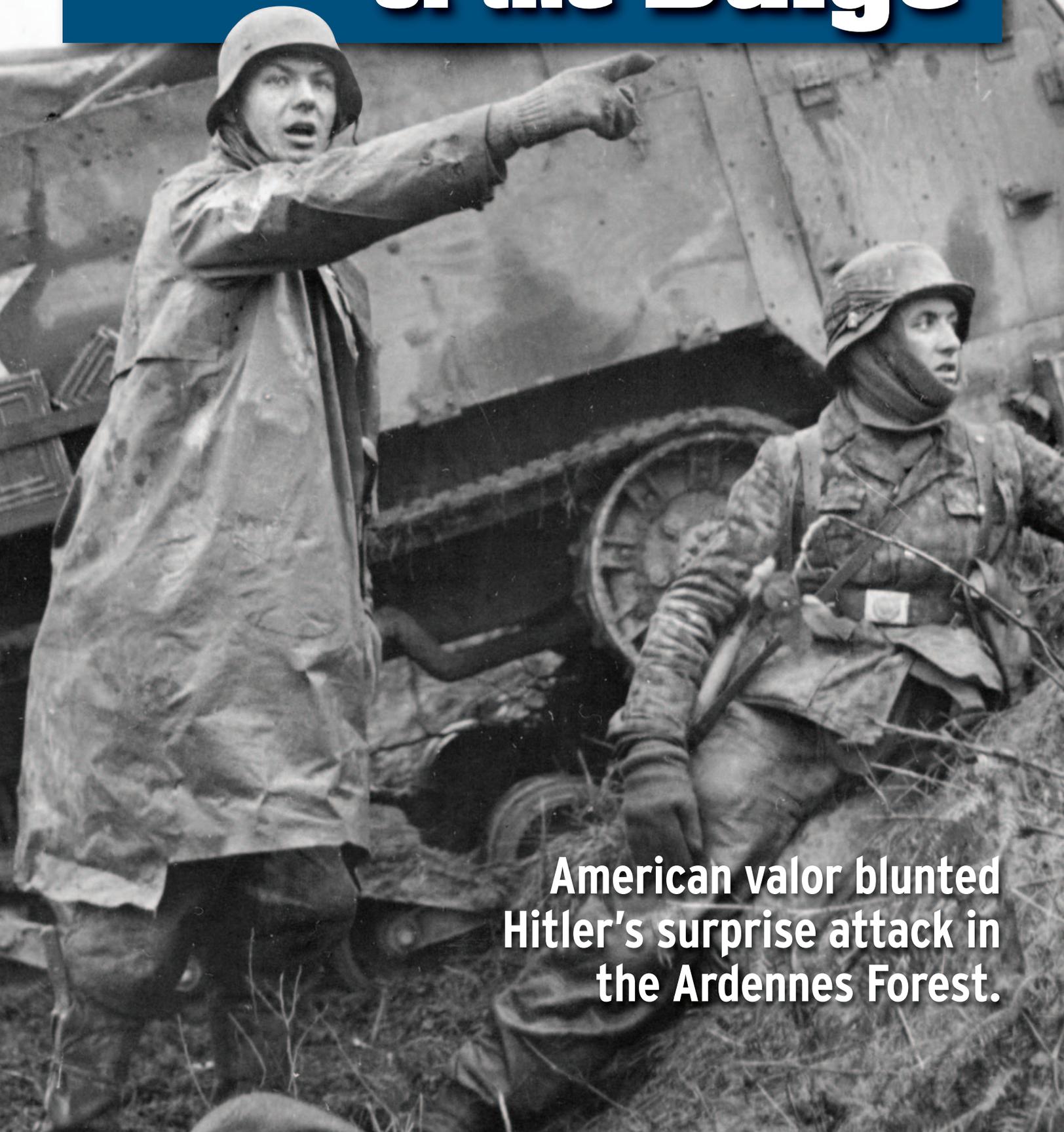


WARFARE HISTORY NETWORK PRESENTS:

The Battle of the Bulge



American valor blunted
Hitler's surprise attack in
the Ardennes Forest.

Warfare History Network Presents:

The Battle of the Bulge

3: Heroic Stand at Lausdell

Defending a critical crossroads during the early hours of the Battle of the Bulge, American troops blunted the German spearhead on December.

17: The Defense of St. Vith

An obscure brigadier general, Bruce Clarke, and a contingent of American troops slowed the German advance during the Battle of the Bulge.

26: Bravery in Bastogne

The soldiers of the U.S. 101st Airborne Division and a complement of other troops held the key crossroads town during the Battle of the Bulge.

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Heroic Stand at Lausdell

DEFENDING A CRITICAL CROSSROADS DURING THE EARLY HOURS OF THE BATTLE OF THE BULGE, AMERICAN TROOPS BLUNTED THE GERMAN SPEARHEAD ON DECEMBER.

By Bill Warnock

Three German soldiers crept through the snow. They had infiltrated the American front line during a counterattack. Major William F. Hancock spotted the trio. The lead man towered over the others. “He must have been six foot four and weighed about 250 or 275 pounds,” Hancock recalled. The huge German

clutched a Panzerfaust, which had a warhead the size of a hornet’s nest.

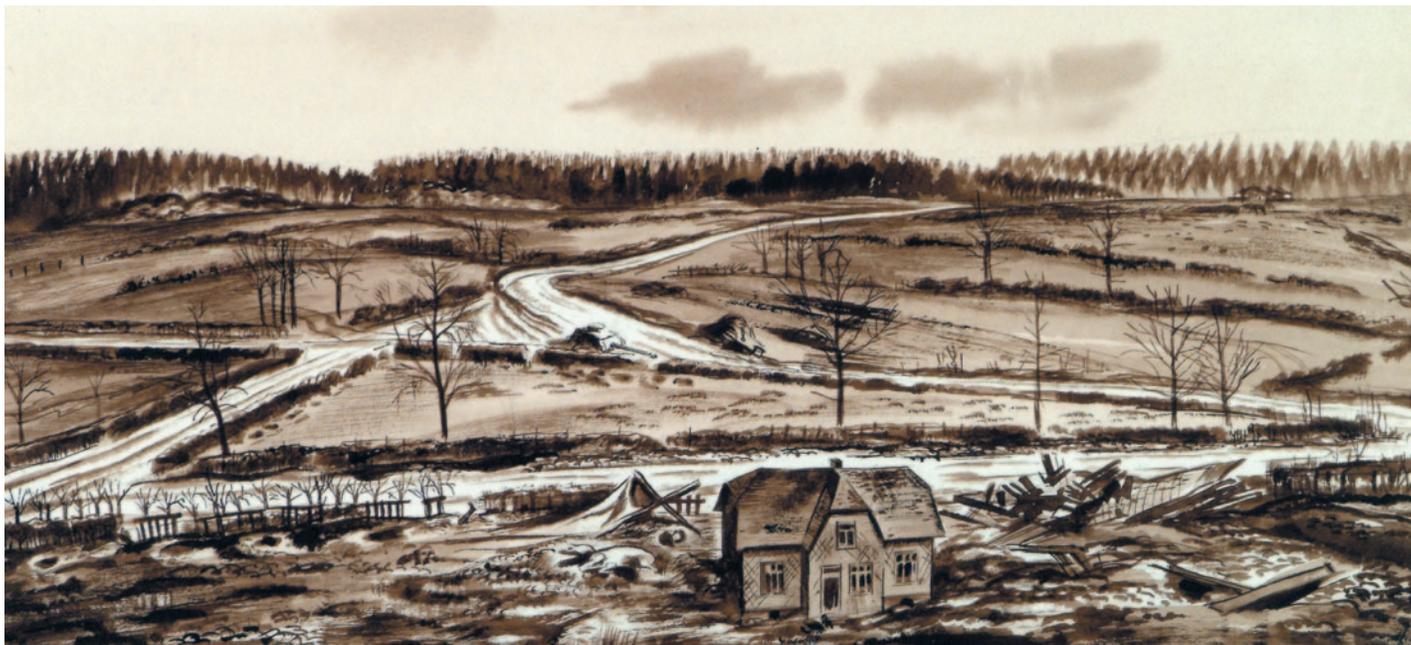
The major shouted to 1st Lt. Roy E. Allen, who stood nearby. The lieutenant leveled his carbine and began shooting at the Panzerfaust man. Allen’s bullets struck the soldier, and he fell after several hits. The man tried to stand

up but collapsed. He remained alive and somehow managed to drag himself forward, still grasping the Panzerfaust. Allen kept shooting. The German struggled onward until he finally keeled over and lay motionless.

The other two infiltrators raised their hands.

The courage of the hulking German impressed Hancock.

In one frame of a series of famous photographs from the Battle of the Bulge, German soldiers pass a burning American tank on the dead run. The Ardennes offensive caught the Americans by surprise, but two weeks later the crisis had passed and the Germans were again on the defensive.



U.S. Army combat artist Harrison S. Standley preserved the wartime look of the crossroads at Lausdell and the Palm farmhouse where a heroic stand was made against the advancing Germans on December 17-18, 1944.

“He was one of the bravest fellows I have ever seen. He just wouldn’t stop.” The Americans examined his body and discovered he was still breathing. “We took him to our aid station because I thought he deserved a chance to live even though he was our enemy.”

The Panzerfaust man was just one of many German casualties suffered during a series of failed counterattacks. These abortive assaults withered under the guns of the 1st Battalion, 9th Infantry Regiment, part of the 2nd Infantry Division. The action took place at Wahlerscheid crossroads, and the date was December 16, 1944.

The crossroads lay several hundred yards inside Germany and within an enormous spruce forest. GIs of the 9th Infantry had seized Wahlerscheid after three days of fighting. Soldiers from the 2nd Battalion were the first ones to pierce the German defenses and, along with 3rd Battalion troops, had captured a string of enemy trenches and concrete bunkers. The 1st Battalion had also captured several bunkers and then had fought to repel the counterattacks.

On the American side, the butcher’s bill included 47 dead and scores more wounded. The weather inflicted even more casualties. During the day it warmed enough for the snow to begin melting. Clothing, webbed gear, and leather boots became soaked. At night, the mercury fell, and everything froze.

Major Hancock served as the 1st Battalion executive officer, and he never forgot the frigid temperatures. “One time my boot strings came untied and were frozen. When I

attempted to retie them, they snapped like twigs. After that I learned to rub my shoestrings with my hands to warm them up.” All night long, soldiers seemed to shiver constantly. “There were times you would shake so long that you were embarrassed because you looked like you were scared to death.”

A few lucky soldiers lived inside captured bunkers, some of which had stoves with tin chimneys. Most men lived outdoors in foxholes and slit trenches. The nearness of the enemy precluded the making of fires for warmth. The men huddled together in their holes. Nobody had blankets or sleeping bags. An epidemic of frozen feet thinned the ranks. “We lost a lot of people who went back to the rear because of cold-weather injuries,” Hancock recalled. “I think we must have lost 20 percent of our command from the cold alone.”

After three days of grinding misery, the fighting strength of the 1st Battalion had dwindled to 22 officers and 387 enlisted men. When the Wahlerscheid operation began, there had been 35 officers and 678 enlisted men. The chain of command had suffered, too. Company A had lost one commander, and Company B had also lost one. The men of Company C had lost two commanders, one of them suffering a nervous breakdown. In addition to losses among company commanders, numerous platoon leaders and platoon sergeants had fallen victim to the cold, or the enemy, or combat exhaustion.

Yet despite the heavy casualties, the Americans at

Wahlerscheid felt a sense of accomplishment. They had cracked the German front line. Their victory had occurred at the forefront of a major U.S. Army offensive aimed at capturing a series of dams on the Roer River. The conquest of Wahlerscheid removed the first obstacle on the way to the dams.

After Wahlerscheid fell, the 1st Battalion established its command post in one of the captured bunkers. As the final hours of December 16 ticked away, Hancock walked outside the bunker and surveyed the surroundings. The night was uncharacteristically clear and quiet. He looked far to the south and saw a blue cloudbank stretching for miles and miles. Flashes of light illuminated it, and the rumble of thunder droned on without lull. The spectacle resembled an electrical storm, but it was entirely manmade, all of it created by artillery. Hancock surmised that an attack must be in progress.

He ambled back inside the bunker to tell the battalion commander about the artillery show. The commander was fast asleep, taking an overdue nap. About then, a field telephone rang. The regimental executive officer was on the line, and he wanted to speak with the commander. Preferring not to wake his boss, Hancock took a message instead. The executive officer said the enemy had launched an attack to the south and had penetrated the American line at several points. He then said the 9th Infantry might have to abandon Wahlerscheid and move south in the morning to help stop the German assault.

The battalion commander, Lt. Col. William Dawes McKinley, woke up and heard Hancock on the phone. News of a possible retreat from Wahlerscheid dismayed McKinley, but he went about making plans for a possible withdrawal.

Hours later, on the morning of December 17, McKinley received an urgent summons to the regimental command post. The entire 9th Infantry had orders to pull out. McKinley's men were to defend an area five miles to the south, in pastureland near Rocherath, Belgium.

Word of the pullout spread among the troops like a prairie fire. After all the terror and death at Wahlerscheid, they were going to give up the place without a fight. It seemed like a bad dream. The men began referring to Wahlerscheid as Heartbreak Crossroads.

Nobody in the 9th Infantry knew the full extent of the German attack to the south. Nobody knew that Hitler



LEFT TO RIGHT: Sergeant Joe Busi, a coal miner from Pennsylvania, survived the intense fight at Lausdell. Staff Sergeant Odis Bone, along with Sergeant Charley Roberts and Sergeant Joe Busi, torched Panther tank 135. First Lieutenant John C. Granville called in artillery support for the hard-pressed Americans at Lausdell.

had secretly mustered a force of nearly 1,000 tanks, 2,000 artillery pieces, and 200,000 men.

The soldiers of McKinley's battalion faced real peril and had no inkling of it.

On December 17, 1944, McKinley and his men began the chore of moving south to meet the German attack. First, the battalion had to disengage from Wahlerscheid without the enemy becoming aware that an American pullout was under way.

According to standard procedure, each rifle squad left three of its 12 soldiers behind (although few squads still had 12 men). The rear guard darted up and down the line, firing from numerous positions to give the appearance of normal operations. Mortar men from Company D and howitzer crews from the 15th Field Artillery Battalion added to the ruse by laying down barrages on the enemy.

Led by Major Hancock, the rear guard gradually pulled out and joined the tail of the battalion column. Before leaving, the major used a thermite grenade to burn a broken-down jeep. He and others had filled it with rifles left behind by soldiers who had become casualties. McKinley's men were the last soldiers of the 9th Infantry to leave Wahlerscheid.

The infantrymen marched south through fog and mist. They crossed into Belgium from whence they had originally come. Each man trudged along with bleary eyes and a sad slouch. The long line of GI boots churned a path through the snow and muck on the main road to Rocherath. The evergreen forest on either side of the road seemed to stretch on forever, but finally the troops emerged from the woods.

A little farther south, at an intersection known as Rocherather Baracken, the men came upon Maj. Gen. Walter M. Robertson, commander of the 2nd Infantry Division. He flagged down McKinley. The general

apprised his subordinate of all available information regarding the German attack. Robertson then directed McKinley to move his battalion and secure a crossroads northeast of Rocherath and defend it against enemy forces pushing in that direction. The general provided trucks, enough to haul about half the battalion.

Robertson had already sent three elements of the 3rd Battalion to the crossroads. They included Company K, a section of machine guns from Company M, and the Ammunition & Pioneer Platoon from Headquarters Company. McKinley received instructions to take command of these units and attach them to his battalion.

The crossroads itself lay amid a patchwork of cow pastures, which local residents called Lausdell. Waist-high hedgerows separated one pasture from another and served as fences. Two buildings stood at the crossroads, a gray-shingled farmhouse and an adjacent barn. The property belonged to Albert and Franzika Palm, a dairy farmer and his wife. Like most civilians, the Palms and their children had moved away when the area became a front-line sector in early autumn.

The house stood derelict when soldiers of the 9th Infantry found it. Captain Jack A. Garvey, commander of Company K, established his command post in the cellar. He positioned the A&P Platoon to his right rear, and he set the Company M machine gunners on his flanks.

All the while, the rattle and pop of small-arms fire emanated from the forest less than a mile east. Bedraggled soldiers exited the woods and hustled toward Lausdell. Some of them wore the Indian Head patch of the 2nd Infantry Division and others wore the Checkerboard patch of the 99th Infantry Division. Many looked punch drunk, stupefied by what they had witnessed. Their units had nearly ceased to exist, crushed by the steel might of enemy tanks. The men told stories of horror and catastrophe. Some of the soldiers stayed to fight alongside McKinley's troops, others fled.

When McKinley arrived at Lausdell, the commander of his headquarters company had already selected an abandoned dugout to use as the battalion command post. It had once belonged to the 372nd Field Artillery Battalion, part of the 99th Division. Earlier in the day, the artillerymen had abandoned firing positions at Lausdell, taking all their howitzers with them.

The dugout that McKinley occupied sat well to the rear of the Palm farmhouse. Inside the log-covered hole, the artillerymen had left a wooden table, upon which McKinley's staff placed maps and a telephone. The

colonel himself received another summons to regimental headquarters, leaving Bill Hancock and Captain Glenn M. Harvey, battalion operations officer, to plan the defense of Lausdell.

Harvey and Hancock placed two of the battalion's three rifle companies in front of Company K. Company A dug in on the right of the main road that cut through Lausdell. Company B dug in on the left. The two units occupied pastures that earlier in the day had been home to Cannon Company, 393rd Infantry, another 99th Division outfit. The men of Companies A and B attacked the ground with their entrenching tools, shoveling out foxholes behind hedgerows. Some of the soldiers took over holes left behind by Cannon Company. The commander of Company A, 1st Lt. Stephen P. Truppner, settled into a deserted dugout. His Company B counterpart, 1st Lt. John S. Milesnick, had only a foxhole.

Harvey and Hancock placed Company C in a reserve position on the battalion left flank, well behind the other two rifle companies. Company C had suffered the heaviest casualties at Wahlerschied and had the least number of able-bodied men. Its new commander, Captain Arnold E. Alger, had transferred in from battalion headquarters.

Besides positioning the rifle companies, Harvey and Hancock gave deployment instructions to Captain Louis C. Ernst, commander of Company D. Ernst paired his two machine-gun platoons with Companies A and B. He placed his mortar platoon along a hedgerow directly behind the Palm farmhouse, and he established his command post near the mortars.

The hour was 5:45 PM, and the day had already lost its light.

Back at battalion headquarters, McKinley returned from regiment and reviewed the defensive plan devised by Harvey and Hancock. He approved it and then met with his company commanders.

Years later, Hancock recalled the colonel's words: "Gentlemen, this is it. We have a Panzer Army coming toward us down the road you see in front of us. They have been seen by our scout airplanes, and they should be here within the next hour. Our mission is to defend the crossroads at all costs. I know you are in position now. When you return to your companies, make sure that everyone in your command understands exactly what 'at all costs' means."

McKinley spoke with the self-confidence of a man who knew his job to a farthing. He turned to his operations officer and said, "Harvey, form 22 bazooka teams. We're going



German soldiers aboard a Jagdpanzer IV/70 tank destroyer from the 12th SS Panzer Division advance during the Battle of the Bulge.

to be on the defensive, but we're also going to be attacking." McKinley then instructed his supply officer to provide extra bazookas and rockets should Harvey require them.

The colonel also directed his company commanders to assemble mine-laying teams responsible for planting antitank mines on all roads that enemy armor might use. But there was a complication. McKinley had received word that armor of the U.S. 741st Tank Battalion might be in the area. The mine layers had to hold back, pending a confirmed sighting of German tanks. Nobody wanted to blow up an American tank by accident.

While the battalion commander spoke to his company commanders, his artillery liaison officer, 1st Lt. John C. Granville, sat just inside the entrance of the command post and agonized over a stroke of bad luck. "I was trying to make contact with the 15th Field Artillery Battalion," Granville recalled. "But my radio wouldn't work."

Minutes later, Granville's fortune changed. "Lieutenant John W. Cooley, a forward observer with Battery A of the 15th Field Artillery, arrived at the CP to ask for instructions regarding artillery support. I told Cooley that my radio was out and that we had to use his radio to make contact with the 15th and, since he would be without any means of communication, he was to stand by as my backup. Lieutenant

Cooley and his crew then prepared to dig in about 20 yards behind the battalion CP."

Wearing a headset, Granville spoke into the microphone of Cooley's radio. It was a bulky SCR-610, the standard FM set used by artillerymen. He soon reached the Fire Direction Center of the 15th Field Artillery and learned that someone had inadvertently compromised the code used to encrypt map coordinates. It consisted of letters that corresponded to numbers. The FDC staff created a new one. "I was to use my own first and last name, not using any letter twice, as a substitute for the compromised code."

Soon after Granville received the new code, he opted to discard it and transmit all coordinates in plain English. The St. Louis, Missouri, native had been in combat since Normandy, and he knew that in a pitched battle he would have no time to fiddle with encryption. Every second mattered.

Visibility dwindled to almost nil as night and fog enveloped the Lausdell defenders. The men strained to hear any sign of the enemy. Nothing stirred.

The stillness lasted until 7:30 PM when, from the east, the men heard the hum of engines and the distinctive squeak and clatter of tank tracks. Four armored vehicles approached. The company commanders had already

The objective of the German breakthrough in the Ardennes Forest was to effect a crossing of the River Meuse and capture the important supply port of Antwerp, Belgium. In the opening hours of Hitler's desperate gamble on the Western Front, American troops fought desperately at Lausdell to slow down the German juggernaut.

informed the troops that friendly tanks might be in the area.

As the vehicles drew nearer, the GIs thought the machines were friendly. False assumption. They were Jagdpanzers from the 1st Company of SS Panzerjäger Abteilung 12, and each had an escort of foot soldiers from the 25th SS Panzergrenadier Regiment.

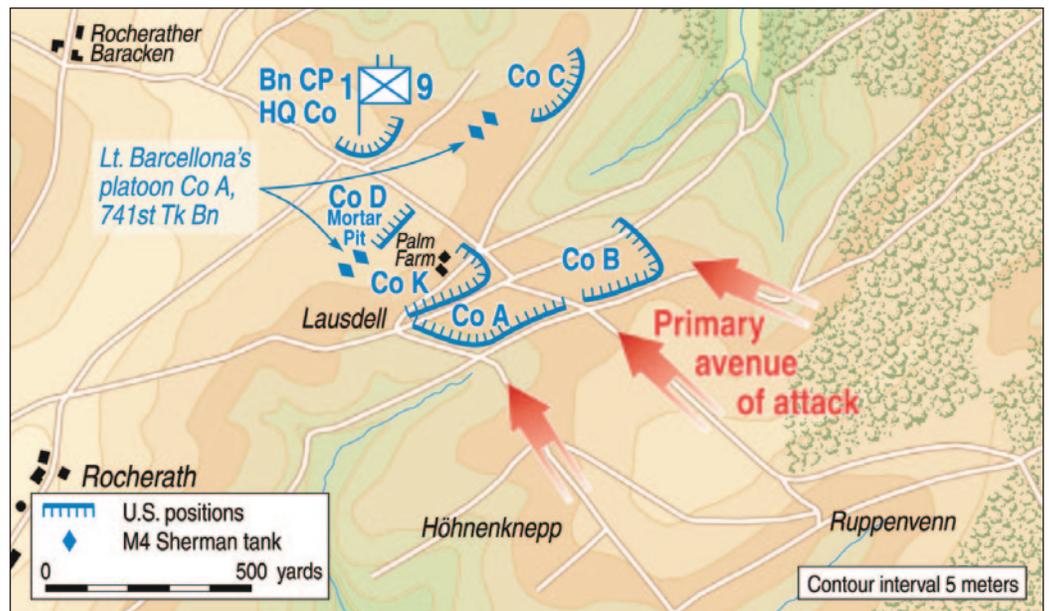
Sergeant Joseph Busi of Company D lay beside the dirt road looking at the grenadiers and Jagdpanzers as they passed by several feet in front of him. The sergeant, a coal miner from Pennsylvania, watched in open-mouthed amazement. The SS men were "talking and joking like the war was over," he recalled. They seemed unaware they were in the midst of an American infantry battalion.

The grenadiers and tanks passed through without a shot fired. They disappeared into the night and continued on toward Rocherath.

Back at Lausdell, scores of GIs shook their heads in disbelief. Soon thereafter, the Americans heard a second group of tanks approaching. Nobody doubted they were German. As the machines rumbled closer and closer, Busi lay mines on the road, as did two other members of his company, Sergeant Charley L. Roberts and Pfc. Harlin E. Coffinger.

The lead tank was Panther 135 from the 1st Company of the 12th SS Panzer Regiment. It reached the crossroads at the center of Lausdell, where it struck one of the mines laid by Coffinger. The blast disabled 135, breaking its left track, which peeled off as the tank ground to a standstill.

Firing erupted. The five-man crew of 135 cut loose with its 75mm cannon and two machine guns. The spray of bullets killed Tech. Sgt. Charlie A. Reimer and Staff Sgt. Billy Floyd, both members of Company A. The unfortunate pair fell as they exited the dugout that served as the Company A command post. Amid the fracas, Panther 127



clanked up to the crossroads. It bypassed the crippled 135 and began turning left toward Rocherath.

Just then, Private William A. Soderman of Company K rose from behind a hedgerow. The former butcher from Connecticut shouldered a bazooka and faced the enemy tank at close range. He squeezed the trigger of his weapon, and a rocket streaked through the air. The wrenching explosion shattered a track link, and the tank rolled to a halt beside Soderman's position. He had brought down a Panther with a single shot.

The crew inside 127 began firing high explosive shells. The turret rotated a few degrees, and the main gun barked out a shell. Another shot followed after the crew cranked the turret around a few more degrees. The enemy gunner sniffed out targets, pounding any location where he spotted movement.

Busi started launching rifle grenades at 127, hoping to stifle its big cannon. Many of his grenades bounced off, but one of them detonated along the base of the turret. The blast sent out a long tongue of fire. "The turret stopped rotating and didn't move again," Busi recalled. Crewmen quickly emerged from the maimed beast, and GIs everywhere opened up on them. Shots rang off the steel hull as the crewmen perished one after another.

Machine gunners from Company D participated in the killing. The squad, led by Corporal Sydney L. Plumley of West Virginia, squirted a steady stream of bullets at the tank. His squad also engaged German infantrymen, who had begun appearing out of the gloom. Plumley worked the trigger, while his assistant gunner fed belt after belt of ammunition. Their shooting drew more

attention than a circus spotlight.

As Plumley's gun blazed away, the crew of 135 remained inside their vehicle and carried on the fight. Their cannon shells ignited hay inside the Palm barn and turned the structure into a flaming pyre. The inferno increased visibility at Lausdell, and the Germans took advantage of it, shooting point blank at whatever targets they could locate. According to Busi, "They were traversing the gun and firing at anything." One shot cut down Plumley and his assistant, Pfc. Harry Hooper. Another shot clobbered the machine gun operated by Pfc. Howard Ammons, who died along with his assistant, Pfc. Frank J. Cudo.

The situation demanded quick action. "We knew something had to be done as we would all be killed," recalled Harlin Coffinger.

Sergeant Roberts, a 30-year-old Texan, said, "Let's burn the damn thing!" He and another Texan, Staff Sgt. Odis Bone of Company B, retrieved a five-gallon can of gasoline from an American vehicle abandoned nearby.

Bone and Roberts crept up behind 135, accompanied by Busi. Bone had the gasoline can, and Roberts had a white-phosphorous grenade. After opening the can, Bone raised the heavy container with help from Busi, and the two heaved it onto the engine deck. Gasoline gurgled out. The tank commander inside became aware of the danger, perhaps seeing the Americans through one of his periscopes.

The three GIs watched the turret hatch slowly open. It rose just enough for the commander to toss out a grenade, which hit the side of the tank and bounced onto the road. Bone and Roberts dropped to the ground just as it exploded. The blast injured Roberts in the hand. Ignoring his wound, he leaped to his feet and flipped the phosphorous grenade onto the engine deck. The gasoline erupted into flames, and the fire beat red against the black sky.

Tracer bullets crisscrossed the air, and Bone surmised he would be hit if he tried to run. He elected to seek cover alongside the tank. He urged Roberts to do the same, but Roberts ran and somehow survived.

The crew of 135 realized their tank had become a death trap, and they made several attempts to escape. Each time trigger-happy Americans kept them pinned inside. The crew eventually became desperate and bailed out despite the fusillade of bullets.

"Our troops along the road just riddled them," Bone later recalled. The bodies of two lifeless Germans tumbled off the tank and landed beside him.

Against near impossible odds, one crewman managed



Sydney Plumley and Harry Hooper gave their lives at Lausdell defending a position with this .50-caliber Browning M1917A1 heavy machine gun. The photo was taken in February 1945, and the Ninth Infantry Regiment has maintained the weapon as a symbol of the soldiers' sacrifice.

to escape by jumping off the left side of the tank. Busi caught sight of him as "he ran like hell back toward German lines." The flames illuminated a white bandage wrapped around his head.

When the hail of small arms projectiles subsided, Bone sprang up but took a moment to grab a field cap belonging to one of the dead Germans. He then made a beeline to the Company B command post, established along a nearby hedgerow. He gave the cap to a lieutenant who said, "Take it back to battalion."

Bone raced some 400 yards to the dugout being used as the battalion command post. He showed the cap to McKinley and several members of his staff. They immediately recognized the insignia on it as being SS and asked how he obtained it. Bone described the fiery incident at the crossroads. One staff member promised him a Silver Star, but that meant little to the sergeant. In his mind, survival was the only measure of success.

Meanwhile, two other tanks had advanced behind 135 and 127.

Lieutenant Roy Allen and Technical Sgt. Ted A. Bickerstaff of Company B pulled a "daisy chain" of eight anti-tank mines across the road in front of the tanks. Bullets flicked up dirt around the two men as they armed the mines.

Alert to the danger, the tank drivers veered into adjacent cow pastures. The huge battle wagons slewed mud and hunks of sod as they sideslipped the daisy chain. American soldiers clutching bazookas stalked after them. The commander of Company B was among the hunters. He suffered a nasty leg wound while in pursuit but

nonetheless remained in charge of his unit, refusing medical evacuation.

German infantrymen had accompanied the tanks, and some of the soldiers crept among the American foxholes. One SS man jumped in the hole occupied by Pfc. Roberto Gonzales of Company D. The startled GI fled and reported the situation to his platoon leader, 1st Lt. Allyn H. Tedmon of Fort Collins, Colorado.

“Did you kill him?” Tedmon said.

“No.”

“Go back and kill him.”

Gonzales carried out the order, using a trench knife to dispatch the enemy soldier.

Tedmon led the 2nd Heavy Machine Gun Platoon, and he had established his headquarters in a shell hole. Eighteen men served under him, and his little band of defenders pelted the German infantry with machine-gun bullets.

Three riflemen from Company A did the same. Pfc. Harry Stemple, William L. Adams, and Rodney M. Jennings climbed aboard Panther 127 and took over one of its machine guns, probably the anti-aircraft MG 34. The men soon had it spitting bullets at the enemy.

But the Germans kept coming.

The commander of Company B sighted more armor approaching, and each tank had an infantry escort. He radioed the news to McKinley’s command post, and the colonel put Lieutenant Granville to work orchestrating artillery support. Granville transmitted his initial call for assistance at 8:36 PM. He began searching the road with shellfire, starting close to Companies A and B and shifting the barrage back toward the forest.

He later recounted his actions: “My first requests for fire were given in an orthodox manner with ‘sensings’ that fire was so many yards short or over, or so many yards right or left. Of course, these were actually the sensings of the infantry personnel involved as relayed to McKinley.”

Shells plunged down with a piercing wail as salvo after salvo hit the enemy. The German tanks and infantry halted. The Lausdell defenders heard wounded enemy soldiers calling for medical attention. “*Sami! Hilfe!*” they cried.

The commander of Company A soon reported more tanks approaching.

Granville shifted the artillery bombardment and stymied the new threat.

At 10:30 PM, the Company A commander again reported tanks—Panthers and Jagdpanzers. This armored assault converged on Lausdell from three directions. It

was the heaviest attack of the night.

Granville described his response: “As the action thickened, I threw all orthodoxy to the wind and, in very unmilitary jargon, called for fire ‘on the right’ or ‘on the left.’ Now those sorts of commands would have made no sense had I not been able to give the precise coordinates of our command post as well as the coordinates of the first target. But, having established those two points, I knew that a line had been drawn showing the relationship of our position to the network of roads.”

The staff at the fire direction center translated Granville’s calls into precise coordinates and then assigned targets to the 12 howitzers of the 15th Field Artillery. Target assignments also went out to six other artillery battalions, which General Robertson had thrown into the fight.

Granville (call sign “Two Four One”) pleaded for everything his FDC could scrape together, and he yelled into his microphone, “If you don’t get it out right now, it’ll be too Goddamn late!”

The seconds crawled by.

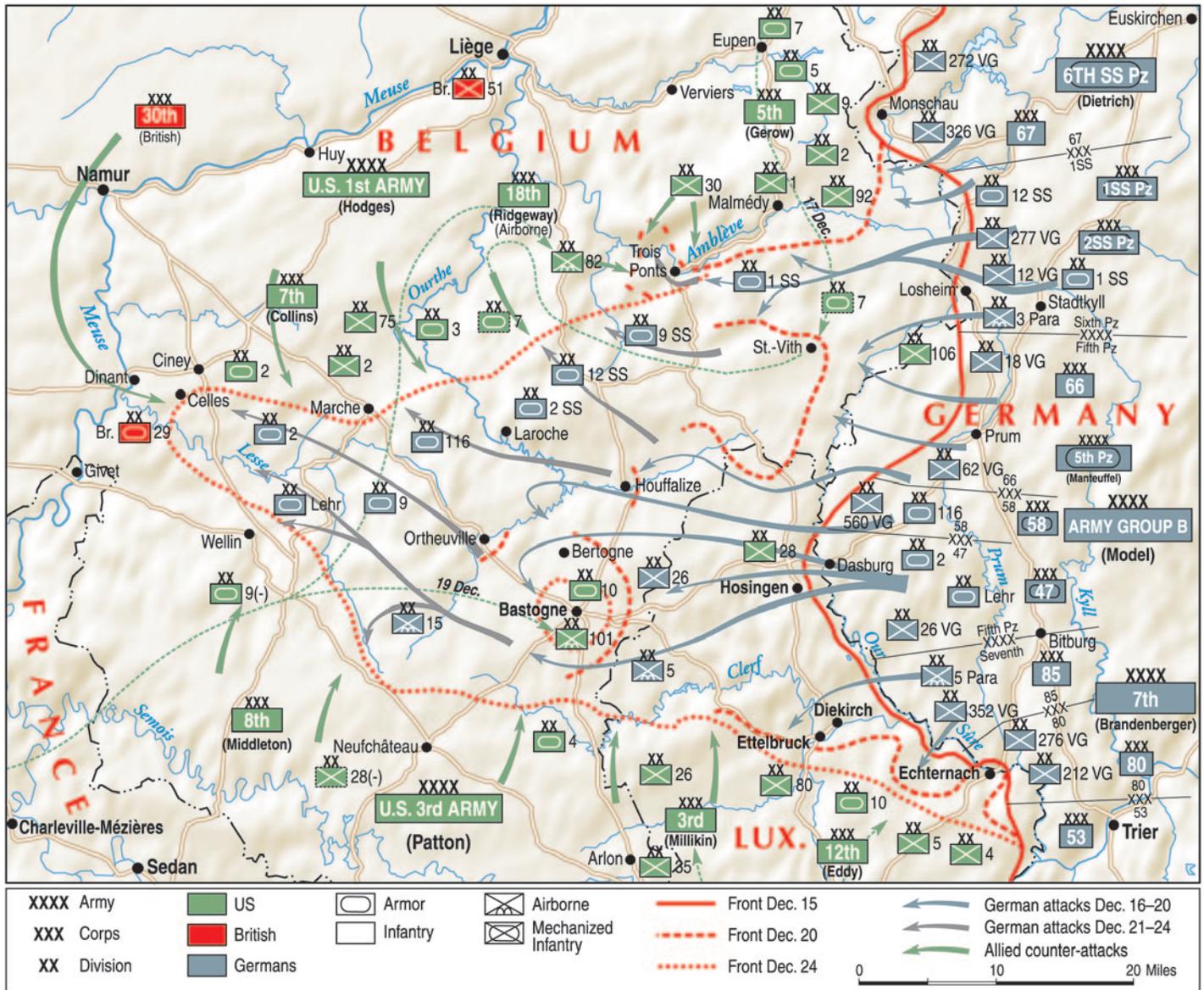
Then, to the rear of Lausdell, the horizon lit up like dawn. Granville heard the distant rumble of howitzers followed by the whoosh of shells hurtling overhead. The wave of projectiles exploded in a horrible cyclone of steel and fire. Shock waves from the bursting shells quaked the earth as the detonations merged into a single deafening din. Everywhere the enemy attackers turned, they saw the bright face of Death.

Granville’s calls had opened the gates of hell, and he kept hollering for more and more shells. But while transmitting requests, he encountered interference.

“During the height of the artillery barrage, a German tank commander broke into our radio channel. He was giving excited commands to his forces, and he and I were talking at the same time over the same radio channel. This was too much for me to stomach. I screamed into the radio, ‘Get off my channel, you kraut son-of-a-bitch!’”

Granville subsequently learned that everyone at the FDC had also heard the German voice. Private Max W. Burian, a German-speaking member of the unit, grabbed a microphone and mimicked the radio lingo used by the enemy. “He transmitted a message directing the Panzers to return to their assembly area,” Granville explained. “I don’t know if any of that worked, but I was probably cussing him out, too.”

By midnight, the wild melee had subsided, and the sour stench of TNT hung in the air. Panthers 127 and 135 stood at the center of the battlefield like a pair of tomb-



stones. The Germans had withdrawn to regroup and marshal more forces.

Hitler's great attack struck along an 89-mile front and overwhelmed numerous American units. The 2nd Division had faced envelopment, but the successful defense of Lausdell on December 17 gave the division time to maneuver.

The 38th Infantry, sister regiment of the 9th Infantry, deployed around Krinkel-Rocherath and moved in behind McKinley's troops. Linemen spliced together a telephone wire from McKinley's command post to the 38th Infantry. The colonel obtained information about the defensive line forming behind his battalion. The men at Lausdell would eventually withdraw through that line but not before receiving permission. For now, they had to continue holding Lausdell.

McKinley gained assistance from a battle-worn battalion of the 99th Division. Its commander, Lt. Col. Jack G.

Allen, received instructions to tie in on McKinley's left flank. The arrival of Allen's force, albeit badly depleted, allowed McKinley to move his Company C from its reserve position. The company marched to ground on the far right flank. There, on the outskirts of Rocherath, the men had instructions to guard against a return of the grenadiers and Jagdpanzers that had passed through Lausdell just before the battle began. The soldiers of Company C found no Jagdpanzers but engaged in a skirmish and bagged one enemy prisoner. The soldiers also encountered GIs of the 38th Infantry, who were now taking control of the area. The company commander soon had orders to turn his men around and move back to the reserve position.

Throughout the predawn hours, Lieutenant Granville called for harassing fire on the Panzer-infested woods to the east. Artillery shells interdicted roads, trails, and any-

where the enemy might be massing forces.

Under the shellfire, German armor and infantry girded for renewed combat. Jagdpanzer crews hunkered down and awaited orders. Crewmen from the 1st Company of the 12th SS Panzer Regiment also waited, as did crewmen from the 3rd Company, which had reached the forest during the night and had 14 brand-new Panthers. (The 1st Company had started the battle with the same number of new vehicles.)

The renewed German assault broke on Lausdell before sunrise. The 1st Company led the way through the fog and dark. "You could hear the tank engines roaring in the distance," Major Hancock remembered. "It sounded like a hurricane coming."

With McKinley at his side, Lieutenant Granville shouted for all the artillery fire his FDC could muster in front of Companies A and B. Granville recalled what happened next: "McKinley handed me his radio receiver. From the other end came an admonition to me: 'You're killing my men. You're blowing them out of their holes.' I immediately ordered fires in that sector moved back one hundred yards or so. To this day, I could not tell you which officer I was talking to. I was sick at heart."

Although the shelling inflicted friendly casualties, it blunted the German attack. The tanks and grenadiers turned tail and fell back.

Daytime slowly arrived, and the sky shifted from black to shades of gray. In the morning light, the Germans pushed forward again. Like a giant battering ram, an extended column of tanks plowed toward Lausdell. Hancock described their attack formation: "They closed up just like boxcars on a railroad track, practically bumper to bumper." Grenadiers marched alongside the column, each man with his weapon at the ready.

Artillery shells began raining down on the phalanx of men and machines, but it wormed its way to within 20 feet of the American foxholes.

William Soderman darted along a ditch to engage the oncoming tanks. He leaped onto the road and pointed his bazooka at the lead vehicle. His rocket disabled it.

Meanwhile, the German foot troops had fanned out. Grenade battles erupted, as did hand-to-hand combat and bayonet fights. Soderman killed at least three enemy soldiers with another shot from his bazooka. He used his last rocket to disable another tank. As he scrambled for cover, machine-gun bullets from the tank tore open his right shoulder. He dragged himself a short distance before two buddies helped him off the battlefield.

Not all the Americans displayed courage like Soderman. Six or seven Company B men fled in panic. McKinley heard about it over his radio, and he charged out of his command post. He intercepted the men and sent them back to their unit. Thirty minutes after daybreak, the commander of Company A reported via radio that German forces had swamped his company, but his men were hanging on despite the dire predicament.

Panthers prowled around Lausdell, blasting foxhole after foxhole. One shell exploded near the position occupied by Rodney Jennings and Harry Stemple. The blast peppered Stemple with fragments, and he bled to death in Jennings's arms.

Lieutenant Truppner, the Company A commander, made one last radio transmission. He requested artillery fire on his own position. His troops ducked into their holes as howitzer shells burst pell-mell throughout the area. The explosions rocked the landscape with concussion and left men bleeding from their ears.

One projectile struck the roof of a Panther turret, penetrating its armored skin and setting off the ammunition stowed inside. The shattering blast made the 47-ton behemoth look fragile. Great hunks of steel somersaulted through the air, and a mushroom cloud billowed upward. The lucky hit left torn and twisted metal strewn all over, but the explosion did little to stem the enemy tide.

At 10 AM, McKinley received permission to withdraw around noontime. By then, troops of the 38th Infantry would have a new line behind Lausdell. McKinley had one stabbing worry. How could he accomplish a retrograde movement with his men locked in close combat? The enemy would blast his soldiers in their backsides if they attempted to disengage. Artillery as a means of cover was problematic. It might hold down the Germans but would butcher the withdrawing defenders as they rose from their holes. What to do? The officer in charge of the battalion antitank platoon spotted an answer churning in the morning mist.

First Lieutenant Eugene V. Hinski sprinted toward four American tanks roving along the Rocherath-Wahlerscheid road. He shouted at the man in charge, 1st Lt. Gaetano R. Barcellona from San Antonio, Texas.

"Do you want to fight?" Hinski said.

"Hell, yes! That's what I'm here for."

Excited hands pointed the eager tank commander to the battalion command post, where McKinley rejoiced at the sight of the four lumbering friendlies.

The 29-year-old tank officer led the 2nd Platoon of



A direct hit from an artillery shell destroyed this Panther in the area held by Company A. Accurate artillery fire was critical in slowing the German advance at Lausdell.

Company A, 741st Tank Battalion. He sported a bushy mustache and had a reputation for boldness. Several months earlier, he had received the Distinguished Service Cross for his D-Day exploits.

McKinley, his operations officer, and Barcellona hatched a plan to use the armored platoon for a counterattack. The maneuver would permit the remaining Lausdell defenders to retreat. The planners decided to split the tank platoon in half, two vehicles north of the withdrawal route and two vehicles south of it. After a 30-minute artillery barrage, the northern pair moved out at 11:45 AM. They served as decoys, attracting the eyes of the Panther crews.

The distraction allowed Barcellona's other two machines to move out and creep close enough to make use of their armor-piercing shells. The tank gunners scored two hits on one enemy vehicle and three on another (the victims may have been Panthers 127 and 135, already out of action). Caught by surprise, two other Panthers bolted toward the twin villages. Barcellona claimed a hit on one of them. Afterward, his platoon withdrew to reassemble for another attack.

With the Panther menace momentarily dispersed, McKinley's men, those not already overrun, pulled their noses from the muck and began falling back. The commander of Company B, Lieutenant Milesnick, roused his men and guided them away despite his being hobbled by a leg wound. Only after leading his men to safety did he consent to medical attention and a trip to the 5th Evacuation Hospital.

Many of the retreating Americans escaped under cover-

ing fire provided by a lone Company D machine gunner, Technical Sgt. James L. Bayliss. He carried a heavy machine gun to an advantageous position and put his weapon into action. The career soldier from Cedar Bayou, Texas, swept the enemy infantry with bullets.

As he hammered out .30-caliber slugs, German armor again converged on Lausdell. The crew of a Panther spotted him and unleashed a shell. The projectile flew wide. Bayliss ignored it and stayed behind his weapon. The Panther cut loose again but missed. The sergeant never flinched. And then—wham—it all ended. He died in a blinding flash as a tank shell found its mark.

Joe Busi and two of his men fell back to the battalion command post. One of McKinley's lieutenants directed Busi to a jeep loaded with ammunition and a machine gun. The sergeant fetched a couple boxes of ammunition. One of his men hoisted out the gun, and the other grabbed a tripod for it. The threesome had instructions to set up the gun at the far end of a long hedgerow and provide suppressing fire. The soldier carrying the gun led the way. Private Joseph Popielarcheck had the tripod. Busi cautioned him, "Stay down below that hedge. Don't let 'em see you."

Popielarcheck, a former paratrooper, lugged the tripod on his shoulders. "He started off real low," Busi remembered. "But then—I guess maybe his back was hurting—he rose up higher and higher. I saw him standing straight up after awhile."

The Germans also saw him and began yelling. Busi realized the danger and screamed, "Get the hell down!" Adrenaline pumping, he tore after Popielarcheck and



The battered hulks of Panther tanks 127 (left) and 135 lie abandoned at Lausdell crossroads following the heavy fighting of December 17-18, 1944. The Panther was developed in response to the Soviet T-34 in the East and far outclassed Allied armor on the Western Front.

dove to knock him flat. But an enemy shell won the race. The blast cut Popielarcheck in half and knocked Busi unconscious.

After regaining his senses, Busi looked around, and his eyes locked on a pair of severed legs clad in paratrooper pants. He also felt pain radiating through his own right leg and hand. Shell fragments had stung him. Blood covered his face and uniform, most of it splatter from Popielarcheck. The injured sergeant crawled away to the battalion command post, where a medic dressed his wounds and pointed him toward the rear.

Busi limped away, moving from foxhole to foxhole as bullets whizzed overhead. He chanced upon a large hole containing four or five wounded soldiers, men who had suffered everything but death. He joined them and said, "Guys, we might as well pray. The Germans are coming like crazy with big tanks. They're gonna kill us all." Everybody started to pray.

The nerve-grinding rumble of tanks soon followed.

Prepared for the worst, Busi poked his head above the lip of the hole. The tanks belonged to Lieutenant Barcelona's platoon. They were attacking in an attempt to spring free the remaining Lausdell defenders. Medics arrived shortly thereafter and evacuated the injured men to a barn at Rocherather Baracken, which served as the battalion aid station. Busi eventually became a patient at a hospital in England and never returned to the 9th Infantry.

Many others also never returned to the 9th. They became prisoners of war, and their ranks included Captain Garvey of Company K. From inside the Palm farmhouse, he watched German infantrymen capture his soldiers and most of Company A. He remained in the house with several wounded men until an enemy tank parked outside the building and trained its cannon on the front door. Garvey threw in the towel and saved the lives of everyone in the house.

McKinley, Captain Harvey, and Captain Ernst were the last men to escape Lausdell. As they hightailed it out, German soldiers shouted at them: "*Hände hoch! Hände hoch!*"

The next day, the defenders who had dodged death and captivity retreated toward Elsenborn, Belgium. Each of the exhausted men felt numb and hollow as an empty shell casing. Yet, McKinley could see beyond the agonies of the present day. While shambling along a sodden road, he said to Captain Ernst, "We're treading on a page of history." Ernst glanced down at his boots. "All I see is mud, Colonel." McKinley shook his head, smiled, and trudged on.

The first head count after the retrograde found only 217 men and officers, although other soldiers made their way home in the coming days. The least fortunate never lifted their faces from the mud and snow. Graves Registration teams recovered 31 fallen GIs from Lausdell after the 2nd



Bill Soderman receives the Medal of Honor from President Harry S. Truman on the White House lawn, October 12, 1945.

Division reclaimed the area in February 1945.

The casualty roll also included 146 soldiers who found themselves on the rueful road to prisoner of war camps in Germany. All but 18 of the soldiers belonged to Companies A and K. Among the internees, Garvey and Trupner were the highest ranking. They became residents of Stalag XIID and survived the war. Only two of McKinley's men died in captivity.

Days after the men became prisoners, *New York Times* correspondent Harold N. Denny began interviewing those soldiers who had avoided captivity. His writing invested the Lausdell defenders with heroic stature for their role in what newspapers called the Battle of the Bulge. Denny authored a front-page article with the headline: "U.S. Battalion's Stand Saves Regiment, Division and Army." Those words represented more than journalistic hyperbole. The men under McKinley's command, and their comrades in the artillery, had staved off the 12th SS Panzer Division for 18 hours. Without that delay, the enemy would have been in position to inflict a devastating defeat

upon the 2nd Division and the U.S. First Army.

During those crucial hours, McKinley's soldiers upheld the motto of the 9th Infantry Regiment: "Keep up the fire."

McKinley's battalion and its attached units received a Presidential Unit Citation in April 1945. A number of other awards were given to men in the unit (see box).

Jennings had no idea he had received the Silver Star until 2005 when this author informed him. Congressman John Murtha's staff subsequently helped the 83-year-old veteran receive his medal, albeit 60 years late.

McKinley's award encompassed the Lausdell and Wahlerscheid actions.

Plumley had returned to duty eleven days before his death, having spent months convalescing from wounds suffered in France. His buddies called him "Pluto" because his nose resembled that of the Disney character.

McKinley recommended Gaetano Barcellona for a Silver Star, but higher headquarters downgraded it to a Bronze Star.

Odis Bone of Company B never received the Silver Star promised him.

Bill Warnock is a U.S. Air Force veteran and author of The Dead of Winter chronicling present-day efforts to recover the remains of missing U.S. soldiers killed during the Battle of the Bulge.

MEDAL OF HONOR					
Soderman, William A.	Pvt	Co. K	G.O. 97, WD,	1945	
DISTINGUISHED SERVICE CROSS					
Bayliss, James L.	T/Sgt	Co. D	G.O. 58, FUSA,	1945	KIA
Milesnick, John S.	1/Lt	Co. B	G.O. 14, FUSA,	1946	
SILVER STAR MEDAL					
Adams, William L.	PFC	Co. A	G.O. 13, 2ID,	1945	POW
Allen, Roy E.	1/Lt	Co. B	G.O. 85, 2ID,	1945	
Garvey, Jack A.	Capt	Co. K	G.O. 75, 2ID,	1945	POW
Hooper, Harry	PFC	Co. D	G.O. 13, 2ID,	1945	KIA
House, Festus C.	Sgt	Co. B	G.O. 13, 2ID,	1945	KIA
Jennings, Rodney M.	PFC	Co. A	G.O. 13, 2ID,	1945	POW
McKinley, William D.	LTC	HQ 1/9	G.O. 41, 2ID,	1945	
Plumley, Sydney L.	Cpl	Co. D	G.O. 17, 2ID,	1945	KIA
Roberts, Charley L.	Sgt	Co. D	G.O. 17, 2ID,	1945	
Stemple, Harry Jr.	PFC	Co. A	G.O. 17, 2ID,	1945	KIA
Tedmon, Allyn H. Jr.	1/Lt	Co. D	G.O. 17, 2ID,	1945	

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The Defense of St. Vith

AN OBSCURE BRIGADIER GENERAL, BRUCE CLARKE, AND A CONTINGENT OF AMERICAN TROOPS SLOWED THE GERMAN ADVANCE DURING THE BATTLE OF THE BULGE.

By Charles Whiting

In the early hours of Sunday morning, December 17, 1944, an American Brigadier general suffering from piles was heading into the unknown. That gray dawn, with the guns rumbling to the east, the newly promoted general was being driven in a looted Mercedes to a Belgian town located a couple miles from the

border with Nazi Germany.

Behind the general in his Mercedes, which required the combined efforts of driver and himself to change gear, there came a lone jeep. In it the frightened GI driver constituted his sole bodyguard in this tense, rugged countryside between Bastogne and the other major Belgian road-and-

rail center of St. Vith, the general's destination.

General Bruce Clark, a big, rugged man in his mid-30s who tended to run to fat if he were not careful, had been trained at West Point to become an engineer. Due to wartime circumstances, however, he had first gone into action four months before as a combat commander in Gen-

In a wooded area near St. Vith an American soldier takes cover and trains his Thompson submachine gun on an enemy position. Savage fighting has already occurred in the area, as evidenced by the burning vehicle and debris littering the scene.



LEFT: Brig. Gen. Bruce Clark led the spirited American defense of St. Vith. RIGHT: Major Don Boyer witnessed the breakup of the 106th Infantry along the Schnee Eifel.

eral George S. Patton's favorite armored division, the 4th Armored. There he had proved that he knew how to manage tanks just as well as he knew how to construct bridges.

Unfortunately, that did not bring him the kind of promotion he eagerly sought. Once, during a visit, Patton told him why. "You're a damned nobody, Clarke," he had exploded. Clarke, who had been born to a large and poor family in a tight apartment above a grocer's shop, had asked why. Patton explained that General George Marshall, the U.S. Army's chief of staff, had never even heard of Clarke. "Hell, Clarke," Patton had said in that curiously high-pitched voice of his, "if you had been in the infantry instead of an engineer and had served in Fort Benning you would have been a major general by now."

In prewar days when General Marshall had been in command at Fort Benning, he had always noted the names of officers who could be promoted rapidly in the case of war.

Now, Clarke, newly promoted and transferred to the 7th Armored Division as a combat commander, was on his way, without Marshall's aid, to his own personal date with destiny. Ambitious, and not a little ruthless, Clarke would start a reputation at this little border town of St. Vith, where so many other senior U.S. officers would have their destroyed, that would carry him to the highest echelons of the U.S. Army and make him a trusted military adviser to a series of U.S. presidents.

For Clarke was heading for a military SNAFU that would have frightened off many more senior officers this dawn. The day before, a whole German Army, the 5th Panzer, commanded by dynamic little gentleman jockey General Hasso von Manteuffel, had struck the 60,000-

strong U.S. VIII Corps with disastrous results. The U.S. 106th Infantry Division, the newest U.S. division in Europe, had been trapped and was now virtually surrounded in the Eifel Mountains just across the border in Germany. Its neighbor, the 28th Infantry Division, had been split in half with one of its decimated regiments, the 110th, pulling back in great disorder. In essence, VIII Corps, a mixture of unblooded infantry divisions and those that had suffered appalling casualties in the previous November, was on the verge of collapse. Once von Manteuffel's armor made a complete breakthrough, the fate of the corps might well be sealed.

That Sunday, Clarke did not know that. All he knew was that there was a flap at the front and that he was to lend a hand with his combat command of two columns strung out somewhere far behind, heading down from Holland to Belgium along roads already being ambushed by the advancing Germans. Perhaps it was good that Clarke did not know just how bad the situation was, for as he explained much later, "I was being thrown into a situation the like of which I had never known up to then and fortunately never have since."

Arriving with his three-man team in St. Vith, Clarke's driver fought his way through the clogged streets, where panic reigned in all its naked ugliness, and Clarke painfully got out of the Mercedes to report to Maj. Gen. Alan W. Jones, the commander of the Golden Lions, as the men of the 106th Infantry Division called themselves after their divisional patch. He climbed the stairs of the Klosterschule, Jones's headquarters, where Jones was located on the upper floor, trying to spot the first Germans the staff expected to appear from the wooded valley below.

Jones, heavy set with sleek, black hair and a pencil-slim moustache in the fashion of the matinee idol of the day, Don Ameche, had been in the Army since 1917, but had never heard a shot fired in anger. Now, within five days of arriving at the front, it appeared he had lost two regiments in a German trap while his third was fighting its way back across the German frontier to avoid a similar fate.

At first, Clarke did not quite know what to make of the older major general, who seemed to waver between an unreal pugnaciousness and a certain careless indecisiveness. "They'll never take me alive," he told Clarke, saying that he always kept a grenade in his jeep in case he was ever trapped by the "Krauts." At the same time, he seemed to think that since Clarke had arrived with his

three men he was saved. He could leave everything to the 7th Armored. As General Clarke noted to this author, “General Jones was surprised and not alert to the danger presented by the Germans.” To his cronies and fellow veterans of the battle, Clarke expressed his opinion of Jones, his temporary superior, in a much more drastic and outspoken manner. But that utterance is better not appearing in print.

Still, that morning Clarke listened attentively as Jones explained what he knew of the situation. So far Jones had asked for an air strike. It would never come due to bad weather. He had also organized a stop line to the east of St. Vith under the command of former football player and now engineer Lt. Col. Thomas J. Riggs, Jr. His 500-man-strong engineer battalion was Jones’s only reserve. Otherwise, Jones seemed to have lost control of his three infantry regiments. Indeed, he was being forced to communicate with them, when he did, through corps headquarters in Bastogne. Now, as Jones expressed it to Clarke, “everything depends on your CCB.”

Clarke promised that as soon as his men arrived he would send them to the aid of the two trapped Golden Lion regiments in the Eifel. Then, unable to do much else but wait, he thought he would help to clean up the clogged streets of the German-speaking border town before his command arrived. He did not have a clue when that might be.

To Major Don Boyer of Clarke’s command, it seemed that day that CCB, 7th Armored Division, might never arrive—not because of direct enemy pressure, but because of the cowardice and panic of their own people. Just after his advance party had passed the hamlet of Poteau, for example, the already slow-moving convoy was forced to grind to a halt. The road ahead was clogged with U.S. traffic going the wrong way—to the rear. Angry already, Boyer pushed his way forward until he came to a group of Staghound armored cars commanded by an officer wearing the golden lion patch of the 106th.

“Who are you?” Boyer rasped. The officer told him. Boyer asked, “What’s the score then?” He should have known better. It was obvious the Golden Lion was panicked, as his next words revealed. “The Krauts—at least six panzer divisions—hit us yesterday,” the man quavered, his bottom lip trembling. Boyer, a veteran of the fighting in France, asked cynically, “What are you going to do about it then?” “Me, I’m leaving.” Without another word the frightened Golden Lion got back into his vehicle and vanished, leaving a fuming Boyer standing.



Two members of a Luftwaffe field division advance into an abandoned American camp as comrades secure jerry cans of fuel.

Ten miles or so away, Clarke was faced by a similar situation. He had left his aid, Captain Junior Woodruff, at the junction of St. Vith’s Hauptstrasse and the Malmedy Strasse, the direction from which the 7th’s relief column would come. But the key road was packed with fleeing vehicles, anything and everything from 8-inch howitzers to jeeps. Clarke, who had a short fuse cried, “What happened, Woody? How come you’re letting them through?” He was referring to the fleeing vehicles. An unhappy Woodruff replied and pointed to an officer, “General, that lieutenant colonel—he was going to use the road. He said he’d shoot me if I got in the way.”

That did it. Clarke strode over to the artillery colonel and yelled above the racket, “Get the tractors off the road so my tanks can get through. If there’s any shooting to be done around here, I’ll do it!” He tapped his pistol holster. The artillery colonel backed off. The road from Malmedy was cleared, but there was still no sign of Clarke’s tanks. So, as Clarke phrased it later, “I became the highest ranking traffic cop in the U.S. Army for a while.” He started directing the traffic himself.

By late afternoon that terrible day, the first of Clarke’s combat command arrived. They came in dribs and drabs. Some had horrific tales to tell about what had happened on the trip from Holland. Clarke had no time to listen.

The initial rapid successes of the German drive through the Ardennes in 1944 could not be exploited quickly enough. Eventually, Allied resistance stiffened, dooming the offensive to little more than a setback for the Allies.

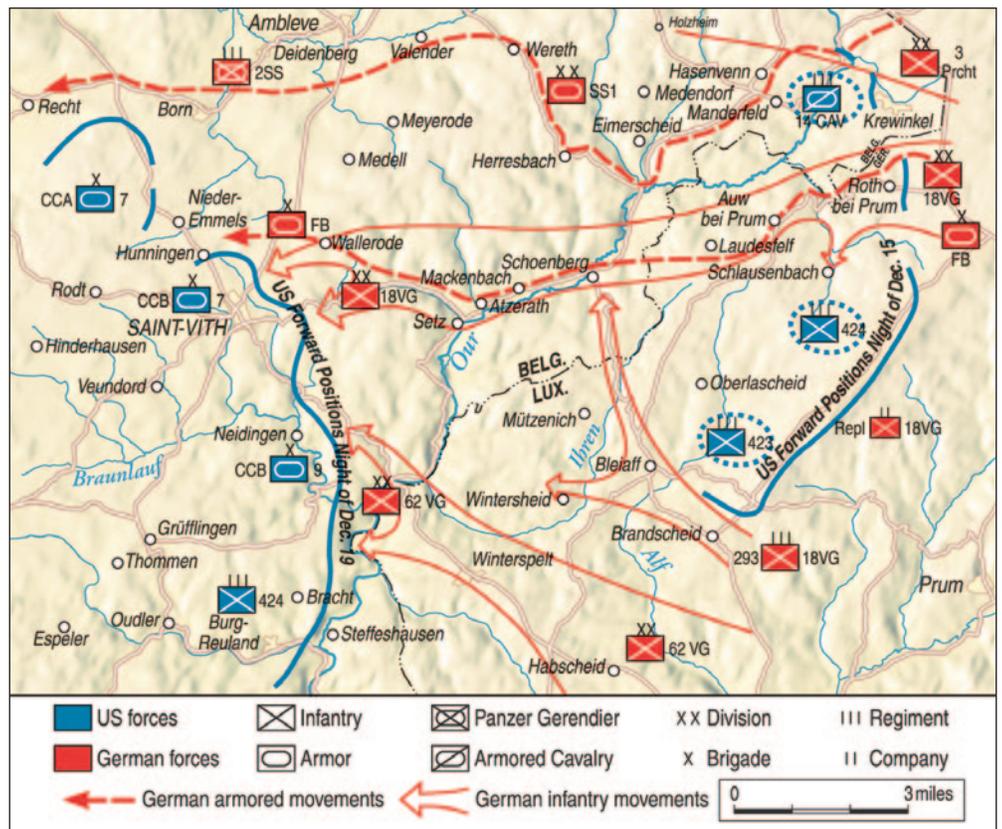
Standing there doing his traffic cop bit, he assigned them personally to their positions as they arrived. Already, he knew he did not have sufficient strength to help Jones's trapped regiments. By now two of them were cut off in an area of 10 square miles of rugged, wooded country some miles away from St. Vith. There, six battalions of green infantry, supported by three artillery battalions, were crowded together in some confusion with their supplies running low, under senior officers who could not seem to make up their minds on what to do next: stand and fight or retreat into Belgium. Like predatory gray wolves, the Germans were heading for their unsuspecting prey in St. Vith.

By Monday, December 18, Jones gave in. He had lost control of his division, and it seemed Clarke was not prepared or in any position to rescue his Golden Lions. Late that afternoon he ordered his command post to move back to Vielsalm some 20 miles to the rear, where Clarke's boss, Brig. Gen. Robert W. Hasbrouck, was in charge. Now it was up to Clarke.

That fact did not particularly please Clarke. By now he knew the Germans were bypassing him on both flanks, and from the reports of officers coming up from corps headquarters in the Bastogne, the rear was devoid of U.S. troops save those fleeing toward the River Meuse. And the Krauts were increasing their pressure all the time.

It was understandable. Manteuffel had wanted St. Vith and its communication network the first day. Now he was two days behind schedule, and everyone from Hitler downward was pressuring him to capture the border town so that the tanks could roll for their first major objective, the Meuse.

Clarke was determined to do his duty. He had formed a kind of rough and ready horseshoe of defense around St. Vith, using what infantry he had and his armor. The task



was difficult. The U.S. training manuals had little to say about using tanks in defense. In street-to-street fighting they were particularly vulnerable to some brave enemy infantryman equipped with a rocket launcher—and the Germans had plenty of those. Still, using his Shermans was the only way Clarke knew to thicken his line, and he used them, praying that the weather would not change.

As long as the biting wind that seemed to come straight from Siberia froze the ground, his 30-ton steel monsters would be alright. But once the countryside thawed around the embattled town, the Shermans would be bogged down. Then it would be anybody's guess what might happen. His tanks would be sitting ducks. Naturally, he thought of retreating. He had some 22,000 men under command, and he knew very few of their officers. Still they were American soldiers and his responsibility. Could he simply sacrifice them in what was becoming increasingly a one-sided battle?

The powers-that-be seemed to have forgotten Clarke. His Army commander, General Courtney Hodges of 1st Army, had seemingly vanished from the face of the earth. As for General Troy Middleton, commanding VIII Corps, he had lost two of his four divisions and the other two were either split up and, in the case of the veteran 4th Infantry Division, now under heavy attack. In essence, Middleton was losing control rapidly, and although



Destroyed and abandoned, these German armored vehicles offer silent testimony to the desperation of the fighting near St. Vith. Before retreating, the American defenders of the town severely hampered German efforts to exploit their Ardennes breakthrough.

Clarke did not know it that day, the portly, bespectacled general, who had been called from retirement to take up his command, was now preparing to move his headquarters from Bastogne. It was clear, even to Clarke with his limited information, that Middleton expected Bastogne soon to be under attack. What would happen to St. Vith then? Where could he retreat to?

Of course, the decision to fight or withdraw placed Clarke, a relatively junior general as we have seen, in a great quandary. He knew the U.S. Army's doctrine as once expressed by General Omar Bradley, who was also confined to his headquarters in Luxembourg City, cut off from most of his Army group and fearing for his life at the hands of German murder squads.

"The US Army does not give up ground," Bradley had maintained, "bought with American blood." Now, if he, Clarke, did so, he guessed that his career in the U.S. Army might come to an abrupt end. Bradley was well known for his habit of abruptly sacking generals whom he thought had failed him. That third week of December, with Christmas just around the corner, Clarke must have clearly wished for some senior officer to appear at St. Vith and solve his problem. But that particular Christmas present wasn't going to be his—yet.

That day, Clarke received a message from 7th Armored's G-4, a Colonel Hoggesson. He signaled, "I have no contact with Corps ... but Corps has ordered us to hold ... Hope you don't think I'm crazy. CG was well pleased with everything you have done. Congrats. Don't move 'till you hear from me." That message made up Clarke's mind for

him. The "Corps" in question was the XVIII Airborne, commanded by General Matthew Ridgway, a veteran of Sicily, Italy, and the battles in Holland and Normandy. Ridgway was a parachutist. He would expect Clarke to stand, even if he were surrounded by the enemy. Paratroopers were taught to do so. But he knew nothing of the situation in the St. Vith area. Yet, Hasbrouck would have to concede to Ridgway's wishes if he did not wish to be relieved himself.

Things were already changing drastically on the northern shoulder of the Bulge. Secretly and unofficially at first, Montgomery had taken over command of all troops in the area, including Ridgway's corps and with it Clarke's command. Montgomery was a commander who was not particularly interested in ground as such; men were more important to him. Now, Montgomery took a hand in the fate of Clarke of St. Vith.

On the morning of Wednesday, December 20, Montgomery strode into Hodges's new headquarters in Chateaufontaine, where the 1st Army commander had moved in haste, leaving all his top secret documents to be examined by anyone who cared to wander into his abandoned headquarters at Spa. Before he had left his own headquarters, Montgomery had told his staff he could not believe that two U.S. divisions (the 106th and 28th) could have been overwhelmed in such a short time. He was going to send out his scouts to find them and, if successful, to explain the situation and to request the commanders concerned to withdraw westward to positions where they could link up with other U.S. divisions.

Now, Montgomery told a broken Hodges, who had lost control of his army and had still to make an appearance at the front to find out personally what had happened to his VIII Corps, "We must sort out the battlefield, tidy up the lines,... The primary job is to pull everyone out of the great St. Vith pocket." Montgomery, the man who had been wounded and left for dead on the battlefield, was not going to waste good men's lives that easily.

Hodges did not like that, and for a time Montgomery humored him. But not for much longer. That day, unknown to Clarke, Montgomery was making decisions that would save him and his 22,000 GIs at St. Vith. As Clarke's son, Bruce Clarke, Jr., once told this author, "Dad once drew a list of people involved in the period 16-24 December 1944 and gave them yes or no ratings, depending, in his view, how effectively they had dealt with the situations that had confronted them at that time. Yes rating went to Montgomery, Hasbrouck and Hoge (General Brigadier General William M. Hoge of the 9th Armored Division). No rating went to Ridgway, Middleton and Jones."

Clarke was not out of the woods yet. There were still the Germans and the weather to be reckoned with. All along the perimeter of Clarke's defensive position, which became known as the fortified goose egg, his weary men could hear the rumble of German armor and the creak and jingle of horse-drawn transport heading west for the Meuse. Signal flares shot into the dawn air constantly. Close by their positions in the woods, they could clearly make out the cries of German NCOs. The American defenders were not allowed to fire back. They were running out of ammunition fast; every bullet and shell had to count. The Germans had plenty of ammunition. Shortly after first light, German infantry attacked in small groups. Clad in white camouflage overalls, they advanced under a mortar bombardment behind their tanks. They were obviously looking for a weak spot in the goose egg.

As the intrepid Major Boyer recalled long afterward, "The Krauts kept boring in as fast as we decimated their assault squads. Again and again, the Krauts got close enough to heave a grenade at a machine gun crew. One .50-caliber squad, which had been dishing out a deadly hail of fire, was hit by a panzerfaust. The gunner fell forward with his face torn off, the loader had his arm torn off at the shoulder and was practically decapitated, while the gun commander was tossed about 15 feet away from the gun to lie there quite still." That night, things got even worse, and Boyer watched in horror as German tanks

knocked out five Shermans one after the other, while he took cover in a snow-filled ditch, hoping not to be discovered too.

By this time, an exhausted Clarke, who had been without sleep for days now, had only about 100 infantrymen left in the St. Vith area. All his tank destroyers had been knocked out, and in his own immediate command post area he had exactly four tanks left under Lieutenant Will Rogers, Jr., the son of the famed homespun American humorist. The younger Will Rogers, a bit of a joker himself, had nothing to laugh about this day.

Clarke decided to shorten his line, so his men stole back in fours and fives. The unlucky Boyer was captured doing so. His captor smiled at him. "Just the fortunes of war," the German officer told his bespectacled captive. "Maybe I'll be a prisoner tomorrow". Boyer was too exhausted and miserable to reply. That night, Clarke commented to Hoge, "It looks like Custer's last stand to me." However, help was on its way at last.

That Friday, Montgomery finally made his decision. Earlier that day, Ridgway had told Hasbrouck he might still be able to hold. Pointing to the fortified goose egg on his big situation map, he snapped, "What do you think of making a stand inside this area? You'd hold out until a counterattack catches up with you. You'll soon be surrounded of course, but we'll supply you by air."

Hasbrouck did not like it and he said so. "The area is heavily wooded with only a few poor roads. Besides, the troops have had over five days of continuous fighting.... My people are only 50 percent effective.... I'm sure that goes for the infantry too."

Jones, the failure, who was present, suddenly chimed in to say, "I think it can be done." That made Hasbrouck even angrier. Even as Ridgway was being told by Clarke's individual commanders that their troops were only 50 percent effective (Clarke told him bluntly that his were only 40 percent), Montgomery overruled Ridgway on the decision to stand and made a lifelong enemy. He passed on a message to Clarke through Hasbrouck, which read, "You have accomplished a mission, a mission well done. It is time to withdraw."

However, that was easier said than done. A thaw had set in, and Clarke's vehicles were bogged down in the new mud. That day, Hoge told him, "Bruce, let's just stay and fight. Our vehicles are up to the hubs. We haven't got a chance of getting out."

Clarke frowned and got on the radio to Hasbrouck in Vielsalm, his initial joy over the prospect of a withdrawal



Camouflaged to blend into the winter landscape, two soldiers of the 7th Armored Division defend a roadblock near St. Vith.

vanished. With a note of finality in his voice, he told his divisional commander, “We have to stay.” It looked as if there was no hope for him and his trapped men.

At five that Saturday morning, a very worried Hasbrouck called back to Clarke to inform him, “The situation is such on the west of the river (Salm), south of the 82nd, that if we don’t join them soon the opportunity will be over.” Clarke realized that that buck had been well and truly passed to him. The fate of all those thousands of young men lay in his hands. He ventured outside his headquarters. Dawn was not far off. Suddenly, he felt a thrill of recognition and a surge of new hope. The ground beneath his feet crackled and snapped. The many ruts made by his heavy vehicles had frozen!

Just then, an impatient Hasbrouck called him again from Vielsalm. “Bruce,” he demanded, “do you think you can get out?” For once the big general let his pent-up emotions ride loose. “A miracle’s happened!” he exploded. “The road’s frozen. We’re chopping the vehicles out of the ice—at zero six hundred we’re going to start rolling.”

It was not easy, and it took all day. Several times the Germans infiltrated the long lines of vehicles heading along a single road for Vielsalm. Impatient, Hasbrouck waited for them to arrive. Once he was nearly killed himself by a German tank that started to shell his position. Meanwhile, he reflected, he had once been faced with this same problem, a withdrawal under enemy pressure, at Fort Leavenworth’s staff college. His examiners had given

him a bad mark on the paper because he had suggested troops should withdraw when under great pressure even by daylight.

Clarke had no such problems. Now it was up to the gods. He collapsed in the front seat of his jeep to snore his way out of the trap. Late that afternoon, Clarke staggered out of his jeep, swaying from side to side like a drunk. A doctor noticed his condition. “General,” he said, “you’d better get some sleep, or you could be in serious trouble.”

Clarke answered wearily that he did not think he could sleep. Too much was going on in his mind. “I can fix it,” the medic replied. He gave the big general a shot, which, as Clarke’s biographer put it, sent Clarke out “like a sack of sand.”

Twice, Ridgway’s aides tried to awaken the exhausted Clarke with, “General Ridgway wants you immediately.” Once, Clarke murmured in a highly drugged sleep, “The hell with it.” Later, when he had overcome his exhaustion, he was told once again he must report to the corps commander at once. He did so in the same dirty uniform he had been wearing ever since he had left Holland back on December 16. To his surprise, a granite-faced Ridgway did not offer Clarke a cigarette or a coffee. Instead he said, “I’m not used to brigadiers telling me that they won’t report.”

Clarke looked down at the airborne commander, “Well, general,” he said, “the fact is I hadn’t been to sleep for a

week.” He explained what had happened and how the doctor had given him a knock-out shot. Ridgway was not impressed. He started to lecture Clarke on Army discipline. Obviously, Ridgway was smarting at the way Montgomery had overruled him and ordered Clarke and his men out. Suddenly, Clarke had had enough. “General, I came to this command against my wishes. I got nine decorations for bravery in two days in my old outfit, I’ve got a good record in the Third Army and I can go back there tomorrow morning and General Patton will be glad to see me.”

Ridgway’s face remained stony. He did not react. Clarke tried again. “I’ve done my job up here. History will give our unit credit for the job we did at St. Vith. I’d like to leave.” Finally, Ridgway responded. With a wave of his hand, he said, “Well, don’t let it happen again.”

In a way, that episode exemplified the fact that Clarke had reached the nadir of his career that wintry Saturday with the snow falling steadily outside. Within days of receiving his first general’s star, Clarke had fought a battle that had ended in a retreat and a kind of defeat as Ridgway saw it. Now all talk was of Bastogne and Patton’s brilliant counterattack. Few people considered the fact that General Anthony McAuliffe, in command of the 101st Airborne Division in the absence of General Maxwell Taylor, denied he had been surrounded and that he had needed Patton. America needed a victory. No one wanted to talk of the “defeat” at St. Vith, especially as the withdrawal from the Belgian town had been forced on the U.S. Army by Montgomery.

Just after Clarke had seen St. Vith retaken in January 1945 and celebrated the victory with toasted cheese sandwiches, he was sent back to England to recuperate and for another operation. He did not return to Europe until after the war was over to command the 7th Armored and later his old division, the 4th Armored. There is little information available on why it took so long. The Freedom of Information Act does not make it that easy to obtain the details, and there were many senior officers who had fought in that first week of the Bulge who were under



A Sherman tank from the 7th Armored Division lies at the outskirts of Vielsalm—marking the exit road out of the “fortified goose egg.”

investigation about their conduct.

When he did return, Clarke started to ascend the ladder of promotion steadily, becoming a corps commander, an acting Army commander, the commander of the U.S. 7th Army in Europe, and finally adviser to Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. He never forgot St. Vith, where it all started. In 1964, when there was a typhus epidemic in that part of Belgium and Americans were forbidden to go there, Clarke ignored the order and attended the reunion of the men who had fought there, many of whose lives he had saved.

There, too, he met an old enemy, General von Mantuffel. There, just outside Bruce Clarke’s old command post, the former gentleman jockey told the American who towered above him, “On Christmas Eve, I recommended that the German Army give up their attack and return to the West Wall. I gave as a reason the time my Fifth Army had lost at St. Vith. Hitler did not accept my recommendation.”

It was a bald, unadorned statement without flattery. But it told a pleased Clarke one thing. Despite critics such as Ridgway and other U.S. commanders in the Bulge, as a raw, young brigadier general unknown to the outside world, he had helped to change the face of World War II.

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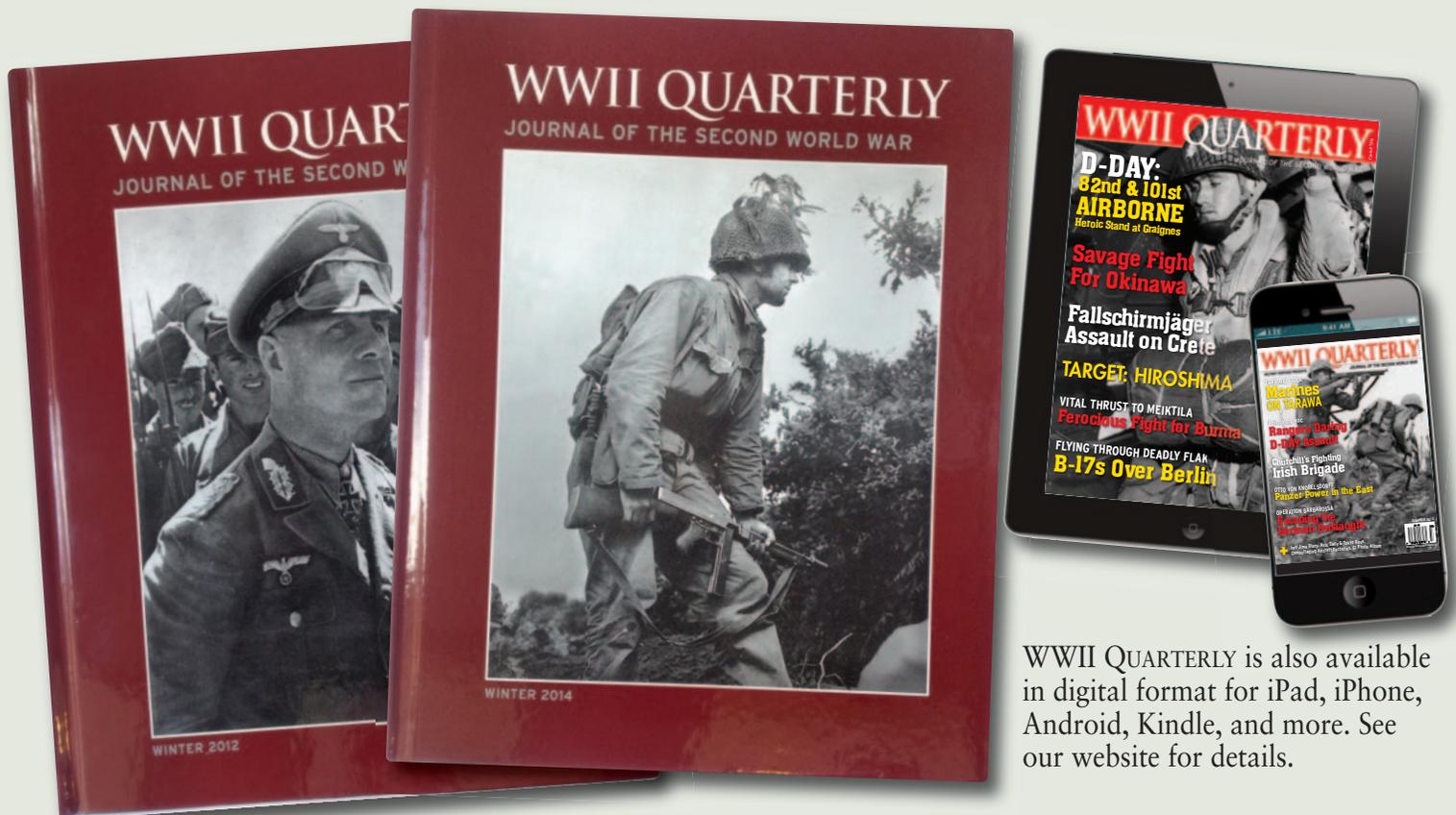
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Bravery in Bastogne

THE SOLDIERS OF THE U.S. 101ST AIRBORNE DIVISION AND A COMPLEMENT OF OTHER TROOPS HELD THE KEY CROSSROADS TOWN DURING THE BATTLE OF THE BULGE.

By Michael D. Hull

Shivering and stamping their feet in the snow, three American soldiers warmed their hands over a small fire at an observation post. They were weary, dirty, hungry, and a long way from home.

Three other GIs shuffled along to relieve them after a while, and one said,

“Merry Christmas.” The first three looked up in surprise, and one of them replied slowly, “We thought tomorrow was Christmas.”

The soldiers were helping to guard the perimeter defense line around the town of Bastogne in southeastern Belgium, not far from the Luxembourg border. They were surrounded

by German forces, and there was not much Christmas cheer to go around that cold, snow-covered, fog-shrouded December more than 60 years ago.

Yet, although they did not know it at the time, those GIs of the 101st Airborne “Screaming Eagle” Division were writing a glorious chapter in the history of their army. The

This haunting image of a snow-covered Bastogne was painted by a U.S. Army artist about the time of the siege in December 1944. U.S. forces refused to evacuate the Belgian crossroads town and stood against repeated German attacks.

Much of the civilian population of Bastogne left the town with the approach of battle. Here, some of the townspeople, now refugees, seek safety. American troops have halted along the street, where no snow has fallen as of the date of this image.



name of Bastogne would be stitched proudly on American battle flags alongside Yorktown, Gettysburg, San Juan Hill, Chateau Thierry, the Marne, Bataan, St. Lo, Remagen, and Pork Chop Hill.

Christmas 1944 found the Screaming Eagles, veterans of Normandy and Holland, and Combat Command B of the 10th Armored Division defending besieged Bastogne while the Battle of the Bulge—Adolf Hitler’s last desperate counter-offensive of World War II—swirled around them. It was the first major battle fought by American soldiers in winter, and the one in which they suffered the greatest number of casualties: 76,890 killed, wounded, and missing.

Bastogne, an upland town 43 miles south of Liège in the Ardennes Forest region, was the junction of a railroad and seven highways lacing Belgium and Luxembourg. It lay on the center line of the German advance and was a vital strategic objective. Its 10,000 American defenders, outnumbered four to one, held firm. They groused because the enemy breakthrough had deprived them of anticipated furloughs in Paris, but they sang carols and put up makeshift Christmas trees as enemy artillery hammered away and bombs fell.

The first snow had fallen in the Ardennes Forest on December 9. Before dawn on Saturday, December 16, 1944, German guns blasted a thinly-held 100-mile front of Lt. Gen. Omar N. Bradley’s U.S. First Army. The “ghost front,” so called because it had been the quiet sector of the Allied line, was manned by four U.S. infantry divisions—the green 99th and 106th, and the 4th and 28th, which were resting after being mauled in the recent Hürtgen Forest campaign. Three panzer armies—13 infantry divisions and seven panzer divisions—crashed through the American lines. Hitler’s objective was to split the British-Canadian and American Armies, reach the River Meuse, and

capture the strategic port of Antwerp in Belgium.

The German breakthrough caught everyone off balance, from the front-line GIs all the way up to General Dwight D. Eisenhower, the supreme Allied commander. Confusion and inertia gripped Eisenhower’s headquarters for several critical hours, and some senior officers believed that the enemy thrust was merely a spoiling attack. But two of Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt’s panzer divisions had cracked wide open Maj. Gen. Troy Middleton’s VIII Corps, and panic was widespread in the field as the German columns thundered westward through Belgium. Allied communications were chaotic, and no one in the outposts or headquarters map rooms was sure of what was happening.

As the panzers and seasoned German infantry punched through the American lines, many GIs threw away their rifles and ran in terror. Large quantities of equipment, heavy weapons, ammunition, and vehicles in good running order were abandoned. Roadsides in the Ardennes were littered with discarded trucks, jeeps, halftracks, and gun carriages. One advancing American tank column was forced to churn across mud and snow covered fields because the nearest available road was choked with fleeing soldiers.

In the Schnee Eifel sector, two regiments of the U.S. 106th Infantry Division, between 8,000 and 9,000 men, surrendered to two divisions of the German 66th Corps. The Army official history called it “the most serious reverse suffered by American arms during the operations of 1944-1945 in the European theater.”

German Panther tanks roll along an unpaved road that has been hardened by freezing winter temperatures during the Battle of the Bulge.



But other U.S. units, both seasoned and green, stood and fought valiantly as powerful German Panther and Tiger tanks, followed by infantry, loomed out of the fog and snow. In some locations, small pockets of American resistance, two or three GIs with a machine gun or bazooka and a minimum of rounds, defended a bridge or crossroads and helped to

upset the enemy timetable for a few hours. Many Americans died, and their gallantry will never be known.

On a slope overlooking a strategic crossroads at the Belgian village of Lanzerath, a platoon of the untested U.S. 99th Infantry Division led by Lieutenant Lyle J. Bouck halted a column of panzers, paratroopers, and Waffen SS soldiers for 18 critical hours. The Americans fought until their machine guns and carbines burned up or ran out of ammunition. When the Germans at last overran their position, the stubborn GIs were pulled bodily from their foxholes. Only two Americans were killed in the encounter, but many were badly wounded. The enemy toll was 509 casualties. “We never surrendered,” Bouck reported proudly. “We were captured.”

At St. Vith, troops of the 7th Armored Division under Brig. Gen. Bruce C. Clarke held firm for a week before withdrawing just as the last escape route was closing. And other U.S. units resisted gallantly at Berg, Butgenbach, Spa, Trois Ponts, Stoumont, Stavelot, Houffalize, and Elsenborn Ridge, where troops of Maj. Gen. Leonard Gerow’s Fifth Corps resisted repeated attacks by four Nazi divisions.

Yet, despite the gallant delaying actions fought by U.S. troops at many locations in the Bulge, the Germans had penetrated to 60 miles west of Celles, Belgium, by December 19. At high tide, the enemy columns reached within a few miles of the strategic River Meuse, and, without knowing it, passed within a quarter-mile of the First Army’s main supply depot at Spa, Belgium.

General Bradley was slow to grasp the gravity of the sit-

uation. “Pardon my French,” he muttered in his Luxembourg war room, “but where in hell has this son of a bitch gotten all his strength?” Field intelligence and aerial reconnaissance reports of an ominous German buildup in the Schnee Eifel a few miles east of the Ardennes had been disregarded because the Allied high command believed the German Army no longer capable of a major offensive. Enemy security precautions for the counter-offensive had been watertight.

Even the usually astute General Bernard L. Montgomery, commander of the British 21st Army Group, had summarized on the very morning of December 16, “The enemy is at present fighting a defensive campaign on all fronts; his situation is such that he cannot stage major offensive operations.”

It was not until the evening of December 17 that General Eisenhower took a more realistic view and ordered the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions, the only two units readily available, to shore up the faltering American formations in the Bulge as a stopgap measure. The two divisions were still refitting and resting after their battering in the ill-fated Operation Market-Garden, the airborne invasion of Holland, that September. Meanwhile, Eisenhower ordered General Montgomery to take over command of U.S. forces on the northern flank of the Bulge. One of the first Allied commanders to realize the gravity of the German breakthrough, Monty ordered British Army units to hasten to the strategic River Meuse and defend its crossings.

In France, trucks and semi-trailers of the Army Trans-



Weary troopers of the 101st Airborne Division march in two columns along a road on the outskirts of the Belgian crossroads town. The heroism of the 101st and other American troops at Bastogne stemmed the German tide during the Battle of the Bulge.

portation Corps' famed Red Ball Express were swiftly marshaled, and the American paratroopers were rushed into action on December 17-18. The 82nd Airborne was trucked to the Werbomont area on the northern flank of the Bulge, while the 101st Airborne raced in a serpentine convoy for 300 miles from its rest area at Mourmelon-le-Grand near Reims, France, to Bastogne. The Screaming Eagles rolled into the Bastogne area to join Combat Command B of the 10th Armored Division none too soon. The Germans were closing in, and the strategic town was soon to be under siege.

The men of the 101st Airborne hastily dug in and set up a defense perimeter, led by Brig. Gen. Anthony C. McAuliffe, a peppery but genial artilleryman and 1918 graduate of West Point. Nicknamed "Old Crock" by his men, McAuliffe was the division artillery commander now serving as temporary divisional leader in the absence of handsome, scholarly Maj. Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, who was in Washington, D.C.

Bastogne was soon pressed by the 2nd Panzer, Panzer Lehr, and 26th Volksgrenadier Divisions led by General Heinrich von Luttwitz. The town was isolated on December 20, but the Screaming Eagles held firm stubbornly and the panzers were eventually forced to swing past them in their westward advance. The timetable of the enemy counteroffensive was being disrupted.

Although the Allies had aerial superiority, low clouds and fog hampered support operations. Shelled, mortared, and sporadically bombed, Bastogne was now surrounded.

When an aerial observer asked a radio operator in the town what the situation was, the operator replied wryly, "Picture us as the hole in the doughnut." The outlook grew increasingly dismal for the besieged paratroopers as ammunition, rations, and medical supplies soon ran short. In makeshift first aid stations set up in cellars and churches, Belgian nurses, housewives, and priests tended to wounded soldiers as best they could, but when the blood plasma and medicine ran out, all they could offer to ease the soldiers' suffering was cognac.

Day after day, the hungry and weary GIs heard the drone of high flying Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress and Consolidated B-24 Liberator heavy bomber formations on their way to targets in Germany, but when they looked up for a glimpse of lower-flying C-47 transports bringing supplies, there were none.

At noon on December 22, two German officers were sent by General Luttwitz under a white flag to seek "the honorable surrender of the encircled town." In his basement command center on the northern edge of Bastogne, General McAuliffe faced a military and moral dilemma. He agonized over the fact that his men and Belgian civilians were being killed and wounded every day, but McAuliffe, a decorated veteran of Normandy, was not about to surrender.

McAuliffe's immediate reaction to the enemy demand was to scrawl the word "Nuts!" on a scrap of paper and hand it to a junior officer to turn over to the German emissaries. They said they did not understand the word, and asked, "Is your commander's reply affirmative or nega-



Manning a lonely outpost along a road leading into Bastogne, soldiers of the U.S. 101st Airborne Division point their bazooka in the direction of an expected German attack.

tive?” McAuliffe’s aide said, “My commander’s reply is ‘Nuts.’ It means ‘Go to hell.’ You understand that, don’t you?” Some observers in McAuliffe’s command center at the time believed that he used more profane language, but, in any case, “Nuts!” went down in the history books as one of the most famous utterances of the war.

McAuliffe reported later, “They said they’d give me two hours to decide, and if we didn’t [surrender], they would destroy the town and all the people in it.”

His snappy one-word reply lifted the spirits of the “Battered Bastards of the Bastion of Bastogne,” but a bleak Christmas was approaching for both them and the people of the town. Some of the American officers observed a singular mood of detachment from reality spreading through the ranks. As daylight faded on Christmas Eve, many GIs clambered out of their foxholes and mortar pits to shake hands with each other feelingly.

That evening, a tired, strained General McAuliffe radioed General Middleton at his Neufchateau headquarters. “The finest Christmas present the 101st could get,” said McAuliffe somberly, “would be a relief tomorrow.” Middleton replied just as grimly, “I know, boy, I know.” McAuliffe also radioed the headquarters of Maj. Gen. Hugh J. Gaffey’s 4th Armored Division. “There is only one more shopping day before Christmas,” said McAuliffe.

For several days, Sherman tanks, tank destroyers, and

halftracks of the 4th Armored Division had been struggling from the south to break through to Bastogne. After an urgent plea from Eisenhower for help in blunting the German counter-offensive, General George S. Patton, Jr., commander of the Third Army, had responded swiftly by directing three of his divisions in eastern France to make a 90-degree turn and highball north to the left flank of the Bulge that stretched from Echternach in Luxembourg to Bastogne. It was a logistical nightmare, but one of the speediest and most brilliant maneuvers of the war. It astounded the Germans.

The 4th Armored had to march 151 miles from Fene-trange in French Lorraine to Vaux-les-Rosieres in Belgium, and it covered the distance in an incredible 19 hours. However, a few miles southwest of Bastogne the division was held up by snow, fog, ice and cratered roads, and a blown bridge. The tankers, many of them suffering from frostbite, had to battle teller mines and the crack German 5th Parachute Division.

Meanwhile, in Bastogne on that moonlit bitterly cold Christmas Eve, the 3,500 civilians trapped in the besieged town tried to keep themselves warm in their cellars and church crypts for another night. Many of them huddled on the damp floors of the cellar in Abbé Jean-Baptiste Musty’s great seminary. Shivering and infested by lice, the men, women, and children lay on filthy mattresses. By

flickering candlelight, the sisters of the seminary clinic circulated to comfort the old and young.

Headquarters personnel of the 101st Airborne Division gathered in the mess hall for their sundown meal, quieter and more thoughtful than usual. Roman Catholic soldiers spread the word that Mass would be celebrated at 7 PM, and when the time neared, 100 or more men entered a large room that had been converted into a chapel. Candles on the makeshift altar furnished light, and tapers burned in tin fixtures along the bare walls.

A young Army chaplain in vestments celebrated the Mass, assisted by enlisted men. The worshippers sang Christmas carols to the accompaniment of a little field organ. In a brief homily, the chaplain remarked on the sacrifices that were required in Bastogne that Christmas and called for trust in God. "Do not plan," he counseled, "for God's plan will prevail."

Meanwhile, in the transept of the vaulted chapel in Abbé Musty's seminary, officers and GIs sang carols while wounded men, lying on stretchers on the stone floors, listened, their eyes glistening. Bright moonlight filtered through broken stained glass windows, and snow sifted from cracks in the roof as voices chorused "O Little Town of Bethlehem."

There was a pause, and then the soldiers began singing Silent Night. The wounded, covering the entire floor, joined in. This Mass was interrupted by a loud explosion in another part of the town, but then the singing of carols continued. There were other religious services that night in Bastogne as soldiers tried to drown out the rumble of artillery and mortar fire with thoughts of home more than 3,000 miles away. Men of the 502nd Parachute Infantry Regiment gathered to pray in the 10th century chapel of the Rolle Chateau, their command post, while General McAuliffe joined the men of one of his field artillery battalions for a midnight Mass on the snowy outskirts of the town.

Meanwhile, Lt. Col. Harry W.O. Kinnard, the divisional operations officer, drafted a Christmas Day greeting to the troops from the commanding general. He wrote, "What's merry about all this? You ask. We're fighting—it's cold—we aren't home. All true, but ... we have stopped cold everything that has been thrown at us from the north, east, southwest.... We continue to hold Bastogne. By holding Bastogne, we assure the success of the Allied armies. We are giving our country and our loved ones at home a worthy Christmas present, and, being privileged to take part in this gallant feat of arms,



On the day after Christmas, 1944, Douglas C-47 transport aircraft drop provisions to American troops occupying Bastogne.

are truly making for ourselves a Merry Christmas."

The relative quiet of that poignant Christmas Eve was shattered when German bombs crashed down on Bastogne, inflicting severe casualties. One bomb struck the medical aid station of Colonel William Roberts's Combat Command B of the 10th Armored Division, burying 20 patients in the debris. Among the dead was Nurse Renée Lemaître, the daughter of a hardware merchant, who was pinned beneath a fallen timber. She had been tending the wounded. It was the worst bombing the town had endured, and dozens of buildings burned. Army ambulances roared through the dark and shambled streets, and volunteers dug frantically for survivors in the rubble.

The Battle of Bastogne was nearing its climax, and the defenders knew that their time was running out if they did not soon receive relief or air-dropped supplies. A brief break in the miserable weather on December 23 had enabled the dropping of some supplies in the Bulge, but it was not enough.

It was a troubled Christmas Eve in Bastogne. Around 2:30 AM, an all-out German artillery and mortar barrage fell upon the Americans' northwest perimeter, and 18 tanks and two infantry battalions burst through. The defenses were breached in two places, but the penetrations were contained by McAuliffe's skillfully deployed reserves. The 327th Glider Infantry Regiment was com-

mitted along its front, and tank destroyers and field guns opened up on the enemy. Every man who could carry a rifle was rounded up in the town and rushed to the defensive posts—company clerks, cooks, radiomen, engineers, walking wounded, and even chaplains. It was the closest call yet for the defenders of Bastogne, but the Germans were driven back.

Meanwhile, the lead elements of the 4th Armored Division were stalled five miles to the south because of heavy resistance, and General Patton, the architect of the relief effort, was chafing at the delay. He had ordered Monsignor James H. O'Neill, the chief Third Army chaplain, to publish a prayer calling for good weather. "See if we can't get God to work on our side," said the profane yet religious Patton.

On Christmas morning, he got what he wanted. Patton rose and approved of what he saw, confiding in his diary: "A clear, cold Christmas, lovely weather for killing Germans, which seems a bit queer, seeing whose birthday it is."

Finally, at 3 PM on the following day, December 26, 1944, thunder filled the air over the Bastogne area as formations of C-47s began dropping much needed supplies. Cheering GIs watched the parachutes blossoming down and raced to retrieve the containers of ammunition, rations, and medicine. Spirits rose in Bastogne.

At the same time, south of the village of Assenois on the road to Bastogne, Lt. Col. Creighton W. Abrams, Jr., commander of the 37th Tank Battalion, 4th Armored Division, stood on a hill watching the supply parachutes fall on Bastogne. After radioing for permission to push forward, he clambered into the turret of his Sherman tank, clamped a cigar between his teeth, and told his tankers, "We're going in to those people now. Let 'er roll!"

Supported by artillery salvos and with all guns firing, the battalion's Shermans, halftracks, and tank destroyers rumbled forward. They blasted their way through Assenois and reached the outer southern perimeter of Bastogne shortly before 5 PM. The last 16 miles into Bastogne were the toughest that a unit of the 4th Armored Division had ever fought.

There would be fierce fighting for several days, but the eight-day ordeal was over for General McAuliffe's stubborn Screaming Eagles and the heroic townspeople of Bastogne. In recognition of his inspired leadership, McAuliffe was personally awarded the Distinguished Service Cross by General Patton. The 101st Airborne Division received



Their rifles slung over their shoulders, three men of the 101st Airborne Division walk down a rubble-strewn Bastogne street past the bodies of fellow soldiers killed by German bombing the previous night. This photograph was taken on Christmas Day, 1944, and the beleaguered defenders of the town were relieved the following day.

a Presidential Unit Citation.

The Allies had faced disaster at the start of the Battle of the Bulge, but the stout American defense, harsh weather, and a critical shortage of fuel had ground the German columns to a halt. The enemy had paid the price for Hitler's last folly. "The backbone of the western front was broken," as Field Marshal von Rundstedt said. By January 31, 1945, the Americans, with British help, had straightened the Bulge, though the Allied advance into Germany had been delayed by six costly weeks.

In the Bulge, the Germans underrated the tenacity, logistical capability, and courage of the GIs. "When all is said and done," observed General Montgomery, "I shall always feel that Rundstedt was really beaten by the good fighting qualities of the American soldier."

British Prime Minister Winston Churchill rose in the House of Commons on January 18, 1945, and said, "The United States troops have done almost all the fighting and have suffered almost all the losses. We must not forget that it is to American homes that the telegrams of personal losses and anxiety have been going during the past month.... Care must be taken not to claim for the British Army an undue share of what is undoubtedly the greatest American battle of the war, and will, I believe, be regarded as an ever-famous American victory."

From the Publishers of WWII HISTORY Magazine

Battle of the Bulge

70TH ANNIVERSARY SPECIAL ISSUE



By December 1944, time and resources were running out for Adolf Hitler. The Allies had gained a solid foothold in Europe after the D-Day invasion, and his armies in the Soviet Union were being pushed back toward Germany.

Hoping he could repeat history, Hitler mustered up a quarter-million troops from three different armies to launch the riskiest, most costly counter-offensive of the entire war. The plan? Another surprise blitzkrieg through Belgium, splitting the Allied armies through the rugged Ardennes Forest.

For the Americans who spent the winter of '44 surrounded by 200,000 German soldiers, it was known as the Battle of the Bulge. ...and within the pages of this Special Issue, you'll get a first-hand look at what they experienced.

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