



# "The Glorious Collapse of the 106th"

by STANLEY FRANK

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*Five days off the boats, some of the youngest and greenest troops in the American Army were shoved into a quiet" sector—and at once virtually wiped out during the grimmest days of the Battle of the Bulge.*

**WAR** is the stimulation of victory that sends you home with the swagger of survival, the dame you met in Paris and the cognac you liberated, the enduring satisfaction of having painfully paid a debt of allegiance to society free from that society's conventions and restraints for the last time, perhaps, in your life. War also is a dirty, despicable, degrading business, sometimes attended by bitter, unredeemed defeat in a man's first action, leaving him to wonder for the rest of his days whether he was betrayed by circumstances or his courage. That was the side of war the 106th Infantry Division knew.

The 106th virtually was wiped out in the Battle of the Bulge. Five days after it landed on the European continent and went into the line in a "quiet" sector of the Ardennes, the 106th caught the brunt of Von Rundstedt's counteroffensive mounted by three German armies. The first shots fired in anger heard by the green troops literally were the massive barrages that preceded the attack. No other American division in the war was hit by a greater concentration of enemy strength. None suffered such catastrophic casualties in a single brief engagement.



These survived and learned from Lt. Gen. Courtney Hodges that "No troops in the world, disposed as your division had to be, could have withstood the impact of the German attack . . . in your sector." SIGNAL CORPS PHOTO

**Decimated,** the classic word used in relation with a military disaster, is a grim understatement of the 106th's losses. Two of its three regiments were isolated and liquidated three days after the Germans attacked on December 16, 1944. By December 22, 70 per cent of the division's combat effectives were dead, wounded or captured. St. Vith, the enemy's key objective in the Schnee Eifel, was lost by the 106th. Arid yet the beaten, battered doughfoots achieved a brilliant feat of arms in their first fire fight.

The Battle of the Bulge always will be associated in the public imagination with the 101st Airborne's epic stand at Bastogne. Without the slightest depreciation of the 101st's performance, it can be stated that the 106th's holding action at St. Vith was equally vital. The main force of the German effort was contained in two tremendous lunges at Bastogne and St. Vith, commanding the only north-south roads in the sector suitable for mechanized movement. Bastogne, some twenty miles west of St. Vith, was the target of a ponderous, roundhouse left swing. St. Vith, only 12 miles from the German jump-off, was the objective of a shorter, sharper right hook. St. Vith fell on December twenty-second—five days late on Von Rundstedt's timetable.

Maybe the krauts would have been stopped even if St. Vith had been seized in the early hours of the attack, according to plan. The character of the American resistance at Monschau, Stavelot and elsewhere on the northern shoulder of the Bulge suggests as much, but sheer conjecture has a negligible value in war. The path to the war-criminal trials is paved with the German and Japanese High Commands' false estimates of the Allies' capabilities. The point is that the painfully green 106th, mauled by four veteran divisions, stood and held until its position had lost all tactical importance, although every reasonable expectation led the enemy to anticipate a quick, decisive penetration.

The 106th didn't win the war or even a battle. It didn't lose a battle, either, and that's the big story that didn't make the headlines. For the 106th was a typical draft division and, without getting too sloppy about this, symbolized the courage and resourcefulness of American kids in a desperate situation.

The highest numerical division in the Army, the 106th also had the lowest age average. It was the first outfit to get eighteen-year-old draftees. When it arrived overseas its average age was twenty-two.



Happy ending. The shooting war over, remnants of the 106th raced across France to round up a record bag of 910,000 German prisoners. These 106th MP's are guarding some high-ranking krauts.

### ***Even Monty Was Impressed***

It did not have the tradition or geographical integration that charged some outfits with high morale. Any special esprit de corps it might have had was disrupted by the steady drain on it for replacements. In the month preceding embarkation, 95 per cent of its riflemen were assigned to other units. Its training in the States had been routine and its equipment was merely adequate. Everything went wrong in the Bulge. Maj. Gen. Alan W. Jones, its commander, suffered a heart attack induced by overwork and anxiety for the fate of his son, who had become a father the day before the attack struck and was with one of the isolated regiments. Division headquarters had no communications with corps or the two surrounded regiments after December 19. But the overrun 422nd and 423rd Regiments fought without food and water until their ammunition was exhausted, and the 424th, which escaped encirclement, came back with enough heart left to participate in the counterattacks that reduced and flattened the Bulge.

"The American soldiers of the 106th Infantry Division stuck it out and put up a fine performance," Field Marshal Montgomery—not especially noted as a press agent for American performances—said. "By Jove, they stuck it out, those chaps."

Guarded reports that a new American division had been surrounded and faced annihilation began to trickle back to the States in the early dark hours of the Bulge. Security did not permit correspondents to identify the division, but families at home knew the men of the 106th had arrived recently in Europe and guessed theirs was the outfit in jeopardy. Lacking definite information from the War Department, the folks at home

organized one of the most remarkable civilian volunteer agencies to appear during the war, the "Agony Grapevine".

Conceived by Duward B. Frampton, a Pittsburgh lumberman, whose son was a corporal with the 422nd, the Agony Grapevine painstakingly set out to determine the fate of each unreported man in the division. In January, 1945, Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson announced that 416 men of the 106th had been killed in the Bulge, 1,246 were wounded and 7,001 missing in action. Frampton and his helpers never abandoned hope that the missing men had been captured.

Frampton and volunteers who owned short-wave radios began tireless vigils at their sets, listening to German propaganda broadcasts which each night released the names of American soldiers captured. A letter from California to New York, telling of Frampton's work, gave the Associated Press a lead to the story, which was circulated nationally. Letters, photographs, telegrams and offers of assistance deluged the Framptons. In Cleveland, Dr. and Mrs. C. R. Woods heard in roundabout fashion that an officer with another division had written his wife in Chicago saying he was pretty sure most of the 106th boys were prisoners. On the basis of such flimsy encouragement, another branch of the grapevine was nourished.



The St. Vith massacre, evidence of a Nazi atrocity. The Yanks dead in the snow were slain in cold blood by SS men. The 106th helped avenge them.

Every family Frampton could locate was asked to communicate with him as soon as it heard whether sons and husbands were PW's. Names trickled in from all parts of the country. It was tedious work, but ceaseless sessions at the radio began to produce results. One night, alone, Frampton picked up the names of 125 PW's from the 106th. He distributed regularly circular letters to all families, listing the names, serial numbers, home addresses and next of kin of all newly reported prisoners, urging those who did not find the names they sought to continue praying. Eventually, the majority of the missing men turned up alive and

well. Six months after V-E Day the 106th's MIA list had been reduced from 7,001 to 1,023. In many instances the Agony Grapevine transmitted the good news to families long before the War Department came through with an official confirmation.

Historians will be fighting the Battle of the Bulge for years to come, with specific attention to the surprise exploited by the Germans at such a heavy cost in lives to the 106th and three other American divisions, the 4th, 28th and 99th. An ironic footnote will remind future students of military science that the Schnee Eifel, a rugged terrain believed unsuitable for large-scale offensive operations, was the German springboard on May 10, 1940, for the *Blitzkrieg* that conquered France in six weeks.

The 106th men who did all their fighting in the Bulge have not gone around in public blaming top brass incompetence for the krauts' sneak punch that caught them unprepared. They quietly read the analysis of the pre-battle situation that General Eisenhower made in his official report: Since the shortage of combat troops made it impossible to maintain a strong line everywhere and carry through an attack being mounted in the north, the mountainous Schnee Eifel was the least likely sector for the enemy to launch a successful counterblow on a large scale.

The men are familiar with General Bradley's "calculated risk." They have heard all the explanations and excuses, but the 106th knows only this: It was given absolutely no warning or indication that the Germans were preparing to attack.

"We relieved the Second Division, a damn good, battle-wise outfit that had been in action since D-Day," General Jones says. "It had been in that sector for two months and it knew the score. The last thing General Robertson, commander of the Second, told me was, 'Take it easy. Those krauts won't attack if ordered.' The Second's artillery was dug in so deep that we traded them gun for gun. I wanted to make some revisions in the disposition of guns and ammunition dumps and, by a coincidence, I planned the changes for the morning of December sixteenth. Do you think I would've considered such measures had I known anything was cooking on the other side?"

Brig. Gen. Leo T. McMahon, division artillery commander, has written in his official comments: "No advance warning was received of the impending German attack or any information of the enemy that would justify the conclusion that an attack was being mounted."

"The guys thought they had let the Army down and endangered every other outfit in the line. . . ."  
[But these self-accusing voices were stilled after the 106th came back to see more hard action.

SIGNAL CORPS PHOTO



Responsibility for St. Vith, a village on the Belgian frontier that had been German territory before the Treaty of Versailles, was assumed by the 106th on the night of December eleventh after a five-day motor march across France, passing cemeteries of American, British, Canadian, French and German dead from another war. The newcomers were so green and security was so relaxed that some vehicles arrived with headlights on and 2nd Division MP's didn't even bother to eat out the offenders, in the traditional fashion of Army watchdogs.

Loose-mouthed civilian critics have accused the High Command of gross negligence in putting the raw 106th in the St. Vith sector. Throwing harpoons into the big brass always is a popular pastime, but there is no justification, except second-guessing, to substantiate the charge. For ten weeks there had been only light patrol activity in the area. Both the Americans and Germans had been using the Schnee Eifel for identical purposes—to rest battle-weary divisions and to accustom new outfits to the sights and sounds of war. It was the safest spot along the entire western front at a time when there was such a desperate need for combat troops that SHAEF was combing the Services of Supply and Air Force ground crews for personnel to be converted into infantrymen. The 2nd Division veterans told the rookies they were getting a good deal. The 106th believed it until 5:40 A.M. on December 16, 1944.

At that precise instant the 106th's 27 mile front - the book calls for a division to hold five miles - erupted convulsively. During the next eighty minutes thousands of rounds blasted the kids who never had heard—much less been exposed to artillery fire. Shelling was so intense that MP's directed traffic lying prone in the mud. The full weight of the barrage was directed against the 589th Field Artillery, supporting the 422nd Regiment, to silence counter-battery fire.

A half hour after all hell broke loose, the division had its first two heroes in Pfc. Thomas Graham, of Elmhurst, New York, and Lt. Eric Wood, Wayne, Pennsylvania. Graham, turret gunner of an armored car, delivered the wounded driver to the medics, and then drove the vehicle across exposed ground to reach a more effective firing position. Twice his gun jammed. Each time he calmly withdrew, then returned and, remaining upright in the turret, wiped out twenty invaders. Wood stood in the open, directing field pieces to the rear in the face of tank and small-arms fire. He tried to run the gantlet with the last gun. Graham and Wood did not live to receive their medals.

At seven o'clock a panzer and three *Volksgrnadier* divisions advanced in waves through the ghostly mist shrouding the dense woods and rolling valleys toward the 106th's positions. This movement has been described as the most auspicious start of a battle made by either side throughout the western campaign. The front then was an irregular line that recrossed the Belgian-German border at several points, giving the Americans a series of salients into the Siegfried Line. Those projections were fine for observation posts and as potential jump-offs for attacks. But when reverse technique was applied, they were vulnerable to encircling movements.

The left flank of the line was covered only by the 14th Cavalry Group, a light reconnaissance outfit that was not trained, equipped or expected to fight defensively. The enemy made his first significant advance there, permitting him to throw a pincer to the south around the 422nd Regiment. Simultaneously, he hacked a wedge between that regiment and the 423rd. By morning of December seventeenth, both regiments were surrounded on three sides. The 424th was forced to withdraw toward St. Vith.

The German had inflicted savage losses on the 106th and he had made important penetrations—but not deep enough. He should have been in St. Vith that morning, swinging north up a good road leading to Liege, the 1st Army's communications center and supply base, before opposition could mass and block his path to Antwerp, the Allies' huge port and the ultimate objective of his last-ditch effort. Nothing much stood between him and the Meuse River (the nearest American reserves were ninety miles away). Nothing except a few thousand frightened kids who refused to break under a sheer weight calculated to beat them into the ground.

T/5 Edward Withee, of Torrington, Connecticut, volunteered to cover the withdrawal of his platoon, pinned down by four tanks. When last seen, Withee was returning with a submachine gun the fire of 88's poured to him from point-blank range of thirty yards. The platoon, which escaped without a casualty, assumed Withee was killed. But he turned up four months later in Eupen at a rest camp named in his honor as the division's first winner of the Distinguished Service Cross.

Large Lee Berwick, a captain from Johnson's Bayou, Louisiana, decided to throw a bluff comparable to his size when his thirty soldiers found a detachment of Germans holding a road junction. The krauts were in a building impregnable to the small arms Berwick had. He walked up to the house and demanded the surrender of the enemy to the huge forces" behind him. The Germans took a look at the six-foot-two-inch, 220-pound *Amerikaner* brandishing a Tommy gun, and out came 105 men and two officers, followed by seventeen captured doughfoots.

"That Heinie leader sure was mighty disgusted after he'd been disarmed and my thirty guys showed themselves," Berwick says with a reminiscent grin.

Not everybody was as lucky as Berwick. Lt. Albert Barnaby, of Metamora, Ohio, had his platoon dug in on a knoll overlooking the Siegfried Line when it was jumped by two battalions and five tanks. There was only one bazooka and a machine gun in the platoon to answer the tanks and a battery of 88's and, as the attack continued, Barnaby's ammunition got dangerously low. To control his fire, he deliberately exposed himself

to give the machine gun selected targets. Outnumbered thirty to one, the platoon held its ground for eight hours until reinforcements arrived. Barnaby then tried to make contact with the surrounded company command post. Instead of sending an enlisted man, he went himself. He never returned.

Von Rundstedt's orders, first captured by a 106th doughfoot from a battalion commander of the German 62nd Division, told General Jones the enemy's objectives, routes and disposition of forces. By nightfall of the first day Jones was convinced that his forward elements, exposed on a ridge of the Schnee Eifel, would be destroyed unless they were pulled back a few miles to stronger positions on the Our River. At 12:36 A.M., December seventeenth, Jones received a message from Maj. Gen. Troy Middleton, commanding the 8th Corps:

"Troops will be withdrawn from present positions only if position becomes completely untenable. In no event will enemy be allowed to penetrate west of Our River, which will be held at all costs."

"In plain military language," Jones says laconically, "that means, 'Stay till you're dead.'"

So the green kids stayed where they were and fought to live. A shell damaged the mortar base manned by Pfc. Harry Arvannis, of Moline, Illinois. He fired his last eighty rounds holding the tube between his legs and aiming by hand. As the Germans continued to come, he was pointing the mortar straight up and dropping shells within twenty-five yards of his own slit trench. Four krauts closed in with bayonets. He stopped three with his service pistol. Now the last one was lunging at him. Arvannis threw his four-pound revolver at the German, hit him squarely between the eyes and killed him.

By evening of the second day it was obvious that the 422nd and 423rd Regiments were doomed. Only 300 of the 6000 men from those two units managed to escape to division headquarters or to the 424th, which was imperiled on its right flank by the collapse of the 28th Division, veterans of Normandy. Cpl. Willard Roper, of Havre, Montana, was the lead scout for twenty-one men who fought through the enemy lines for seventy-two hours to reach safety with little ammunition and four D-ration chocolate bars among them.

The most appropriately named doughfoot in the Army, Sgt. Wallace Rifleman, of Green Bay, Wisconsin, collected all the stragglers he could find and survived an interminable series of hand-to-hand fights to break out of the trap.

"I'll never forget the faces of two men who were cut off from their outfits and wandered around until we picked them up," says Cpl. Minturn T. Wright, III, West Hartford, Connecticut. "They couldn't talk coherently. They'd drop their heads in their hands in the middle of a sentence or stare off into space. They told of walking eight miles with a lieutenant who breathed through a hole in his back as big as a fist until he died. One of them had seen his best friend's foot blown off. Another man, they said, had his eye blown out and dumped sulfa powder into the empty socket and went on fighting."

In the vast and terrible confusion, there was no front or rear. The front was wherever a man turned, the rear was over his shoulder. Cooks took chow to the foxholes and were given rifles. Men from the quartermaster companies drove ammunition trucks with one hand, holding carbines in the other. Company clerks set up covered-wagon defenses around headquarters. The division band fought as riflemen. The 331st Medical Battalion, supposed to function only as a collecting station, operated without rest for seventy-two hours as an emergency field hospital while isolated, and lost only six men of all the wounded it treated.

Arrogance is not a characteristic of the 106th. The men who were in the Bulge freely concede they were raved from complete annihilation by Combat Command B of the 9th Armored Division, led by Brigadier



General Hoge, who later seized the Remagen Bridge. Hoge's tanks rumbled into St. Vith just when the situation appeared hopeless.

"It was like a horse-opera movie," General Jones comments. "Those tanks wheeled into position in the public square just as German Tigers came over the brow of a hill to the east."

All combat troops are pretty skeptical of decorations, knowing too well that too many acts of high valor go unrewarded because an officer did not happen to be around to file a report. But the 106th's soldiers, to a man, are unanimous in agreeing that Lt. Col. Thomas Riggs, of Huntington, West Virginia, was the outstanding hero of the division.

Riggs, commanding a battalion of engineers, led the defense of St. Vith and N 23, the road leading north to Liege, for five days. He not only balked overwhelmingly superior forces but personally spearheaded a series of counterattacks to keep the enemy off balance. Among his other distinctions, Riggs was one of the few men who saw action on both fronts in Europe. Captured while leading a patrol a few hours before St. Vith fell, Riggs was marched 110 miles in bitter weather to a prison camp. During the ordeal, Riggs, a six-foot-three-inch, 230-pound former football star at Illinois, lost forty pounds. When he refused to give them any information, the Germans shipped him to a camp in Poland for such stubborn characters, but he escaped to the oncoming Russians. He fought with a Red tank army for ten days before he was evacuated to the rear. Eight weeks later he landed in Paris by way of Odessa, Port Said, Naples and Marseilles. At Naples he spurned a chance to go home because he "wanted the "satisfaction of finishing the war with an outfit that got the hell kicked out of it.

By December eighteenth the immediate fall of St. Vith seemed certain, but the inevitable was forestalled for four more days. Radio communications were so bad that it took one hour to transmit one short message. Division headquarters, abandoning time-consuming codes, was trying to reach the isolated regiments with messages marked triple urgent: "We must know where you are." For four days Wright's radio team was the only contact the 424th Regiment had with the outside world. It transmitted at night from a truck sneaking up and down the roads to throw off enemy direction finders attempting to locate its beam. The last word from the 422nd was received on December nineteenth: "Send us ammunition." Atrocious weather made it impossible to supply the surrounded men by planes—visibility of less than 100 yards reduced air activity on December twentieth to twelve sorties, the lowest of the entire western campaign.

St. Vith finally fell to the Germans on December twenty-second and the shattered remnants of the division withdrew through the 82nd Airborne to Vielsalm. The compounded nightmares of the six awful days and nights played queer tricks with a man's sub consciousness. Lt. Col. Herbert B. Livesey, Jr., of Mamaroneck, New York, threw himself on a pile of rags in a farmhouse and dreamed a beautiful girl was sobbing in his ear. He awoke to find a Red Cross girl, who had just heard her brother had been killed with the 424th, huddled on the floor and crying convulsively.

Survivors saw "Stars and Stripes" and learned for the first time the magnitude of the Germans' attack. They began to realize they had been through one of the grimmest battles in military history. Lt. Gen. Courtney Hodges, 1st Army commander, wrote:

"No troops in the world, disposed as your division had to be, could have withstood the impact of the German attack, which had its greatest weight in your sector. Please tell these men for me what a grand job they did. By the delay they effected, they definitely upset Von Rundstedt's timetable."

"The guys thought they had let the Army down and endangered every other outfit in the line by being driven back," Wright explains. "All of us had read the stories from Anzio and we heard at [Camp Atterbury](#) in

Indiana how bad the beaches were on D-Day. We knew that no American soldiers had retreated since the Kasserine Pass, and we had a feeling we'd failed in our first test. I can just imagine how those poor devils who were captured felt. They probably thought the attack that hit them was the ordinary sort of thing that happened all the time and was handled without any trouble by other divisions."

Remaining elements of the 106th saw hard action after the Bulge and acquitted themselves as well as any division in the line. Sixteen hours after being relieved by the 82nd Airborne, the 424th Regiment launched the first counterattack of the Bulge at Manhay, on the coldest Christmas Eve in the memory of the Belgians. Manhay was taken, but the 1st SS Panzer Division had to be kicked out twice before the battle went the other way. To the east.

In tandem with the 517th Parachute Regiment, the 424th hacked away through the Ardennes. The advance was slowed at Ennal. Two platoons of Company K were having a tough time taking high ground. Brig. Gen. Herbert T. Perrin, acting commander of the division, went up with his doughfoots and led the attack. At the peak of furious house-to-house fighting, Perrin discovered his gun had fallen out of his shoulder holster while he was crawling through the mud and snow.

The division that was only a regiment was ordered to join with the troops of the 7th Armored to retake St. Vith on January 22, 1945.

Romantic reportage would have the men fired by an all-consuming passion to avenge their retreat. To them, it was just another dirty job. St. Vith fell to the 7th Armored and the remnants of the 106th the following day in a methodical, efficient mopping-up operation.

After another month of hard, unspectacular fighting under Maj. Gen. Donald A. Stroh, the 106th was out of the shooting war. It was sent to Brittany, where the lost regiments were reconstituted. The division was at full strength for the first time since the Bulge. Slated to relieve the forces containing strong German garrisons at St. Nazaire and Lorient, the 106th was sent racing across France on a more pleasant mission—the biggest PW job in history. More than 910,000 German prisoners were processed by the division, the equivalent of nine German armies, fifteen times the total number of prisoners taken by the first A. E. F.

The war was over and now the guys who had fought from Normandy to the Elbe began to tell their tall tales. The 106th doughs again heard the small, secret whispers of doubt and lack of self-justification. They knew they were one division that had not won the war, and they were given to private speculation whether they had almost lost it. They began to feel better about the whole thing, though, when fellows like Sgt. Roger Hunter, of Macon, Georgia, came back, telling of a strange and wonderful experience.

Hunter went to a rest camp wearing the 106th's Golden Lion shoulder patch, still new in the ETO. He was stopped by a soldier with the Red One of the famous 1st Division, which had spearheaded the invasions of North Africa, Sicily and Normandy. The man from the 1st asked him what outfit he was from. Hunter told him.

"I want to shake your hand," the man said.

Certainly the 106th has one distinction no other division of World War II enjoys, if that is the word. The doughs of the 106th got indoctrinated in the art of war faster than anybody else.

February 4, 2005

I just read the very long article (above) about the 106th Division and the Battle of The Bulge. I just wanted to correct one statement you made.

The 7th Armored Combat Command B was not led by Brigadier General Hoge.

It was commanded by Brigadier General Bruce Cooper Clark who later on was a Four star general in charge of the European forces in Europe after the war.

I was in the 275th Armored Field Artillery Battalion which fired lots of 105 ammunition over the 106th and 14th Calvary on that Fateful day of 16th of December. My "C" battery had one officer and five enlisted men captured at the village of Roth the very first day.

We spent the entire night of the 16th trying to move back a very few miles to get into better positions.

We also had FO posts at Kobshied, Lanzarath and several more small villages.

DeLoyd Cooper



*Page last revised*

*James D. West*

[www.IndianaMilitary.org](http://www.IndianaMilitary.org)

[jimdwest@centurylink.net](mailto:jimdwest@centurylink.net)