has been his sorrow when he learned his death."

The woman, Simone Bouf, had promised her friend she would take care of John Leighton's grave, but it was difficult for her to get to Sainte Mere Eglise. So she wrote to a woman named Simone Renaud, the wife of the mayor of Sainte Mere Eglise and who was known as the "Mother of Normandy" for taking care of the graves of American servicemen. Renaud took a picture of one of three sons kneeling at the grave, his small hands wrapped around the cross bearing John Leighton's name and burial number.

"I do hope it will be a comfort for you to think that your son is not forsaken somewhere in France, but often visited with affection by a little boy and his mother," Bouf wrote.

One month after that letter was written, on June 17, 1947, a small air base near Weurzburg, Germany, was officially named Leighton Barracks. The Germans had built the base during the war, but it was captured by American troops on Easter in 1945.

The orders naming Leighton Barracks were issued by the U.S. Army's European Command Headquarters and are signed by two generals. The orders recount the circumstances of the captain's death, calling him a "capable, understanding and courageous leader," and state that he was awarded the silver star.

"His gallant and heroic stand in the vicinity of Raids, France on 18 July 1944, which cost him his life, will ever be an inspiration to the men of his company and the entire battalion," the orders state.

Returned to Germans

The bodies of American soldiers eventually had to be moved when France wanted to reclaim the temporary cemeteries for farmland. In 1949, the body of Capt. Leighton was buried again, this time at Long Island National Cemetery in Farmingdale, N.Y.

Over the years, Leighton Barracks grew to become a major military base in Germany, about 70 miles south of Frankfurt in Bavarian wine-growing country. In 2005, the U.S. Defense Department announced plans to relinquish control of 11 military bases in Germany.

On Sept. 30 of this year, a week after we learned about Leighton Barracks, it was officially turned back to German control and the city of Wuerzburg.

The future of Leighton Barracks is now the subject of "an intense city planning discussion," Hans-Peter Baum of the Wuerzburg town archives said via e-mail. The adjacent University of Wuerzburg will get a large section of the base, he said. There are also plans for housing, shops, cafes and a hotel.

As for what will happen to the name Leighton Barracks, Baum said officials plan to find a "suitable German name" for their new part of town. Then, perhaps sympathetic to my family's sense of loss of the honor we had just discovered, he added one thing:

"Most people still refer to the area as the Leightons."

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