



WWII Veteran Tells **a Ghost Story**

by Dayna Harpster

Some veterans tell windy war stories. Some don't say a word about what they've experienced. Either way, most people are understanding and patient about that. Those stories are their own to tell or not.

But the public reaction was far different when word got out about a company of men in World War II who waged their campaigns through art, mimicry and deception. When the plotline centers around rubber tanks and airplanes and even inflatable soldiers, plus entire faux battles consisting only of soundtracks and fake radio signals, inquiring minds can't help but ask. And one Southwest Florida man who certainly thought all that was in the past – he is 91 now – is having fun with the surge of interest.

"I thought I'd get my 15 minutes of fame, but it just keeps going on and on," said Gazo Nemeth a resident of Jamaica Bay in Fort Myers.

Nemeth was among the 1,100 who served in that creative and clandestine cadre and he's delighted to find that suddenly people are interested in his war stories. People from his neighborhood, local news outlets, even his daughter and son-in-law, Linda and Ray Schneider, are suddenly very curious about his military service.

"I always just said I was in the signal corps," said Nemeth. The truth is, he became an ace mimic, learning to replicate the way other companies sent communication by Morse Code. He was among the radio men who drew attention to the 23rd Headquarters Special Troops and away from actual warring units.

Until recently Nemeth lived in virtual obscurity save for the broad fan base of neighbors, friends, family and co-workers who have cherished his upbeat nature and winning personality. An energetic daily swimmer, Nemeth retired just four years ago as a courier for Robb & Stucky to care for his late wife, Carmella, when her health began to fail.



Listen online to an interview with the producer of *The Ghost Army* @ [wgcu.org/Gulf Coast Live!](http://wgcu.org/GulfCoastLive!)

She never knew much about his war experiences, nor did other people, not even the Schneiders nor his other daughter, Barbara Askin of Port St. John. Although the Ghost Army record was mostly declassified in 1996, it remained for filmmaker Rick Beyer to make the subject fairly widespread knowledge through a documentary for public television. “They figured we’d have a war with Russia so they kept it classified” for years, Nemeth said.

The result of a nearly 10-year effort is Beyer’s documentary *The Ghost Army*.

You won’t see Nemeth in it, but he was there. As a radio operator, he took part in what Beyer called “the least glamorous part of the story.” Beyer spoke on WGCU *Gulf Coast Live!* radio program with host John Davis in March, and also told Davis that since estimates are that 75 percent of German intelligence in World War II consisted of intercepted radio communication, the false information about troop locations and maneuvers sent by Ghost Army men like Nemeth was central to the company’s – and the Allies’ – success. These masters of deception were later decorated, usually cryptically because the information was classified, and credited with saving thousands of American lives.

Adorned in his Army Garrison Cap one afternoon in the Jamaica Bay welcome hall, Nemeth spoke humbly about his part in the Ghost Army. “We’d just make up bull stuff and pretend it was worthwhile,” he said, smiling. “Stuff like, ‘We’re holding out here, we’ll be here for three days.’” The “we” always meant another American company, freed to be elsewhere in secret while the Ghost Army provided stand-ins.

“We’d be sent to a part of the front line that was static,” Nemeth explained. “We’d pull alongside another radio crew. I’d listen to one guy and see how often he

⇒ *continued*

Ghost Story, continued

sent messages. We'd paint their stickers on our bumpers and put their patches on our arms, and they'd move somewhere else down the line. I think I ended up with 29 different patches."

The bumpers they painted were on big toys: inflatable tanks that looked so real they deceived everyone. "At first, we kind of thought it was ridiculous," Nemeth admitted. "Who are we going to fool with this crap?"

But they did. Credit would be due to the artists – including future fashion titan Bill Blass – who were hand-picked from art schools all over the country to set the stage. And also the sound men, who recorded and played tracks that perfectly mimicked the sounds of war, from battles to troop movements to a company at rest.

The idea was the brainchild of what the documentary calls "controversial journalist" Capt. Ralph Ingersoll, who wrote in a memo on Christmas Eve 1943, "I considered it one of my more improbable dreams, but damned if the Pentagon planners didn't buy it whole."

Sometimes the 23rd Headquarters Special Troops found that their own fake war had become real, and they were about to be stuck in the middle of a battle with toy guns and phony ammunition, and "just a little company of 100 sharpshooters, in case of emergency," Nemeth said. "They didn't have anything stronger than a light machine gun." Such was the case for the Ghost Army's 20 battlefield deceptions from June 1944 to March 1945 from Normandy to the Rhine River.

"We always drove like hell to get away when we had to," he said, laughing, then turning just a little bit serious. "They always told us never to get captured. 'We can't let you become a POW and talk,' they'd say, 'so here's a cyanide tablet. First blow up your radio, then blow up your transmitter. Blow up everything.'"

More than once the company retreated to Luxembourg, "the nicest country I ever was in," Nemeth said. Considering their accommodations were often bombed-out churches, crumbling seminaries or simply patches of ground, that's high praise.

Nemeth never knew any of the 379 artists in the company, officially called the 603rd Camouflage Engineers. Among them were Blass, and Arthur Singer, who became well-known for his bird illustrations; Jack Masey, an ace caricaturist; abstract artist Ellsworth Kelly; and many more.

Just two men were killed among the 1,100. Some were injured, though. And Nemeth endured two near tragedies involving fellow soldiers. A friend next to him during Reveille accidentally shot him in the helmet; another company member shot through his jacket and severed a belt loop.

Perhaps it's understandable, then, when Nemeth laughs and says, "It was a million-dollar tour and I wouldn't do it again for five." ■



Gazo Nemeth in the war years.