

The Career of a Monuments Man



Before the War

Walter Huchthausen was one of five children born to German immigrant Julius Huchthausen and his wife, Ida. Julius served as a Lutheran minister in various churches in Oklahoma and Washington before settling in Minnesota during the 1920s.

An award-winning architect

Walter attended the University of Minnesota. He joined an academic fraternity and an honorary art fraternity. He also served as the art editor for the university's magazine, the Minnesota Techno-Log. Huchthausen won several awards for academics and art. One of the most prestigious, the Magney and Husler Prize, was from the American Institute of Architects for the student with the highest academic standing over four years.

He also created an award-winning design for the university's architectural drawing competition.

Huchthausen earned a master's degree in architecture from Harvard University. He then studied in Germany under a Harvard fellowship. His fluency in German would later be instrumental in his service in World War II. In 1939, Huchthausen returned to the University of Minnesota to teach architectural design, drawing, and painting. During the next few years, he designed buildings, including a Gothic revival church, in St. Paul. He also created designs for monuments and painted watercolors.

Military Experience

Walter Huchthausen left the University of Minnesota in 1942, at age 37, and enlisted in the Army Air Force. He trained at Ellington Field in Texas and was deployed to Great Britain. While in London, a Luftwaffe bombing raid injured Huchthausen. After he recovered, the Monuments and Fine Arts and Archives Commission (MFAA) recruited him for frontline work in Germany.

The Allied armies housed the MFAA program in the Civil Affairs and Military Government Section. Created in 1943 in the United States, it eventually grew to include over 300 men and women from 13 countries. Many of them, like Huchthausen, had worked as artists, architects, museum curators, or educators before the war. Their role was to protect cultural treasures endangered by the war.

They also worked to collect artifacts displaced by the war. Some MFAA officers took part in battle preparations, advising military strategists of culturally important sites so pilots could target alternate sites. When warfare damaged cultural treasures, MFAA officers moved into the area with front line troops to assess damage and make repairs.

Recovery efforts in the former seat of Charlemagne's empire

By the fall of 1944, Huchthausen was staff officer for the MFAA in the 9th Army in France. He moved with the 9th as it fought its way into western Germany. The army entered Charlemagne's 1,100 year old capital in the city of Aachen in late October. Both sides had suffered heavy losses in the Battle of Aachen. Much of the city was devastated.

Huchthausen moved quickly, organizing recovery and restoration efforts across the city. He found a key repository of the area's art in Aachen's Suermondt Museum. Huchthausen used the building as a base from which to direct operations. Another MFAA officer, George Stout, reported that he had never seen so many altarpieces in one place as he had under Huchthausen's care in the Aachen museum.

Hidden repositories of art looted by the Nazis

During the last year of the war, the MFAA began discovering hidden repositories of art looted by the Nazis. The Nazis had evacuated some of the art from museums for "safekeeping." Some they had confiscated from Jewish families. Some enriched the estates of top Nazi commanders like Hermann Goering. Due to the swift Allied advance, the Nazis deposited many of these treasures in castles, mines, and even jail cells as they retreated. The MFAA was not yet in a position to recover this hidden art, except in the area of Aachen, where Huchthausen came across a key find.

In February 1945, Huchthausen received record of a meeting of German officials from the Rhine province. The document contained coded information on 30 repositories identified by the Germans for safeguarding looted artifacts. The location that housed the art stolen from Aachen, however, was a mystery. Through his interrogation of German prisoners, Huchthausen discovered that this site was called "Siegen." The soldier who transcribed Huchthausen's interrogation of German prisoners transposed the "ie." Because of the misspelling, it took the MFAA some time to find the repository on their maps.

While Huchthausen protected altarpieces near Aachen and assembled information about repositories further east, the Supreme Allied Command Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) was planning its advance across the Rhine into Germany. Their goal was to encircle the bulk of the German army in the west in the region directly east of Aachen.

This region, the Ruhr, was the industrial heart of Germany. It supplied coal, oil, chemicals, and power. It also manufactured tanks, aircraft, submarines, and cannons. Allied armies crossed the Rhine on March 24, 1945, in an operation known as Varsity. The 9th Army, including Huchthausen, was assigned to the northern sector. By April 1, Allied armies encircled the entire Ruhr area.

On April 2, Huchthausen and Lieutenant Sheldon Keck, a fellow MFAA officer, traveled north of the Ruhr Pocket by jeep to recover an important cultural artifact. As they were driving, German machine gun fire hit their jeep. A shot to the head killed Huchthausen immediately. His body fell onto Keck, protecting him from injury. American troops found Keck alive in a foxhole later that day.

Commemoration

On April 2, the same day that Huchthausen died, soldiers found six wooden crates in a damp iron pit in a town called Siegen ("see-gen"). The crates included a silver bust of Charlemagne and paintings by Dutch masters. They also contained the original manuscript of Beethoven's Sixth Symphony and other priceless artifacts. Because of Huchthausen's tireless efforts to find, recover, and preserve cultural treasures, the MFAA was able to return hundreds of artifacts to their original homes.

"A signal contribution to the cultural preservation of Europe"

David Finlay, a member of the Roberts Commission that created the MFAA, wrote to Huchthausen's parents: "Captain Huchthausen was, in the opinion of this Commission, one of the outstanding Monuments Officers in the field, and his work in the Valley of the Loire and at Aachen will remain as a signal contribution to the cultural preservation of Europe."

The work of the MFAA remained largely unknown for the next half century. In 2007, however, both houses of Congress passed a resolution honoring the soldiers who served in the MFAA. In the course of his statement of support, Senator Jim Inhofe singled out Huchthausen for praise.

For heroic service against the enemy, Huchthausen received the Bronze Star. He also received the Purple Heart. Huchthausen is buried in the Netherlands American Cemetery at Margraten.