

## U.S. Army Europe and 7th Army

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### Citizens of German town honor American Soldiers who died there during closing days of World War II

By Jason L. Austin

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**HEIDELBERG, Germany** – German citizens observed Volkstrauertag, a national day of mourning for those who died during World Wars I and II, sometimes called Remembrance Day, Nov. 16.



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Chaplain (Lt. Col.) Joel Harris, chief of operations for the U.S. Army Europe Chaplain's Office, prepares to join Sinsheim, Germany Lord Mayor Rolf Geinert and Duehren, Germany Mayor Walter Zahn (right) in unveiling a memorial plaque to 21 American Soldiers who died fighting in the Duehren area in April 1945 during Volkstrauertag, or national day of mourning, events in the town, Nov. 16.

Every year since the end of World War II 63 years ago, the citizens of Duehren, a small town south of Sinsheim, Germany, have gathered on that day to honor the 51 men from their town who died in World War II, along with 25 missing.

Also among those remembered are 13 German soldiers who died April 2, 1945 -- Easter Monday -- defending Duehren against American

Soldiers of the 397th Infantry Regiment who were clearing towns on their march toward Heilbronn.

Between April 1 and 3, 1945 -- just more than a month before the German surrender on the war's western front -- 21 Americans also died in the Sinsheim area.

This Remembrance Day the citizens of Duehren chose to remember the American sacrifice as well as their own.

Town officials asked if a U.S. Army chaplain could speak at an ecumenical church service there, followed by a memorial service and the unveiling of a memorial plaque at the village's war graves site. Chaplain (Lt. Col.) Joel Harris, chief of operations for the U.S. Army Europe Chaplain's Office, spoke at the event on behalf of the Army.

As church bells rang, people filed into the small Nikolauskirche, filling the rows of pews from front to back.

The service opened with organ music, followed by a gospel duet by Perry Blake of the USAREUR Civilian Personnel Operations Center and local student Sandra Salm. The organist, Patty Harris, wife of Chaplain Harris, accompanied the duet during an a cappella song as well.



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A memorial plaque to 21 American Soldiers who died fighting in the area of Duehren, Germany in early April 1945 was unveiled at the town's war graves site during Volkstrauertag, or national day of mourning, events there, Nov. 16.

The service continued with German and English hymns, scripture readings in both languages and a sermon by Harris translated into German.

The chaplain opened his sermon in German, apologizing for his limited fluency and thanking the citizens of Duehren for honoring Soldiers and for their commitment to freedom.

He remarked that the memorial plaque that would be placed following the service

represents the sacrifice allied forces from many nations make for freedom.

“Our collective presence demonstrates our collective commitment to remember those who have gone before us,” Harris said, “... to ensure the purpose for which they fought is never forgotten.”

During an intercession prayer, Pastor Dietmar Coors spoke about the opportunity to further peace by gathering with a former adversary, who is now a partner.

At the memorial ceremony Duehren Mayor Walter Zahn spoke of Volkstrauertag as a day of sorrow, remembrance and mourning for all victims of war.

Through a translator, Zahn said Germans “must never forget the insanity of extremism ... the guilt our nation bears today is greater than 30 years after the war.”

Today, “the readiness to use force is a worldwide threat ... it has become part of normality,” Zahn said, referring to the terror attacks in America, Madrid and London, suicide bombings in Israel and Iraq, and the more than 200 armed conflicts since World War II.

“The past has not passed, despite our attempts to ignore it,” Zahn said.

“On this day Duehren is a place of peace,” Harris said. “On this day Duehren is a place of honor. On this day Dühren is a place of forgiveness. On this day Dühren is a place of healing.”

While Duehren's Volkstrauertag event was a day to remember the “darkest days of German history,” said Sinsheim Lord Mayor Rolf Geinert, he said it was also a day of renewal.

“This stone (memorial) is a very good start to work toward freedom and peace,” Geinert said.

Geinert’s remarks were interrupted briefly by two protestors who voiced their opposition to the memorial plaque and then quickly left.

In German, Geinert said American Soldiers have created freedom in our world, freedom in our nation, freedom in our city and freedom in our families.

“The American Soldiers are part of our history,” Zahn said. “From this day forward, we will remember them.”



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