

The Monuments Men During January 1945  
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As December 1944 ended and January 1945 began, the German counteroffensive in the Ardennes (Battle of the Bulge) was two weeks old and the Allied forces had stopped the German effort to cross the Meuse River and capture Antwerp. But the German forces were not defeated and were not withdrawing back to the Siegfried Line in Germany, from whence the attack had been initiated on December 16. On January 3, 1945, the First U.S. Army attacking from the north of Belgium and the Third U.S. Army attacking from the south of Belgium, from the Bastogne area, started their own counterattack to push the Germans out of the salient they had created in Belgium. During the fighting around Stavelot and Malmedy in mid-January further destruction was visited upon these towns. Both had already faced devastation in mid-December.

At the end of January the Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives (MFA&A) specialist officers with the First U.S. Army, [Captain Walker K. Hancock](#) and [Captain Everett P. Lesley, Jr.](#), who spent the whole month in Belgium, visited both Stavelot and Malmedy to inspect damage to cultural property. They found, as they would note in their monthly report, that the center of Malmedy had been completely destroyed by artillery fire and that they were told looting had been prevalent. As for Stavelot, they noted that looting and wanton damage took place, but they had found it impossible to ascertain by what troops, at what time. In their report, dated February 1, 1945, Hancock and Lesley observed that the post-occupational situation at Stavelot and Malmedy, had brought into sharper focus more than ever before certain very basic problems common to MFA&A work: it was geographically and chronologically impossible for the officers working in the field to cover, prior to, during, and after operations, all the monuments [e.g., historic buildings] falling within their jurisdiction. Certain responsibilities had, they wrote, devolved upon Corps and Division G-5 (Civil Affairs) Sections, and Civil Affairs Detachments assigned to given localities, but that the fulfillment of the responsibilities in an emergency, or during rapid movement, must often wait upon other, more urgent matters, such as public health, public safety, food and transportation. Yet, by the time a given military situation has subsided sufficiently to make possible the posting of “off-limit” signs to buildings, writing of reports, and other duties required by handbooks and instructions, much irreparable damage may have been done.

They observed that it would not be advantageous to increase the dissemination of printed matter regarding MFA&A activities to the Civil Affairs Detachments, which already had more printed matter than was convenient to handle, and it was manifestly impossible for a single officer attached to an entire Army to prepare breakdown lists of monuments to cover all the constantly changing unit areas. They added:

There remains only one means by which the MFA&A Specialist Officer in the field can, in a measure, prevent the reoccurrence of such incidents as those of Stavelot and Malmedy. He must be free to work, for longer periods at a time, with the commanders of Corps, Divisions, and Regimental Combat teams, in advance of and during operations. There he could make preliminary pinpointing, in conjunction with tactical commanders at lower echelons, of monuments within their areas and accompanying, if feasible, the

commander of these echelons during operations, in order to post, protect, appraise, or inventory monuments. As an answer to the problem of covering an entire Army area during a rapid operation we further suggested the feasibility of designating a particular member of the Corps G-5 Staff to consult with the MFA&AA office to pinpoint monuments in the anticipated corridor of operations.

In order to accomplish this, they added, more latitude of movement was absolutely necessary, and observed that:

The MFA&A officers represent a service both unparalleled and unprecedented in the U.S. Army, one which cannot easily be processed through traditional channels. It is unrealistic to assume that the duties so uniquely theirs will or can be carried out by others. The need for the MFA&A Specialist Officers is to be on the spot at the time danger to monuments is imminent, or damage is taking place. All tactical commanders with whom the undersigned have conferred are unanimous in agreeing that the place for the MFA&A Specialist Officer is in the advance, not rear, of tactical operations.<sup>1</sup>

Several days after writing their report, the commanding general of the First U.S. Army, gave Hancock and Lesley the latitude of movement they had urged be given.<sup>2</sup>

In his report on the work of the Monuments Men during January 1945, British Lt. Col. Geoffrey Webb, in charge of the Supreme Commander Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) MFA&A operations, wrote that "The most insistent problem facing this Section [G-5, SHAEF] in January had been the billeting question-especially in Belgium." He observed that the reports of First U.S. Army, especially those dealing with conditions in Malmedy, Stavelot and at the Chateau de Modave, showed the nature of the military use and billeting problems in its most aggravated form. Webb noted that [Hancock](#) and [Lesley](#) had come to the very natural conclusion that little help could be expected from non-specialist Civil Affairs officers dealing with the conditions such as those which prevailed in Malmedy and Stavelot and, that in such circumstances, the only course was for the MFA&A officers to be well forward themselves. He added that the directives, under which the MFA&A officers with Armies worked were formed to give wide scope for such adjustments, and the officers with First U.S. Army availed themselves of this latitude to initiate a practice [i.e., being on the spot to take corrective action with respect to unauthorized billeting in

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<sup>1</sup> Report, Capt. Walker K. Hancock and Capt. Everett P. Lesley, Jr., MFA&A Specialist Officers, First U.S. Army, Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives Area of First United States Army, Semi-Monthly Report, February 1, 1945, File: AMG 294, *Subject File Aug 1943-1945 (Entry UD-55B, NAID 612714)*, Monuments, Fine Arts & Archives Section, Operations Branch, G-5 Division, General Staff, Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces (SHAEF), Record Group 331: Allied Operational and Occupation Headquarters, World War II.

<sup>2</sup> Memo, Col. R. S. Nourse, Adjutant General, First U.S. Army to Corps, Divisions, and Separate Unit Commanders, Subject: Protection of Historic/Artistic Monuments, February 4, 1945, attachment to Report, Capt. Walker K. Hancock and Capt. Everett P. Lesley, Jr., MFA&A Specialist Officers, First U.S. Army, Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives Area of First United States Army, Semi-Monthly Report, February 1, 1945, File: AMG 294, *Subject File Aug 1943-1945 (Entry UD-55B, NAID 612714)*, Monuments, Fine Arts & Archives Section, Operations Branch, G-5 Division, General Staff, Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces (SHAEF), Record Group 331: Allied Operational and Occupation Headquarters, World War II.

historic buildings] which it was hoped would go far to prevent such unfortunate occurrences in the future.<sup>3</sup>

At the end of January, Lt. Gen. Omar N. Bradley, head of the 12<sup>th</sup> Army Group, wrote the G-5s of his four Armies (First, Third, Ninth, and Fifteenth) regarding the MFA&A Specialist Officers. After referring to the various handbooks, directives, and instructions, and mentioning their attachment to G-5s for MFA&A work, he instructed that G-5s would utilize these officers to the best advantage in the areas for which they were responsible. These officers, he wrote, to be informed, would need to make inspections of the listed and other important monuments and collections in the areas of the commands to which they were assigned or attached, and to keep acquainted with conditions in such areas from the time of occupation by elements of such commands. These officers, he instructed, would advise the G-5s, concerning monuments and collections not on the Official List of Protected Monuments which need to be exempted from military use or to have special protection.<sup>4</sup>

Bradley also wrote that as a measure contributing to the eventual restitution of works of art and objects of a scientific or historical importance which may have been looted from United Nations governments or nations, the MFA&A officers would investigate all information of such nature and inspect all repositories of such works falling within the area of the command to which they were assigned or attached, and report their findings.<sup>5</sup> Of course, in January, the Monuments Men were not, with the exception of the Aachen area, in a physical position to seek out looted cultural property, nor German cultural treasures that had been evacuated eastward for protection. That would change in February 1945, as the Allies began their drive to the Rhine River, and cross it in March.

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<sup>3</sup> Memo, Geoffrey Webb, Lt. Col., Advisor, MFA&A, G-5 Division, Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force to The Assistant Chief of Staff, G-5, Subject: Report on MFA&A Operations for the Month of January 1945, February 24, 1945, *Activity Reports and Related Records, 1945-1950* (Entry A1 517, NAID [3725266](#)), Munich Central Collecting Point, Records Concerning the central Collecting Points (“Ardelia Hall Collection”), Records of the Office of Military Government (U.S.) OMGUS, Record Group 260: Records of United States Occupation Headquarters, World War II, Record Group 260, National Archives Microfilm Publication No. [M1946](#), roll 74.

<sup>4</sup> Memorandum, Lt. Col. J. H. Bloss, Assistant Adjutant General HQs, 12<sup>th</sup> Army Group to Commanding Generals First U.S. Army, Third U.S. Army, Ninth U.S. Army, and Fifteenth U.S. Army (Attn: Assistant Chiefs of Staff, G-5), Subject: Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives Specialist Officers, January 31, 1945, File: AMG 217, (12AGp) MFA: Correspondence: 12 Army Group, *Subject File Aug 1943-1945* (Entry UD-55B, NAID [612714](#)), Monuments, Fine Arts & Archives Section, Operations Branch, G-5 Division, General Staff, Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces (SHAEPF), Record Group 331: Allied Operational and Occupation Headquarters, World War II.

<sup>5</sup> Memorandum, Lt. Col. J. H. Bloss, Assistant Adjutant General HQs, 12<sup>th</sup> Army Group to Commanding Generals First U.S. Army, Third U.S. Army, Ninth U.S. Army, and Fifteenth U.S. Army (Attn: Assistant Chiefs of Staff, G-5), Subject: Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives Specialist Officers, January 31, 1945, File: AMG 217, (12AGp) MFA: Correspondence: 12 Army Group, *Subject File Aug 1943-1945* (Entry UD-55B, NAID [612714](#)), Monuments, Fine Arts & Archives Section, Operations Branch, G-5 Division, General Staff, Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces (SHAEPF), Record Group 331: Allied Operational and Occupation Headquarters, World War II.