



**All about Benefactum.org
Frequently asked questions
Interview – Erik Westerman**

What inspired you to make this website?

Since I was little boy, I always remember sifting through my father's old steamer trunk of war relics. It was a real treasure trove of memories, and included things that most other young kids my age had ever seen. These were black and white photos of my father in a war, a real gritty memory of a war that most people of my generation hadn't been told about first hand. I don't have a lot of memories of my father stories, but he kept excellent records.

Living in Belgium was probably what heightened my interest. We had many friends and family members who lived out in the countryside that served as battlefields during final counterattack on Europe after D-Day. I used to visit small villages, meet the locals, and find out where they'd witnessed actual fire fight and soldiers trenched in hastily made defences during one of the coldest winters in decades.

Many parts of this countryside still remain unscathed since 1944, and with a tuned eye, it's very easy to identify trenches. Here I was on the battlefields of a war that hadn't happened that long ago. It made me think of my father. I decided at that point to start doing online research to see what I could find about the 40th. This project is now over 10 years old, having started back in 1997.

Surely there are other collectors or archivists out there.

As far as I know, I'm the only one. I'm confident that by now, if someone else was interested in the 40th in World War Two, they would have got in touch with me by now. One gentleman from France has particular interest in one individual from the battalion, and gentleman from Oxfordshire has been in touch as he remembered the battalion when they were bivouaced in England.

As far the National archives are concerned, there are records, but they are hazy. I obtained some interesting information concerning their activities and whereabouts, but my fathers own personal compilation of activity seemed to be the best source.

A story had been typed up by a member of the battalion, perhaps my father, but I really don't know; the person who typed it up remained anonymous.

Isn't there a list of names of all the people who served in the battalion? Surely they'd be easy to find if you a list.

The Army has what it called duty roster lists. I've obtained such lists for other signal battalions just before they entered the European theatre of war. I have an embarkation list when the troops were returning home at the end of the war, but that only has about 10 names on it.

Other names I took from my father's scrapbook. Some I found online, through obituaries.

New names crop up from time to time, but usually after they've passed away. Sadly to say, it seems as if we praise people for the noble actions after they pass away and miss out the chance to honour them whilst they're still alive.

I've contacted the battalion historian. I've been in touch with NARA. I've made copies of most of the notes that contained names, and occasionally rank and serial numbers of soldiers. The list is growing very slowly.

And this is why you made a website..

Exactly. At least there is some sort of centralised repository for all of the ephemera. Having said that, I'd like to eventually design a permanent museum display so that the general public can see these historic ephemera with their own eyes. I think the Signal Battalion museum in Georgia would appreciate that.

Where do you live?

I live in Reading in County Berkshire, Southern England. Oddly enough, I'm less than an hour away by car to the place where my father and the rest of the 40th were bivouacked during the war. I have lived in England for the past 15 years.

What are the goals of this campaign?

If I was successful at finding a few surviving members of my father's battalion, I'd be straight over to meet them in the US. I'd love to conduct video interviews, and find about the rumours and myths that I remember, and the guesses and theories of location and encounters..

What rumours?

I remember my father mentioning a good jazz troupe in the battalion. There were rumours of one of the men being an excellent cook who made do with what he had in the field.. Are the men who of the 40th who died and are buried in Holland victims of the first counterattacks of the Battle of the Bulge? I have so many questions that I'd like to ask.

What do you think the public will get from this?

I think that we could actually learn what it must have been like for an African American soldier serving in the Signal Corps during World War Two. Technically, the role was considered a skilled job, and those skills were learned or apprenticed. These were intelligent and capable young men, who by sticking together, and working for the same cause, overcame obstacles, both at home and overseas.

Their will to integrate for a greater cause is what distinguishes them as honourable veterans. Role models from this era have been documented before, the Tuskegee Airmen, the 761st Tank Battalion but not that of an all African American Signal Battalion unit.

Were there any other African American Signal forces serving in WWII?

The Army's first African-American signal battalion, the 325th served served in France in World War One, but was dismantled at the end of the war.

As far as I know there are only a few others, such as the 320th Anti-Aircraft Barrage Balloon Battalion, 275th Signal Construction Company, and the 42d Signal Battalion. It would be interesting to hear from veterans from these units too.