

THE TRAGEDY OF THE 109TH FIELD ARTILLERY

KOREAN WAR

WHEN?
Sept. 11, 1950

WHERE?
Coshocton, Ohio



EVENT
Train accident

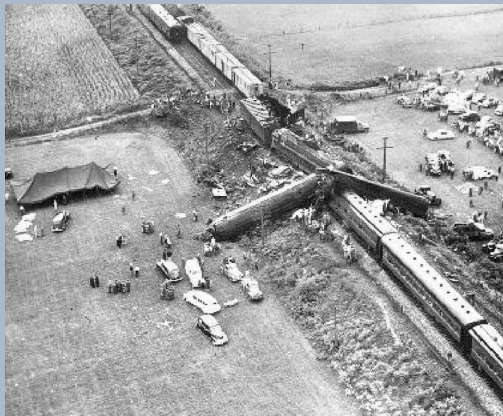
VOCABULARY
Armory
National Guard

Photo by William Fischer, Jr.

The 109th Field Artillery has a long history that began before the Revolutionary War. During the Korean Conflict that began in June of 1950, they joined over 600 members of the Pennsylvania National Guard under the command of Lieutenant Colonel (LTC) Frank Townend on their way for training at Camp Atterbury, Indiana. Numerous men had been in the service for less than a year.

Many of the servicemen had relatives—brothers, fathers—serve during WW II and thought that it was now their turn. The 109th were at Fort Indiantown Gap (near Harrisburg) when their training was cut short. They were given 10 days at home before they would be shipped to Camp Atterbury. As they boarded the train at Wilkes-Barre, that a large number of well-wishers came to the station to see them depart (Times Leader).

As the train traveled through Ohio, an air brake ruptured, and the train had to stop on the tracks for repair. Flagmen hurried to the rear of the train to put out flares and lanterns to warn other trains. Another train, the Spirit of St. Louis, was coming down the tracks. The engineer, William Eller, admitted that he ignored the warning signs until a flagman threw a flare against the windshield of the incoming train (PBS). By that time, it was too late, and the Spirit of St. Louis rammed the rear of the troop train about 50 miles per hour around 5:15 a.m. Most of the men were sleeping.



Al Williams and several others were in one of the cars that received the full impact. In the PBS video, *Tragedy of the 109th*, he talks about that moment. The incoming train hit the last car so hard it threw it up

over the car Williams was in and onto the third car. Their car was then rammed by the Spirit of St. Louis killing most of those who died. Williams and three others got thrown out.

Rescue efforts began immediately. Ambulances from West Lafayette and Coshocton plus others from neighboring towns hurried to the scene. Two hundred and seventy-eight men were injured, and thirty-three members of the battalion were killed. Men who were uninjured and civilians who arrived on the scene worked side by side pulling survivors out and giving aid to the injured (PBS). Williams had several injuries including a steel bar through his right leg. He was in the hospital for over a month. Whether you lived or died depended on where you were on the train. Many were injured and severely so as the steel twisted from the impact.

Those who were killed were returned to Wilkes-Barre. When the train arrived at the station the caskets were unloaded. Large crowds formed and watched in silence as the mass funeral procession moved to the Armory. People lined the sidewalks from the station across Market Street Bridge to the Armory (PBS). The flag-draped coffins were arranged in the Armory each with an honor guard.

Each year a memorial service is held to honor those men who were killed. A granite memorial in the shape of a keystone is located at the Armory near Kirby Park listing the names of those lost. On the other side is a description of the train wreck in Ohio. Another monument is located on the grounds of the Luzerne County courthouse. There is also a troop train memorial at the site of the crash made of black granite listing the names of those killed. Thirty-three white crosses are also placed near the scene. Each year the communities in Pennsylvania and Ohio



Photo by Sgt.1st Class Matthew Keeler

remember those servicemen who lost their lives in what has become the most tragic day of the 109th Field Artillery (PBS).

ONLINE RESOURCES

[PBS TRAGEDY OF THE 109TH KOREA](#)

[Times Leader Korean War 109th](#)