

VETERANS DAY Roland Sluder sees it as his duty to keep fresh in the public's mind the legacy of America's soldiers



Roland "Ron" Sluder, 85, holds a vial of sand from Omaha Beach in Normandy. Below, a picture of him as a young private.

AMY DAVIS/BALTIMORE SUN PHOTOS

Serving as bodyguard to Gen. George Patton

By Mary Gail Hare
THE BALTIMORE SUN

At the end of World War II in Europe, a young American soldier was reassigned from the infantry to the military police. He was issued a new uniform, told to practice saluting and ordered to guard the former German SS headquarters in Bavaria, where the U.S. Army had set up a base of operations.

As he stood at his post, proudly sporting the black-and-gray patch of the 94th Divi-

sion on his sleeve, Pfc. Roland "Ron" Sluder spotted a tall, broad-shouldered man in a trench coat making his way down the corridor. He quickly realized he was about to greet Gen. George S. Patton.

"I was shaking like a leaf when I saluted," said Sluder, who now lives in Lochearn. "Patton saluted back. Then he told me he was glad to see the 94th patch. He took both my hands in his and said, 'Thanks.' He told me our division helped him all the way to the Rhine."

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Ex-soldier's duty: keep memories alive

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Sluder would serve as one of Patton's bodyguards for about eight months as the commander of the 3rd Army oversaw the reconstruction of the Bavarian government.

Now 85, Sluder said his war experiences have inspired him to devote much of his life to the American Legion and to veterans' causes. He will mark Veterans Day with a dinner date with his wife, Lucille, at one of several Baltimore County restaurants offering to treat veterans. He will wear his American Legion uniform, with the 94th patch, his cap and his medals, which include a Bronze Star. And he will remember the men and the battles.

As the nation observes Veterans Day today, such recollections heighten awareness of the debt owed to the military, said James A. Adkins, adjutant general of the Maryland National Guard.

"During World War II, almost every American family was touched by the war," Adkins said at a commemoration Wednesday in Towson. "Now less than 1 percent of our population is serving in the military, but it is no less important to keep all of them in our memory."

While in Bavaria, many American soldiers stayed in vacation homes abandoned by high-ranking German officers. Patton's bungalow was so spacious that its basement housed a pistol range, Sluder said.

"I actually slept in Heinrich Himmler's home," Sluder said. He has Nazi photos — including several that depict Himmler at a party with Adolf Hitler — that he found.

The American soldiers were charged with confiscating and destroying German weapons, uniforms and any Nazi flags and propaganda.

"We had a huge bonfire right at Patton's front door," said Sluder, who has kept

photos of that event.

Patton often spoke of the battles that helped the 94th Division "leapfrog" across Germany, Sluder said. "If you were driving in the car with him, he would be on the edge of the back seat, leaning over to talk to you," he said.

On the day Sluder boarded a ship for home, Patton died in a German hospital from injuries sustained in a car accident.

"We never exchanged much more than 'good mornings' and small talk, but I still consider him the greatest man I ever met," Sluder said.

Sluder fought with many great men as his division made its way across Europe in battles that defined the outcome of the war. He can still vividly recall those events, the places and the people, and maintains his own vast collection of war memorabilia — helmets, rifles, ammunition, flags, medals, photographs — from both sides of the conflict.

The New York native is long retired from a career that took many turns. He began as a butcher for the A&P grocery chain, later worked in banking and retired from an insurance firm. He and his wife, married for 62 years, raised two children and are the grandparents of five. They are living now at Augsburg Lutheran Home. He still takes every opportunity to recount his stories and share memorabilia, particularly with schoolchildren.

"My grandkids actually got me started on telling the stories," he said. His daughter and her family live in White Marsh. "I was so impressed with the ways kids looked at this stuff."

He often passes around a vial of sand from Omaha Beach in Normandy — he arrived in Europe shortly after the Allied invasion. "Kids look at it like it's something holy," he said.

"They all ask if I got close to anybody, and I always answer, 'God,'" he said.

Sluder was a 17-year-old high school senior when his mother, who worked at a local hospital, alerted him that a Marine friend had returned critically wounded from Guadalcanal in the Pacific. Sluder and about 20 other classmates took a school bus to visit their friend. They took that same bus that same day to the recruiting station, where every one of them enlisted. Sluder remained in the Army Reserves until his 18th birthday in October 1943, and then followed his elder brother, Leroy, into the Army.

After basic training and a stint as a cook, in which he became a favorite of the officers, Sluder crossed the Atlantic on a converted ocean liner shortly after D-Day. After more training, his unit deployed to Utah Beach.

"The roads were so muddy and the trenches and abandoned machine guns were still there," he said. "We could see where the men had to pull themselves uphill with ropes. I still don't understand how they did it."

The division was charged with containing 60,000 Germans in ports along the French coast, according to National Archives.

"The German tanks were all over," he said. "Every man over there had a lot of close calls."

The battles were hard-fought with high casualties in brutal winter weather.

"Our coffee was so frozen, we ate it with a spoon," he said. "We often trudged through a foot and a half of snow. We would wash our feet in that snow, but our bodies were covered with soot."

When they were not involved in skirmishes with the enemy, the soldiers were constantly on the move, most often on foot. While scouting for his squad in a small Ger-

man town near the Belgian border, Sluder was shot in the leg. The bullet shattered his right knee. Alone, sheltered in a barn, with only eight rounds in his rifle and racked with pain, he prevented two Germans with machine guns from attacking his men. A third German soldier, unaware that Sluder had run out of ammunition, surrendered to him, bandaged his wounds and helped him to an American aid station.

"My prisoner put me in a sleigh, covered me with his overcoat and got me help, all while Germans and Americans were shooting at us," he said. "I never got his name."

After recovering from the wound that earned him the Purple Heart, he rejoined his unit before the Americans crossed the Rhine River. When the war was over, Sluder was briefly attached to units liberating concentration camps in Czechoslovakia. Among his collection are photographs detailing the appalling conditions in those camps.

As long as he is able, Sluder said, he will continue sharing his memorabilia, reiterating his experiences and honoring all those who serve this country.

"I want the stories out there," he said. "I want to make sure all veterans are appreciated. I especially want children to understand how veterans saved all their freedoms."

A decade ago, Sluder learned to conduct military funerals. He purchased a bugle and trained himself. In South Carolina, where he lived until about two years ago, he stood honor guard and played taps for a young female Marine killed in Iraq.

He will take his white gloves and bugle with him to the restaurant today for his Veterans Day meal.

"After dinner, I will ask if I can play taps," he said.

mary.gail.hare@baltsun.com



AMY DAVIS/BALTIMORE SUN PHOTO

Roland "Ron" Sluder holds an armor-piercing round from a .50-caliber machine gun. He has a large collection of war memorabilia from his service with the 94th Infantry Division.