The shoulder patch of the 99th was based on Pittsburgh's city seal, which was itself modeled after the coat of arms of William Pitt.

The crew of a 99th Infantry Division mortar squad. Theron Lawhead (second from left in top row) lived in Clearfield, Pa., until his death a few years ago. Robert Mikesell (third from left) lives in Punxsutawney.
Checkerboard Soldiers in World War II and Beyond

By J.C. Doherty

This fall, the U.S. Defense Department will move into a large, modern office building on State Business Route 60 in Moon Township, across from the old entrance to Pittsburgh International Airport. The building will be occupied by civilian employees and Army reserve soldiers who make up the headquarters group of the 99th Regional Support Command (RSC), U.S. Army Reserve. On Veteran's Day, the road will even be renamed the 99th Infantry Division Memorial Highway.

Space has been set aside in front of the building for a 12-foot-high bronze statue of a World War II soldier designed by Pittsburgh sculptress Susan Wagner. Enthusiasts have started a nationwide drive to raise the $200,000 needed to turn Ms. Wagner's model into the monumental figure.

Of all her hundreds of works executed over a 20-year career, none bear the weight of so much history, symbolism, and pride in sacrifices endured and duties performed. The model shows the soldier dressed for winter warfare. His rifle and bayonet are at the ready. He wears the Checkerboard shoulder patch, or escutcheon, of the 99th Infantry Division.

The patch is the key: it connects the statue to the building and the people who work there. It connects it to the Pittsburgh region where the division got its start, and to its people, many of whose sons served in the 99th in World War II. And it signifies terrible battles fought and won by the division whose men wore the Checkerboard emblem as they went to war.

The 99th was organized as a reserve infantry division a month before the end of World War I, then almost immediately demobilized. It reappeared in 1921 as part of the Organized Army Reserve (OAR). Its headquarters was in Pittsburgh, and its cadre of 300 or so reserve officers was drawn from the area. The plan was that if war came, this small cadre would mobilize men from the region to flesh out the division.

The shoulder patch worn by the 99th OAR officers and men was based on Pittsburgh's city seal, which was itself modeled after the coat of arms of William Pitt, the Earl of Chatham, for whom Pittsburgh was named. Three black and blue checkerboard bands on a field of black symbolized the city's two "hard" industries, coal and iron. The 99th came to be called the Checkerboard Division.

War was not a preoccupation of the national government in the 1930s: putting men to work was. The Roosevelt administration established a Civilian Conservation Corps of unemployed but able-bodied young men for work on construction and preservation projects in state and national forests and parks. The government called on the OAR to put the CCC into operation: officers of the 99th OAR were called to active duty and ordered to help organize the CCC program in the Western Pennsylvania-West Virginia region. There were plenty of forests and other public lands there with a long list of needed improvements.

However, when the U.S. entered World War II a few years later, the national patrimony of fields and forests became a low priority, and finding jobs for idle young men was no longer a problem. At the end of August 1942, the War Department (as it was then called) reactivated the 99th Infantry Division. Simultaneously, its core of OAR officers was sent to priority assignments at other stations across the U.S. needing leaders and organizers with some military experience.

The Checkerboard Division was to be organized and trained at Camp Van Dorn near Centerville, Miss. Its leaders would come from an already-trained unit (the 7th Infantry Division). They would build it to the standard size: 781 officers and 13,472 enlisted men in three infantry regiments (three battalions each), four artillery battalions, one engineer battalion, a cavalry troop, and support and service units.
If the plan had originally been to build the Checkerboard Division solely with officers and men from Western Pennsylvania, it was now moot. The frenetic drive following Pearl Harbor to form Army, Army Air Force, Navy, Marine, and Coast Guard forces to stand up to the Japanese in the East and the Germans in the West simply didn’t permit plans based on conditions no longer relevant.

All the armed forces were scrambling for manpower. The Army Ground Forces in the first months of the war seemed constantly to be fighting a losing battle with the other services in the contest. Infantry and armored divisions needed to be built wherever and however they could. This often meant from the vast expanses of piney woods, old cotton lands, and hills and river bottoms of the South, but young draftees — few more than 25 years of age — poured in from all 48 states.

In spite of the randomness of the process, the Checkerboard Division in its early months did receive more recruits from central and Western Pennsylvania and northern West Virginia than chance might have dictated. But veterans of the 99th Infantry Division still living in Western Pennsylvania remember well how impersonal, random, and rapid the whole process was.

Isadore Rosen, who lives near Pittsburgh's Highland Park, went to Fort Meade, Md., with 60 boys from the same high school on Troy Hill, North Side. Only two, including Rosen, were shipped to the 99th at Van Dorn.

Twin brothers Harold and Howard Wilson, who now live in Warren, Pa., went by train to a processing center at Cumberland Gap from their Erie home. Both were shipped to Van Dorn. Eventually they served together in the same squad of a combat engineer company, an almost unheard of happenstance.

Lewis W. Miller, Latrobe, was inducted in Greensburg, processed at Indiantown Gap, and shipped straight to Van Dorn and a Checkerboard rifle company.

Harry McCracken, now from Manor, then from Westmoreland City, remembers the large contingent of Pennsylvania boys who entrained from the New Cumberland, Pa., processing center to Van Dorn. He was assigned to the medics, a break for him.

However they got there, nothing in their young lives — going to school, working, or playing in the neighborhoods and towns of the Pittsburgh region — prepared the young recruits for Van Dorn. Bluntly, it was a miserable place, and nearby Centerville, Miss,
wasn't much more inspiring. Located in the Mississippi River plain close to the Louisiana border, Centerville and the surrounding towns and farms had been hit hard by the Depression, and the U.S. Ground Forces Command had not had the time or resources to prepare the camp adequately for the 99th Infantry Division.

The officers and men gathering on what had been worn-out corn, cotton, and scrub pine land were expected to complete some of the construction while simultaneously training for war. They helped local carpenters finish the frame barracks and service buildings (wooden board sides covered with tar paper to keep out the weather) and laid thousands of feet of wooden walkways to keep everyone out of the mud...more or less.

Training started for the new Checkerboard Division in January 1943. Nights meant sleeping in the uncomfortably cold barracks surrounded by snoring, coughing, restless men. For the trainees assigned to the infantry, days consisted of hard work, marching, practice shooting, lining up and waiting, lectures in the open, more marching, and tactics for squads (12 men) and platoons (36 men).

The weather bedeviled them all the way: cold winds often shot through with even colder rain that turned the fields and pine forests to a morass of mud. In summer, an oppressive sticky heat descended on the camp. The unforgiving Southern sun turned the mud to dust. Bugs — mosquitoes, chiggers, and ticks — came out in force to attack the Checkerboard's young soldiers day and night.

The only grace note in this drumbeat of harsh living and harsher training was provided by young women. Patriotic matrons in Centerville and nearby towns recruited girls for dances in the camp. The Army sent in 250 WAGs (Women's Auxiliary Corps) soldiers to do administrative tasks. More than a few wives of the young soldiers found their way to Centerville desperate to spend a few nights with their new husbands before the Army shipped them off maybe for eternity. (There were also "professionals" who hung around the shabby lunch counters and diners in the towns.)

The routine of ceaseless training relieved only by an occasional dance, date, or weekend pass to spend with a wife didn't last long. The main body of the Checkerboard decamped for a month to a nearby forest. The trainees slept in two-man "pup" tents and fought mock battles in oppressive heat harassed all the way by insects, noxious weeds, and the occasional snake.

After a month of this training, the 99th was considered ready for a big maneuver involving five Army divisions, plus armor, aircraft, and lots of artillery. Early in September 1943, the Checkerboard soldiers marched into Louisiana's swamps, woods, and farm fields. Here they fought large-scale mock battles, and the infantry covered on foot, of course, miles of landscape under the same oppressive conditions as before, only longer lasting and complicated by the involvement of tens of thousands of men and their weapons.

It was excellent preparation for jungle fighting in the Pacific War Theater. Only the Checkerboard Division didn't go to war in the Pacific but in the deep snows of Western Europe during the coldest winter there in 50 years.

Near the close of the Louisiana maneuvers, Army Ground Force Command ordered Major General Walter E. Lauer, the 99th's commanding officer, to give up 3,200 men for rapid shipment to the Italian front as replacements. It was a blow to the Checkerboard Division. Its men had been training as a team to fight as a team. Now the core of the division — the up-front infantrymen — was being hollowed out.

Not for long. In February and March, there arrived at Camp Maxey, Tex. (the new Checkerboard training camp), the same number of young soldiers as were given up to the Italian front. The newcomers had served in a misguided War Department program that assigned some 200,000 high-IQ, college-suitable Army soldiers to 223 college and university campuses around the U.S. In theory, they were being prepared for duties requiring college degrees, especially in engineering, and similar technical specialties.

However, they were the only large pool of reserve strength the Army had at the beginning of 1944. It was clear to every military leader from Secretary of War Henry Stimson down to the Ground Forces commanders that the "Army Specialized Training Program," as it was called, had to go. Its participants also had to go...to the infantry divisions getting ready to fight.

The ex-ASTPers were quick studies and good physical specimens (few were over 20 years old). But they were being integrated with the Checkerboard's old-timers who had been through the
Hitler's plan for the great Ardennes counter-offensive December 16, 1944. The principal force was Sixth SS Panzer Armee. It was to lead the way to Antwerp, Belgium. Its sector of attack was the 23-mile front held by the 99th Infantry Division (ID), plus an American mechanized cavalry group on the south flank of the 99th. So the entire 99th ID was the prime initial objective of the entire 6th SS Panzer Armee on Null Tag, the Germans' D-Day.
training-maneuvers mill. Also, many old-timers came from Mon Valley steel towns and West Virginia mining towns and similar working stiff backgrounds. They did not much favor book learning and college nonsense. They called the ASTPers “college commandos,” and the noncommissioned officers among the oldtimers showed them little affection.

There followed five months of intensive training by 99th Division leaders to bring the new men from the colleges to a competency with infantry and artillery weapons and small unit tactics, and some kind of capacity to endure the brutal physical punishment of soldiers at war.

By August 1944, when General Lauer received orders to start staging for the European War Theater, the Checkerboard’s new and old soldiers were as ready as they would ever be...except for one big thing. As remarked before, they had trained in a hot climate but would fight in a cold one. They would pay for it.

In September 1944, the Checkerboard soldiers boarded ships at New England ports and sailed for England in one of the huge convoys then moving across the Atlantic. England was a stopover, necessary because of the cluttered roads leading from the French ports to the battlefronts. By mid-November, the 99th Division had crossed the English Channel, marched (by truck) across newly liberated France and Belgium, and was taking its place in the 1st U.S. Army’s sector of the front.

Lauer was enthused and “eager to grapple with the enemy,” as he put it. The more hard-headed of his subordinate officers were not so sure. The Checkerboard was assigned a front 23 miles long facing the German fortified West Wall (Siegfried Line) that marked the border between Belgium and Germany. The terrain was as unfriendly as could be: hills covered with conifer forests, narrow valleys, primitive roads, many small streams.

Army instruction manuals dictated that in this kind of terrain, a defending infantry division should occupy a front no wider than five or six miles.

The 99th’s leaders were assured by higher command that the long and rough front line was of no interest to the German enemy. In fall 1944, the main action of the European War was taking place not in the Ardennes region where the 99th was located, but in the north along the Dutch-German border, and east of Aachen, Germany, and in Germany’s Saarland in the south.

Unfortunately, from 1st U.S. Army HQ in Spa, Belgium, to General Eisenhower’s Supreme HQ Allied Expeditionary Forces in Versailles, France, the American chain of command had been complacent regarding the condition and intentions of their enemy. Commanders and their staff officers at higher HQs had lulled themselves into overlooking too many clues of impending disaster.

The Germans in the Ardennes were not hunkering down. The Wehrmacht’s supreme commander, Adolph Hitler himself, was...
preparing to drive 28 newly rebuilt infantry and armored divisions straight into the Ardennes in a final Blitzkrieg, accompanied overhead by at least 1,000 warplanes. The aim of this recklessly bold counteroffensive was no less than the capture of the great Belgian city and main American-British supply port, Antwerp, 100 miles west of the Siegfried Line where the armies faced each other.

The Fuehrer's plan would precipitate the Battle of the Bulge. That battle—a six-week campaign, really—involved more soldiers and airmen, over a larger geographic area, and with higher casualties, than any other fought by the Americans in WWII.

In the way of Wehrmacht operational plans, the counteroffensive was laid out in meticulous detail. The major initial objective was starkly clear: the Checkerboard and three other U.S. infantry divisions occupying the Ardennes were to be annihilated by a massive artillery barrage and infantry assault before noon on the day the counteroffensive would begin, December 16, 1944.

For the soldiers of the 99th Division, Hitler's plan was a catastrophe in the making. Their front extended from Monschau, Germany, in the north to Losheim, Germany, in the south. This sector was selected by the Fuehrer himself as having number one priority for a breakthrough. The distance from the Checkerboard front line to the Meuse River near Liege, Belgium, was shorter than elsewhere in the Ardennes. In the German plan, the Panzers were to reach the river by the third day, so distance was vitally important. Liege was only 37 miles northwest of the 99th Division headquarters.

Hitler's headquarters assigned four German divisions to march over the Checkerboard. Following on their heels would be his two favorite SS armored divisions, 1st SS and 12th SS Panzer, driving hard for the Meuse.

As if this weren't threat enough to doom the Checkerboard's up-front soldiers, a few days before December 16, three full battalions (836 infantry soldiers each) were ordered to join a 1st U.S. Army attack. The operation would remove these 2,500 or so men from the 99th's defensive front, placing the remaining six battalions on line in an even more precarious position by stretching out the space each had to defend.

On December 16, Null Tag (Zero Day), as the Germans called it, 5,000 Checkerboard infantry would be assaulted by regiments of three enemy infantry and one paratroop division. And the two Panzer divisions waited in the wings.

For three days after these heavily armed enemy formations started forward, the six Checkerboard battalions underwent a baptism of fire such as few other units on the American front experienced during the war in Europe:

- Before dawn they were hit with artillery and mortar shells and explosive rockets in an enemy barrage unequalled in ferocity in the European War.
- They were swarmed by assault teams of enemy infantry. The attackers used searchlights to illuminate the 99th soldiers in their foxholes, machine gun nests, and mortar pits.
- Enemy saboteurs wearing U.S. uniforms and riding in U.S. vehicles slipped through their lines to cause disruption in the rear.
- A special task force of German paratroops dropped behind the Checkerboard battalion defending the far left position along the front line. (Fortunately the paratroops were few in number and badly confused.)
- The commander of one battalion was relieved for incompetence (or worse); commanders of two others suffered severe wounds.
- At first their regimental and division leaders completely misread the massive German offensive as a localized action easily halted. This limited the battalions' room to maneuver.

Where the Checkerboard infantry faced the attacking Germans across open ground and the land lines had not been shot out allowing them to call in artillery fire, the attackers were forced to ground.

However, the rifle companies (three to a battalion) dug into the dense snow-covered forests with no open space to their front found themselves surrounded almost as soon as the artillery barrage lifted. There followed classical Indian-style fighting: blasts of gunfire and exploding grenades in and out among the tall evergreens: a deadly hide-and-seek on both sides. The 99th infantrymen, armed with rifles, machine guns, mortars, and rocket-launch tubes collected in small knots of four or five to make some kind of stand before being overwhelmed or slipping away.

At a crossroads near Losheim, a strategically vital position for the Germans to take, the Checkerboard infantry were driven out of
Robertson, Commanding Officer of the 2nd Division, described the struggles of the Checkerboard’s six battalions in the 36 hours after the Germans struck:

“Their defensive positions had no depth. The enemy drove armor and infantry down the roads, isolating groups [of 99th]. They then formed islands of resistance deep in the woods [and elsewhere]. In these positions they were preventing the enemy from free use of the roads. But nearly all of these groups had lost liberty of action and were being surrounded and cut to pieces.”

By Monday, December 18, the second stage of the war on this front had started. Surviving Checkerboard troops and the 2nd Division men, now joining the battle in increasing numbers, fell back to the villages that had served as their supply and command bases before the German counteroffensive.

They turned these into improvised fortresses. The three battalions of the 99th Division that had not participated in the carnage up to then also came in to guard the 2nd/99th left (north) flank.

The Checkerboard veterans living in Western Pennsylvania whose experiences entering the Army are recounted above remember to this day the fighting in the woods, and villages, and at the crossroads 56 years ago.

Miller was driving a jeep evacuating the wounded. A machine gunner in his company was struck dead by shell fragments. Miller took his place but not for long. He was wounded and evacuated. (Lucy for him. Some of the wounded died on the field as the battle swept over them.) Miller spent Christmas 1944 on a hospital train headed for Paris.
HSWP Museum Associate Lauren Uhl grew up hearing tales of Elsenborn Ridge and Krinkelt: her father Alan Poese, right, was a jeep driver with the 99th Division and fought in the Battle of the Bulge. Like many WWII veterans, he recently wrote his war memoirs as a gift for his family.

Alan in Fleckenburg, Germany, waiting for the small arms fire to subside. He recalled, "I then drove into the woods and picked up a badly wounded 2nd lieutenant."

Rosen remembers the snow and the cold and how easy it was to freeze a limb or a patch of unprotected skin. His platoon leader (a lieutenant) died of gunshot wounds. He assumed command as the senior sergeant. It was not a pleasant task trying to control 30 or so young soldiers getting their first taste of war with artillery shells exploding all around.

The Wilson boys were together in a foxhole with their weapon, an anti-tank rocket launcher (resembling a three-inch diameter, 5-foot long stove pipe). A huge shell came down a few yards away hurling snow and dirt everywhere. It didn’t explode. Had it done so, the Wilsons would not have returned home.

McCracken was assigned to a medical aid station in a village two miles from the woods where the Indian-style combat was raging on December 16 – 17. "We were receiving many casualties, some dead," he remembers. The dead were "placed in neat rows" alongside the house McCracken's unit was using as an aid station. "We also had a roomful of wounded men. We tried to make them as comfortable as possible by giving injections of morphine to control the pain."

Another 99th vet with Pittsburgh roots (who prefers to remain anonymous) witnessed multiple scenes of carnage: "Confusing orders that took the companies in and out of the dense forest as the riflemen skirmished with the German assault teams. A misplaced barrage by friendly tank destroyers firing high explosive shells that wiped out two sections of our machine gunners and a platoon of our infantry. A horrendous nighttime battle between the U.S. 2nd Division infantry and 12th SS Panzer tanks and infantry less than a mile from where our riflemen were skirmishing in the woods."

As masterminded by General Robertson, the objective of the last ditch clinging to the villages was to hold off the surging German tide until the Elsenborn Ridge, four miles to the northwest and on high ground could be made impregnable.

Ninety-ninth infantrymen — or more precisely those who were left — were among the first fighting troops to reach the ridge and start digging in. Almost immediately they were struck by a German mechanized infantry division armed with mobile guns and light tanks. Their automatic weapons, their combat engineers plugging the line, and their massive artillery support enabled the Checkerboard rifle companies to put down the threat, but it was a near thing. (And be it remembered that they accomplished this with the survivors of the earlier fighting and replacements who joined them the same day or the day before.)

By December 20, five days into the counteroffensive, the 99th Division had a continuous line on the ridge, with the 2nd Infantry Division on the south and the 9th Infantry Division on the north. The Germans made several more bloody attempts to open holes in the American line. The Checkerboard front was a special target. All were repulsed with the aid of crushing amounts of American artillery fire.
South of the 2nd Infantry Division a regiment of the U.S. 1st Infantry Division of Normandy landings fame, repulsed the entire 12th SS Division in an awful four days of tank-infantry fighting that was one of the decisive clashes of the Battle of the Bulge. It prevented the Germans from getting behind the ridge and unhinging the 99th-2nd defenses. (The 1st, 2nd, and 9th were among the most experienced infantry on the front at the time. A blessing for the Checkerboard to have them alongside.)

By the end of December 1944, the 6th SS Panzer Armee had abandoned its two-week struggle to get through the American defenses at the Elsenborn Ridge. Hitler's primary objective and best route to the Meuse River had been lost.

Military historians have been taking a fresh look at the Battle of the Bulge in recent years. They still give due respect to the paratroopers at Bastogne, symbolized by their commander's one-word reply to the demand he surrender the city ("Nuts!"). But they now recognize that other sectors, flash points, and bloody stands by the Americans, were just as important, if not more so, in deciding how long the Bulge would last and how much damage Hitler's Wehrmacht would do.

The battling on and in front of the Elsenborn Ridge described here has taken on new importance in the eyes of these historians.

John S. D. Eisenhower's history of the Battle of the Bulge includes the observation that, "the action of the 99th and 2nd divisions could well be considered the most decisive of the Ardennes campaign."

Stephen Ambrose, author of Citizen-Soldier and many other books on WWII, wrote, "It was along the Elsenborn Ridge on the first and second day [December 16 – 17] that [these] two divisions, largely out of touch with their commands, outnumbered five-to-one and worse, outgunned and surprised, managed to stop the Germans on their main line of advance."

William L. O'Neill, in his history of WWII, echoes Ambrose; "Most accounts of the fighting [in the Bulge] turn on the 101st airborne and its defense of Bastogne. This was indeed remarkable. But the key position was the Elsenborn Ridge. The holding of it by the 2nd and 99th infantry divisions, the latter often fighting in small units out of touch with higher command against attackers who outnumbered them five-to-one or more, was the outstanding achievement of the Battle of the Bulge." (author's italics)

Remarkable praise by professional historians for a virtually unknown infantry division whose roots go deep into Pittsburgh's 20th century past. And whose men wore the coat of arms of John S. D. Eisenhower's history of the Battle of the Bulge 20th century past.

And whose men; two others, 54 percent. Casualties in the rifle companies and machine gun squads were far greater than these percentages might indicate. Several companies ceased to exist. Several more made it back to the ridge with scarcely more than a dozen riflemen (from an original 108).

Yet the suffering and dying had only begun. When 6th SS Panzer Armee gave up at Elsenborn late in December 1944, four months
and one week remained to get through in the European War before the German surrender: an eternity several times over for the men who did the fighting.

Soldiers of the Wehrmacht had orders to fight on. And fight on they did until Adolph Hitler killed himself and his generals gave up early in May 1945.

The 99th's infantry ranks were now filled with replacements. Most of them 18 and 19 years old. They had been rushed to the Ardennes from the basic infantry training centers in the U.S. when it appeared the German Armee had risen from the dead and was its old terrible self again. Replacements and old timers (survivors) both now entered upon a long, grueling, and dangerous journey many of them would not complete:

- They joined with the 1st and 2nd infantry divisions to push the Germans back into the Siegfried Line and beyond. (January 1945)
- They moved into the Rhineland, attacking enemy strong points crossing rivers and canals and laying siege to the countless villages and towns. (February – March 1945).
- They crossed the Rhine River on the famous Remagen Bridge. It was a gift of the Germans, the only bridge along the whole length of the Rhine that hadn't been destroyed as they retreated east. As they ran across the bridge, the Checkerboard columns took constant punishment from the big German guns east of the river and from their new jet fighter-bomber. When they went into the Remagen beachhead, they were assigned the right flank of a three-division front. Hitler ordered all the force the Wehrmacht could muster to throw the three back into the Rhine, (a mini Normandy in late March 1945).
- As the beachhead was enlarged and the enemy withdrew, the Checkerboards marched north into Germany's Ruhr River Valley with a powerful Allied force to mop up the dozens of enemy divisions assembling there for a last stand. (April 1945)

“We attack on a ten-mile front. We advance four miles through extremely rugged terrain. We meet stubborn resistance consisting of small arms, mortar, and antitank fire.” From William C. Cavanagh, Dauntless, A History of the 99th Infantry Division (Taylor Publishing Co., 1994), p. 325.

- After resistance in the Ruhr collapsed, the Checkerboard soldiers were sent by truck deep into Germany's south and assigned to General Patton’s 3rd Army. More river crossings and skirmishing for villages and crossroad blocks (often manned by troops of the Waffen SS).

The wide and swiftly flowing Donau (Danube) River near Neustadt, Germany, was their last major barrier. The crossing went smoothly, by rubber boat and pontoon bridge, except for two infantry companies. (There is always an “except” in any successful infantry operation.) They tried to cross by rubber boats at a place where SS troops were dug in on the opposite bank, hidden and undetected. Infantry platoons of the two companies were cut down as they ran to the river or launched their boats. Toll: 120 dead, drowned, wounded, and missing. (April 27, 1945)

The war ended a week later.

In six months of combat, the Checkerboard division suffered 5,311 casualties, 1,187 of which were battle deaths. Ninety-three percent of the battle dead were infantrymen. Nearly a thousand more 99th soldiers did time in German prisoner of war camps, cold, dirty, underfed.

Following the surrender, most of the Checkerboard soldiers were transferred to other units in Europe. These were filled with “high pointers,” soldiers who had spent more time in combat and had more ribbons, thus were eligible for immediate release to civilian life.

The 99th Division returned to the states, its high pointers discharged, its flags furled, records sent to the military archives. Deactivated in military terms.

However, as the men who trained and fought with the Checkerboard began returning home, and taking up their old civilian pursuits, some of them couldn’t let go. They formed the 99th Infantry
Division Veterans Association to keep in touch, keep the memories alive, and honor fellow fighters who were killed. In 1949 they started holding annual conventions. The most recent (the 52nd, in July 2001) was in Fort Mitchell, Ky., still well attended not only by the men but also by their wives and a few children.

The numbers drop year by year for obvious reasons. Yet 56 years after the war ended, 2,650 Checkerboard vets (and a few widows) are paid-up members of the association. One hundred and thirty-five of them live in Western Pennsylvania communities.

The U.S. Army didn’t forget the 99th or its origins, either. In December 1967, 21 years after the Checkerboard Division stood down at the end of WWII, the Defense Department ordered its reactivation as “the 99th U.S. Army Reserve Command,” ARCOM, for short. And after all those years, it was again based in the Pittsburgh area (Oakdale near the old Greater Pittsburgh Airport) and staffed once more by reserve soldiers from the West Virginia-Pennsylvania two-state region.

They supervised local Army Reserve units in the two states. An ARCOM unit, the 14th Quartermaster Detachment based in Greensburg, suffered the most battle deaths in the Gulf War of any American unit of comparable size, whether at the front or the rear. A Scud missile hit the improvised barracks where the QM soldiers were sleeping, killing 13 and injuring 43.

In April 1996, Defense elevated 99th ARCOM to be one of 10 new “Regional Support Commands, U.S. Army Reserve.” Each command was made coterminous with a Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) region, the better to cooperate if Army Reserve skills were needed (as they generally are) in a domestic disaster.

This reconfiguration of Reserve regions also vastly increased the span of control of the Pittsburgh-based command. Henceforth the new “99th Regional Support Command, U.S. Army Reserve” would supervise medical, engineer-construction, military police, quartermaster, and transportation formations in three additional states and the District of Columbia. These now total 160 with 22,000 reserve soldiers serving in them. Forty-eight of the 160 are what the Army calls “force support package units,” the first to be
called up in the event of a global crisis or happening requiring U.S. military on the scene. As of press time, they are expecting orders in the current crisis.

The 22,000 reserves live in local communities, have civilian jobs (usually comparable to their military specialty), live civilian lives, except for the periods when they are training or are called to active duty in places like Bosnia, Kosovo, Guatemala, and El Salvador (where 99th RSC men and women have served in recent years or are serving.)

Even the new RSC headquarters soon to be in Moon Township will be staffed principally by reserve personnel. The commanding general, Major General Rodney G. Ruddock, is the principal of the Indiana, Pa., high school. Brigadier General Karol A. Kennedy is employed full-time as a civilian in the U.S. Defense Department in the Washington, D.C., area. She also happens to be the only female general in the Army Reserve at this writing.

The responsibilities of the RSCs in the U.S. military and foreign policy picture are vital, growing, and little known or understood by the general public. Reserve formations of civilian soldiers ready or near ready to be called up total 20 percent of all organized units in the Army. The Department of Defense expects RSCs to accomplish 46 percent of the combat service support and 27 percent of combat support for the fighting Army. (Operations distant from the battlefield and close to it, in laymen’s language.)

And as the policy of looping the RSCs with the FEMA regions indicates, the reserves also may be called up in an emergency for a variety of humanitarian and peace-keeping tasks at home and abroad.

The rise in influence and importance of the Army Reserve, and the new responsibilities given the 99th RSC, has renewed interest in the history of the old 99th Infantry Division of WWII and its Pittsburgh antecedents. The 22,000 soldiers of the command wear the Checkerboard patch on their uniforms as did their military forebears on the battlefields of Western Europe 56 years ago. Ninety-ninth RSC headquarters personnel try to keep alive the spirit of sacrifice and duty symbolized by the old fighting 99th. They keep in touch with the veterans of the Checkerboard association and send a delegation to their annual meetings. (General Ruddock addressed the two most recent conventions.) They support the projects of local Checkerboard vets, such as McCracken, to insure some knowledge of the old fighting 99th will always be out there.

McCracken and other Pittsburgh area Checkerboarders from WWII led a campaign to have space set aside in Oakland’s Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Hall for arms and artifacts, pictures and documents, guidons and colors reflecting and symbolizing the history of the 99th in WWII and the numerous battles its men fought in. They also raised $16,000 for two stained glass windows portraying winter combat scenes in the Ardennes.

Now they and other Checkerboard veterans and 99th RSC staff have undertaken a much more formidable task: raising the $200,000 that will transform Susan Wagner’s soldier model into the twelve-foot-high bronze statue that will stand in front of 99th RSC headquarters. It will remind passersby of the local boys and their fellows from around the U.S. who long ago went off to save the world. And did. ^

Those wishing to contribute to the statue fundraising can contact Col. Paul Platek (ret.), Association of the 99th Infantry Division, Inc., 201 Lakeside Dr., McKees Rocks, PA 15136-1230.

J.C. Doherty was born in Bellevue, raised in Homewood-Brushton, and educated at Central Catholic High School and Louisiana State and Duquesne universities. He served in a heavy mortar platoon with the 99th Infantry Division during the Battle of the Bulge, December - January, 1944 - 45. He lives in Chestertown on Maryland’s eastern shore where he writes books and articles.

This article is based on his three-volume history, The Shock of War, which covers the battles between the U.S. V Corps and German 1st SS Panzer Korps. The role of the 99th Infantry Division in the Battle of the Bulge is covered on an hour-by-hour basis. Included are 155 photographs, many taken during the battle and never published before. The three-volume history may be obtained by sending a check or money order for $39.95 to Vert Millon Press, Box 332, Alexandria, VA 22313-9998.
The Eclectic Art & Objects Gallery is pleased to offer a body of work that spans nearly fifty years of this amazing internationally renowned artist's life. Born in Alsace - Lorraine France in 1902, Charles Cobelle (born Carl Edelman) lived and painted in Paris until the late 1920’s when he moved to the United States. In addition to his studies at the L’Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, Cobelle studied privately with Marc Chagall and apprenticed in the studio of Raul Dufy in Menton on the Riviera.

Cobelle was one of the last links to the great tradition of the Open Line School of Paris. Throughout his long and prosperous career, Cobelle painted his favorite subjects; Paris street scenes, racetracks, ragattas and casinos. In his bustling world, there were no unpleasant images. The world he depicted in his vibrantly colored mixed media canvases and watercolors belongs as much to the artist’s imagination as to his powers of direct observation.

The exhibition runs through December. Gallery hours Tuesday through Saturday 10:00am-7:00pm. Preview the show online at www.eclecticartgallery.com