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Veteran to tell of his experiences in World War II at history book club

PIERRE, S.D. -- A veteran who fought in one of the turning points of World War II will share his experiences at a program in Pierre on April 14.

Paul Priest of Box Elder will tell about the Allies capturing the bridge at Remagen, Germany, at 7 p.m. Central Time on Tuesday, April 14, at the South Dakota National Guard Museum , 301 E. Dakota Ave., Pierre.

“Paul is the sole surviving member of his division’s reconnaissance team. He is one of the few people still able to give an eyewitness account of events that occurred 70 years ago,” said Michael Lewis, president of the South Dakota Historical Society Foundation.

Priest’s talk is part of the History and Heritage Book Club sponsored by the foundation, the nonprofit fundraising partner of the South Dakota State Historical Society at the Cultural Heritage Center in Pierre. The foundation and Post 8 American Legion in Pierre are sponsoring Priest’s talk.

Priest was one of the first soldiers to cross the Ludendorff Bridge on March 7, 1945. The railroad bridge was a vital thoroughfare for German troops and supplies. Its capture meant that Germany was unable to move troops and supplies across the bridge, and opened the way for Allied troops to drive into the heart of Germany. Germany surrendered on May 8, 1945.

Priest was born on Dec. 25, 1925, in Flint, Mich. He was drafted into the U.S. Army and completed basic training at Blanden, Fla. He landed in France on his 19th birthday, Dec. 25, 1944. He was assigned to the U.S. Army’s 9th Armored Division Headquarters Company, performing reconnaissance patrols for the division, when he fought to capture the bridge at Remagen. As part of a reconnaissance patrol, he would have explored an area to gather military information.

After the war, Priest returned to Flint and married his pre-war sweetheart, Joan. In 2013, the Priests traveled to the 9th Armored Division’s World War II combat sites, part of the “End the War in ’44 Tour.”

Priest collaborated on publishing the book “Return to the Bridge at Remagen” and the documentary “Die Brueke Von Remagen.”

Priest will be accompanied to Pierre by retired U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. George A. Larson of Rapid City. Larson has written a book about the history of Ellsworth Air Force Base near Rapid City, “Thunder over Dakota, The History of Ellsworth Air Force Base, 1941-2011.”

Both men will talk to pupils at St. Joseph Catholic School in Pierre before the evening presentation.

Priest will have a display of items from World War II, and Larson will have his book "Thunder over Dakota" at the evening program. The book is sold at the Heritage Store at the Cultural Heritage Center.

"The program at the South Dakota National Guard Museum is an opportunity to learn about World War II and the military, both in the museum and from the speakers," Lewis said.

Everyone is welcome at the free program. Call (605) 773-6006 for more information.

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The South Dakota State Historical Society is a division of the Department of Tourism. The Department of Tourism is comprised of Tourism, the South Dakota Arts Council and the State Historical Society. The Department is led by Secretary James D. Hagen. The State Historical Society, an Affiliate of the Smithsonian Institution, is headquartered at the South Dakota Cultural Heritage Center in Pierre. The center houses the society's world-class museum, the archives, and the historic preservation, publishing and administrative/development offices. Call (605) 773-3458 or visit www.history.sd.gov for more information. The society also has an archaeology office in Rapid City; call (605) 394-1936 for more information.