

Travis M. Brown, Sr., Major
S-3 Combat Command Reserve
3rd Armored Division

The Hunter Become the Hunted - Task Force Hogan

Travis M. Brown Sr, was a member of Task Force Hogan when it was surrounded in the village of Marcouray during the Battle of the Bulge. Here is his story.



The 3rd Armored Division was flexing its muscles on the 19th of December 1944. This Spearhead Division of the First United States Army had enjoyed unbelievable success as a fighting unit, and while the price paid was high, the Division was all set for the final assault on what we had been lead to believe was a beaten Nazi fighting machine. The G-2 reports told of how the German morale was low; how they were about out of all the necessities that make up a good war machine, and that they would be duck soup any day. We took all of this with a grain of salt, especially since the past few nights they had been flying missions in our rest area, and had dropped quite a few anti-personnel bombs.

Then the news came. The Germans had broken through on a front in Belgium, and had enjoyed great Initial success. We were to make, a forced march to the area, and help to blunt this offensive initiated by the Germans. Task Force Hogan was composed of the 3rd Battalion of the 33rd Armored Regiment, and was assigned to Combat Command Reserve commanded by Colonel Robert Howze, one of the fine combat Commanders of the 3rd Armored Division. Colonel Howze's 3rd Battalion of the 36th Armored Infantry Regiment was a team member of Task Force Hogan.

The night of December 20, 1944 was the beginning of a period that we would long remember. The units of the 3rd Armored were not accustomed to moving into a backward position, but that night back-tracked over some very familiar territory. Occasionally a Buzz Bomb would move overhead on its way to the Liege Area. The V-1, the forerunner of the larger V-2 rocket, was not an accurate weapon and now and then the motor would cut out and one would land in the proximity of our march. Confusion would be the best term to describe the situation that existed on that night. We knew that the Germans had enjoyed some success with what we believed to be a limited counter attack against some very green American forces, which had, shortly before, arrived from the States and were untried in combat. But why was it necessary to make this move over a great distance for what would probably be a limited action? We were to learn soon what the term the "*fog of war*" really meant.

Early on the morning of December 20 we arrived at a point near the small village of Hottton in Belgium. The tanks and other vehicles were gassed up and Colonel Howze was

waiting with orders. Task Force Hogan was one of three Task Forces of CCR, and our mission was to move out as a reconnaissance force on secondary roads to locate the enemy and, if successful in our mission, to proceed to the village of Houffalize, located just north of Bastogne. Our movements proceeded in a column on the extreme right of the Division zone and we encountered very little resistance as we moved along, although we could hear the sounds of heavy fighting on our left. We later learned that our, "H" Company, which had been attached to another Task Force, had become engaged and suffered heavy losses in that area.

No one realized it at the time, but we were actually the only forces standing in the way of a complete German breakthrough to the Meuse River. Late in the afternoon of December 21 we began to pass numerous vehicles that had been abandoned by personnel of the **106th Infantry Division** as they had been overrun and withdrew in the face of the tremendous onslaught by the enemy. We had passed through the beautiful little resort town of Laroche late in the afternoon when the lead vehicles encountered a strong German Roadblock. We were now about 20 miles on the way to our objective.

At this point there was no way to maneuver around the opposition. The Ourthe River was on the right and very steep hills ascended from the road on the left. Our reconnaissance platoon Sergeant, "Shorty" Wright came up with the information from Lieutenant Clark Worrell, the Reconnaissance Platoon leader, that Laroche offered good cover and was easy to defend. Thus Colonel Hogan made the decision that we would set up our defense for the night.

Laroche was a beautiful summer resort town built on the banks of the Ourthe River. There were several resort hotels built on the banks of the river and one of these was selected as a good location for our task Force Command Post. The unit was pulled back; security was set-up and we proceeded to establish our headquarters in the hotel. When the Germans had broken through, the troops that previously held the town had withdrawn hurriedly, leaving behind most of their equipment. The thing that was most interesting to our people were the packages from home that were scattered around the hotel; cigarettes, fruit cakes and various packages from home. They were promptly "*liberated*" and a good many found their way to the rear seat of the Colonel's Peep.

We knew very little of the situation around us at this time. We did know that we were no out of FM voice contact with our Combat Command Headquarters and no messages were relayed to us that evening. Everything was buttoned down and the situation was under control, or at least we thought so. Task Force Hogan was prepared to move out the next morning to continue our mission.

Suddenly Sergeant Wright appeared with a Lieutenant Colonel in tow from one of the over-run outfits. "*Where in the world did you come from?*" was the question put to Colonel Hogan. We explained about our mission. "*Are you people crazy? Don't you realize that you are cut off? The whole Germany Army is all around this place.*" "Well", replied Colonel Hogan "*Here we are and we have a good bit of firepower. If they want to come on in and run us out, we are ready for them.*"

However, Colonel Hogan told Sergeant Earl Godwin to continue to try to raise CCR on the key CW radio. Sergeant Godwin finally made the contact and came in with the order that Colonel Hogan was to report back to CCR Headquarters the first thing morning for further orders. Major William Walker was placed in command of the task force. Because of the stories we had heard from the colonel who had wandered in the night before, we formed a combat patrol to make the run back.

Three peeps were readied. Lieutenant Clark Worrell and Phil DeOrio, Hogan's orderly, occupied the first vehicle. Gast, the colonel's driver, Sam, and I were in the second while Lieutenant Ted Gardon and two other men brought up the rear. When one looks back on those occasions it is funny the things you remember. The weather was getting bitter cold and Sam Hogan and I started off the day with practically the same apparel: long john underwear, OD pants and Shirt, combat suits, heavy field coat, Paratrooper boots and fur-lined British flying boots that we had acquired somewhere along the way.

The patrol moved out back along the way we had come the previous day. We hadn't gone too far before a GI stepped out in the road and stopped us. *"Where in the hell 'do you think you are going?"* he asked Worrell who explained about our mission and then, *"you'd better go like hell because they are rolling hand grenades down on the road just a little way farther on."* "Okay", said Clark, *"we will be careful."* We managed to get by this situation without any serious mishap and proceeded on without too much trouble for a couple of miles.

There was a hairpin turn in the road as we came around the curve. We saw two US armored half-tracks up ahead a little ways. There was a group of men standing around eating. Suddenly Clark waved and yelled *"Back up."* The men ahead, most of who were dressed in American uniforms were running to the half-tracks and the 50 caliber machine gun mounts. We didn't know it at the time, but we had collided with the tail end of Lt. Gen. Krugers Panzer Corps which was moving on Hotton and a battle with the rear area troops there. The *"Americans"* we saw in front of us were the troops of Otto Skorzeny, who had been brilliantly trained and disguised as Americans. We were attempting to turn around as they opened fire on us. Our vehicle hit a tree. Realizing the situation we must have all hit the ground together and ran into the woods on our right. Ted Gardon had managed to get his peep turned around and disappeared around the curve. The rounds from the 50 caliber were hitting the trees around us. Then we ran out of woods. There was only a strip of trees along the road and we found ourselves staring at a large field about 500 yards across. As we ran, Sam and I were peeling off our heavy coats and trying to get rid of the flying boots under which, of all things, were paratroop boots. The two things the Germans hated the most were tank people and paratroopers. The Germans stopped at the edge of the woods and opened fire with their machine guns and rifles. They weren't expert marksmen because none of us were hit as we ran zigzag across the field.

Worrell and the two others had reached the other side of the field and disappeared before Sam and I managed to get there. When we finally made it there was a small cliff with about a 30-foot drop down to a valley that a dirt road ran through. The small cliff was overhanging so over we went and almost landed on top of Clark Worrell, Gast and DeOrio. We were out of wind so flattened ourselves against the underside where the cliff overhung and waited. A patrol of Germans came on across the field and stood on

the edge of the cliff evidently discussing where we had gone (None of us understood German very well). When we heard their footsteps going away, we figured that they decided that we had made it across the next clearing to the forest about 75 yards away.

We waited several minutes then Worrell and I made a dash for the woods. From there we could see over the cliff. Seeing no one we signaled Sam and the others to come on over. We went about a hundred yards into the forest, which was very thick at this point, and collapsed and none too soon. A large patrol of Germans on foot and motorcycles returned and began patrolling the area and the road. For some reason they did not come into the forest. Sam and I were the only ones who smoked and we lit up. Worrell reminded us that we seem to be sending smoke signals although there would have been no way to see the smoke from the road in the dense forest.

We waited in the spot most of the day until we figured the Germans had given up the search for us. We knew that Ted Gardon must have gotten back to the Task Force with the news of what happened so we decided to try to get back through. We followed the ridgeline through the forest in patrol style and eventually, through a break in the foliage, we spotted a church steeple. This would probably be in the village of Beffe that we had passed that morning. It was getting dusk so we cautiously made our way toward the edge of the forest. Suddenly we heard the sound of a shovel digging in the frozen ground. We were hoping that this would be some of our people digging in. Then, from not more than fifty yards away, came the sound of a voice: "*Hans?*" "*Ya.*" "*Vas haben sie?*" (What do you have?) "*Ein panzerfaust.*" (A bazooka). We had run into another blind alley and it was obvious we couldn't stay there.

Sam crawled over to Worrell and me and asked our opinion on what we should do. We decided that he would take the other two and try to make his way back to the area we had left that afternoon. We would delay and come along later and meet them so our movement would not be noticeable. They made quite a lot of noise as they crawled away, or at least we thought they did under the circumstances. Worrell and I wasted about 20 minutes, then crawled back a ways before we dared to stand erect. It was dark and really getting colder. We made our way back to approximately where we had been that afternoon, or at least we thought we had. We whispered as loud as we dared, "*Hogan.*" There was no answer. We searched for about an hour with no result and assumed the others had probably been captured by a patrol. We didn't know it at the time, but Hogan also figured we had been captured. He and the others somehow made it around Beffe and managed to get back to the task force which had been moved by Walker to the village of Marcouray. Worrell and I decided we try to go north and possibly get back to friendly troops. The only directional device we had was a German dial compass that Clark had. With him as navigator, we started north.

I looked at my watch. It was 1 A.M. We had been wandering around for several hours and changed direction each time we thought we were running into trouble. Your sixth sense seems to work at a time like that. We left the woods and made our way across a field. We continually thought we saw the shape of vehicles but we guessed that our eyes were playing tricks on us. We once again came to the edge of the Ardennes forest, made our way into the trees and decided we would try to sleep for a bit. This was almost impossible because now the sleet and snow had started to come down hard but we got up against the trunk of a tree and fell into a fitful slumber brought on by shear

exhaustion. Soon the sound of motors awaked us. As we raised up we pulled away from the ground because our jackets were frozen to it. We crept to the edge of the trees and looked out across the field we had crossed in the inky blackness a few hours before. It was just past dawn. We evidently had walked right through the middle of the German assembly area. They were moving out and we assumed they again must have been heading for Hotton.

Worrell and I went the other way, now heading west. We came to the edge of the forest and again were looking across at a valley. At the foot of the valley, approximately 1/2 mile away, we saw a village. Just on our side of the village was a river which we knew must be the Ourthe that ran down through Laroche. We didn't see any sign of movement but there was smoke coming from a chimney of a house just on the other side of the road. We saw a footbridge over the river down to our right and decided to move out using all the cover possible. We made it across the river, up to the house, and not seeing any vehicles, knocked on the door. The door opened and there was a Belgian family in the house. We explained In French, as best we could, that we were not Germans but Americans trying to get back to our lines. One of them spoke reasonably good English and told us that they knew the Americans were in the town of Marche and one of the men told us he would go with us and show the way.

He had his bicycle and as we left the house we heard the sound of vehicles up the road. Thinking we had not been spotted we went behind the house and waited. They had spotted us however, and pulled off the road a couple of houses away. There was a fence about seven feet high on our left and we started for it. The Germans opened fire just as I reached the strand of barbed wire on top. Clark was already over. I remember seeing in a flash, our Belgian friend on the ground near the fence. We never knew whether he was hit or not. A bullet went through the leg of my combat suit and I hit the ground on the other side running. We ran behind a house next door, cut up the hill and managed to reach a cemetery at the top of the hill. Here we hid behind the tombstones. Once again we were the hunted. They searched for about an hour but gave up the hunt as it was beginning to get dark.

Neither of us mentioned our thoughts to each other. We had been in all that hell of combat throughout Normandy; both had been wounded and returned. Now we were wondering whether or not we would end up as prisoners. We both decided that we would rather take our chances on getting even it meant getting shot. Our thoughts went back to the house where we were earlier, wondering what had happened to the family that helped us. We didn't hear any shots and hoped the Germans didn't know we had been in the house. We wondered what happened to the man who was with us. We finally left the cemetery. We saw a light under a door and approached the house. We were hoping to find another friendly family who could give us some food. We both had our forty-fives and Worrell got back against the wall as I knocked on the door. A blonde fellow in a blue coat opened the door. He looked into the muzzle of my forty-five and said, "*Sacre Bleu!*"

He thought we were Germans in American uniforms. If he had not uttered French I would have thought he was a German. With his scant English and our little French we managed to set him straight after which he went out with us and pointed out the road to Marche. All the time he was telling us in halting English that there was no way we would

get through. By this time it had stopped snowing and there was a bright moon. It reminded me of Halloween because every tree looked as though something was sitting in it.

We passed a house located back from the road. Vehicles were all around us. We knew we were passing a German command post so we left the road and skirted the house so we would not be challenged. As we arrived at a bridge we knew we once again reached the Ourthe River. There was a vehicle in the middle of the bridge. We approached it cautiously--it was an American jeep. There was a dead man behind the wheel. We didn't know what to do but crept across the bridge, came to a field and saw more vehicles. We waited and listened hoping to hear an American vehicle but heard nothing. It was now after midnight.

We went back across the bridge, found a barn, climbed into the loft and buried ourselves in the hay. We were awakened to the sound of all hell breaking loose. Artillery was landing all around and we knew the barn would go any minute. This had to be our artillery and it was coming from the direction where we were the night before listening for a friendly voice. We didn't know it then, but we had been on the side of the river as an American troop concentration and then went back across the bridge away from it.

We took off for the woods. Germans were running in the other direction. Clark said, *"Well I'll be damned. We slept with them last night."* Our feet were numb and we finally found a wood cache that was left by the Belgians where they had gathered wood and I knew it was arranged so it was hollow inside. In we went, removed our boots and started massaging our feet. Boy, were we hungry, cold and just a little frustrated. It dawned on us it was Christmas Eve and we wondered what had happened to the Task Force. There was no way for us to know, but Hogan and the others (approximately 400 men plus vehicles) were in the village of Marcouray where they had set up a defense for the town, surrounded by the Germans. Attempts had been made to supply them by air but most of the chutes failed to drop in the area.

We were beginning to wonder how long this game of hide and seek we were playing would be successful. So many times we had barely escaped. Probably the fact that Skorzeny's men who had dressed in American uniforms were in the area allowed us to get by several times with the Germans thinking we were possibly some of them. We will never know. Clark and I had another conference and decided that once again we had better get underway. We could see, from the edge of the forest, a road about 1000 yards away on which vehicles moving up and down. We thought that some of the tanks were ours, but knowing how much of our equipment had been captured by the Germans we didn't want to risk making our way towards that road.

Later that afternoon, as we made our way through the forest, we heard the sound of vehicles moving on a road ahead of us. We moved very carefully until we were only a few feet from the road which was in a depression just below us. We stopped and remained out of sight. A large column of German tanks and half-tracks were moving down the road just below us. We could have thrown a rock and hit them. The Germans were laughing and enjoying themselves as they moved down the road, never dreaming two pairs of eyes were watching their every move. Finally the column went around a

curve and we decided to make a dash across the road in a northerly direction, hoping we could cross the road without being seen. We made it into the other side into the dense forest and continued to move toward the north.

Dusk arrived. By now it was clear but bitter cold. It had stopped snowing and the snow crunched under our feet. My thoughts were of home and wondering if they had heard anything on the news of our situation. Let's hope not because we knew what was happening to us and they had the worry of wondering. Frances would be trying to get Brownie to bed so Santa would come. He was now six years old. Clark was thinking of the bride he had married only a month before going overseas. We hadn't had any food for three and a half days and all we could think of was what a lousy war it was.

We struggled up a steep hill but still there was nothing around us but forest and the sounds of war in the distance. Suddenly, Clark sat down and said, *"Oh, what's the use! We aren't going to get out of here."* All I could think to say was, *"Clark don't you want to see Raedeen again?"* That got him up and we moved on still traveling north. After about an hour we came to the edge of the forest. The moon was bright as day and reflected up from the snow. We looked across a vast open area, not even a house in sight. I turned to Clark and say, *"Clark, I'm tired of all this whispering. Let's take off across that open area and at the next house we find we are going in and get something to eat, Germans or no Germans."*

We knew our voices were carrying across the open area but we no longer cared. Worrell said, *"Let's go, Brownie."* We moved out. We had gone about 1,000 yards when a voice cracked out *"HALT!"* We halted. Again the voice, *"HALT."* We answered, *"O.K. We're halted."* We weren't sure who had challenged us because the German and English words were very similar. Then those terrible words; *"What's the pass word?"* We answered, *"We don't know the pass word. We are officers from the 3rd Armored Division and we have been cut off from them for four days. Take us to your company commander."* With those words a very big man rose up out of a ditch ahead of us and said, *"That's exactly what we are going to do; put your hands on top of your head."*

A little Sergeant came up and said, *"If you really are Americans you will be OK, but we don't know you. When you came out of the forest we were tracking you with a 50 caliber machine gun. German patrols have been coming out of the forest all night and we have orders to shoot the next thing that moved over there. We were ready to let you have it when we heard your voices. One voice was talking with a southern accent and we figured that no German could use that inflection, so we decided to let you come in. We could have killed you at any time."* They got us back to their company CP and fed us. That had to be some of the best food we had ever tasted in spite of the fact that it was canned. From there we were moved back to their Battalion HQ and finally our identity was established.

The remainder of the Task Force destroyed their vehicles and came out the next day. Only one man was lost on the way out. We sure were glad to see them and they us because each thought the other was lost. We had been the hunters; the past several days showed us what it was like to be the Hunted. Now, once again we would go about the business of ending the war as soon as possible.

Source: *The Spearhead Doughboy*, December 2000

<http://www.battleofthebulgememories.be/stories26/us-army25/692-the-hunter-become-the-hunted-task-force-hogan.html>

Henri ROGISTER, webmaster