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The Battle of the Bulge Remembered

Created on Tuesday, 01 April 2014 23:01 | Last Updated on Saturday, 18 April 2015 08:39 | Written by Dick GOODIE |

-- View from My Snowfields --



At dawn on 16 December 1944, after a pulverizing artillery barrage that lasted an hour, the vanguard of three SS Panzer armies struck in the Ardennes Forest of Belgium on a 60-mile front. Thus began the Battle of the Bulge, the largest land battle fought by Americans on the western front during World War II.

I was 21-years-old that winter, a squad leader in the 486th AAA Battalion of the 3rd Armored Division. Our unit was one of many sent in to help plug the hole blasted in the American lines by the Nazis.

Until that morning nobody dreamed Hitler's tanks would storm through the Schnee Eifel (Snow Mountains), the same attack gate used in 1940 when his blitzkrieg sacked Belgium, France and the Netherlands, sending the British Expeditionary Force reeling back to the sands of Dunkirk.

Hitler caught the Allies by complete surprise.

In November and early December, under continuous days of heavy fog, he had managed to muster 250,000 men and 1,500 tanks. Many of these tanks were the dreaded 68-ton King Tigers with 88-mm guns and six inches of frontal armor, or 45-ton Panthers, both tanks superior to our 34-ton Sherman mounting 75-mm guns with a scant two inches of frontal armor.

Hitler chose veteran Field Marshall Gerd von Rundstedt to head the attack. The battle plan called for the Nazis to punch through the Schnee Eifel and in three days reach the Meuse River, a penetration of 50-miles. Once there, they would wheel north and

capture the deep water port of Antwerp, thus cutting supply lines of the American 1st and 9th Armies, as well as the British 2nd and Canadian 1st.

Secretly, von Rundstedt thought Hitler's plan too ambitious. *"If we reach the Meuse,"* he said, *"we should get down on our knees and thank God."*

Von Rundstedt played a minor role in the assault of his 5th, 6th and 7th Panzer Armies, delegating himself as a conduit to pass messages down where the fighting was - to his divisional commanders. One such commander was Colonel Joachim Peiper, a fearless, aggressive 29-year-old SS veteran with vast experience and success on the Russian front, who led the strongest Nazi army - the 6th - with the 1st SS Panzer Division, which numbered 20,000 men and 200 tanks and assault weapons, including 60 of the dreaded King Tigers.

At noon on 17 December 1944, Peiper reached Malmedy, where his troops gathered over 150 American prisoners in a snowfield. After taking their watches, rings and cigarettes, they murdered 86 of them.

The preceding day the Nazis cut through the untried 106th Infantry Division and bagged 7,000 prisoners.

They were right on Schedule.

That same day General Omar Bradley began the Herculean task of immediately deploying his veteran units to the battle site. One of these was our 3rd Armored Division, at the time in Stolberg, Germany, many kilometers north of the hemorrhaging.

Tank commanders and squad leaders were assembled and briefed: *"If one of your men is wounded, give him a shot of morphine, a blanket, tag him, and leave him along the road. If your vehicle is disabled, the vehicle behind will push it off the road. We will be at the battle site at first light."*

We left on the afternoon of 18 December.

-- ICY ROADS --

After midnight, in a freezing rain, our column reached the hilly Ardennes. We had to traverse down an earthen road cut into the hillside, which was as slippery as wet glass. On one treacherous turn, through the faint, yellowish mist of night, I saw a tank and two trucks slide off the road and crash down through the trees.

The vehicles towed artillery pieces or caissons that flopped crazily against the trees as they fell. I could see some men jump free.

Several times our half-track slid toward the edge, and had it not been for a few pebbles in the center of the road that caught our rubber track and held, we too would have gone down through the trees. And that's how we got through the hills that night: by finding needed traction on pebbles.

At first light we coiled in a field near Eupen, Belgium, to await battle orders and also to wait for the rest of our task force to come down out of the icy hills.

Our first assignment was to reach a hamlet where a company of 1st Infantry Division (The Big Red One) and a battery of 105-mm howitzers on mobile mounts were deployed. I was ordered to get there at once: They needed our guns for protection against strafing aircraft, skirmishing infantry, or other targets.

My equipment was a White M-15 half-track that mounted an automatic 37-mm cannon flanked by twin .50-caliber machine guns on a rotating turret. We had a crew of seven and great firepower. We were popular with the infantry and sometimes sprayed defensive positions before they skirmished.

To get to the hamlet, we had to follow a road beneath a long hill that the Germans controlled and from which they fired mortars at us all the way into the hamlet. Shells splashed off the frozen ground and shrapnel often clanged against the sides of the half-track. There was a foot of snow on the ground.

Halfway in a jeep came toward us and stopped. A major told me where to set up and said he was going for tanks. Just then a mortar exploded between our vehicles and the major's head slumped on his chest. Shrapnel had pierced his helmet. He had no chance.

We continued along the road. It was late afternoon of a freezing, gray day and it began snowing. At the church I looked in and saw the townspeople huddled in pews under heavy, dark clothing. Their dead were lined along the center aisle.

Beyond the church, the road circled down into a large, open snowfield where we came upon the infantry and howitzers. The howitzers were lobbing 105s up onto the wooded ridge at short range. The infantry was deployed in scattered formations across the snowfield.

-- CONSTANT MORTAR FIRE --

The mortar fire was constant coming down from the tree-lined hills. Every few minutes a dogface slumped over and there would be blood on the snow. Someone would shout "*medics.*" That call was heard every few minutes.

Darkness descended on the frozen battlefield. I spotted a three-sided machine shed across the field, toward the church, that looked like possible shelter for my crew and

began wading through the snow, drifted waist-high in some places. When I got 10-yards from the shed, a mortar shell blew it up and I had to dive under the snow to avoid flying debris. I went back to the gun.

We slept on the snow that night and for over 30-nights during the Bulge, the temperature often dipping well below zero.

To keep from freezing to death, we slept right on the snow, using it for insulation. We fashioned our bedrolls with pieces of waterproof tarpaulins and baby-crib mattresses. We had confiscated the mattresses from bombed-out homes in Stolberg. My crew considered them a prized item. They were about an inch thick, efficient and formed a small bedroll handy since we had to carry seven on the half-track.

On each mattress we placed our thin, hooded mummy-bag and a folded GI blanket, and brought the other half of the tarpaulin over everything.

We wore our uniforms and combat jackets in the bedroll, pulled our wool-knit caps over our ears, lay flat on our backs with a boot tucked under each arm, and made it through the night. Some of us slept with a pistol on our chest.

Each man had to get up at least once during the night to pull his two-hour watch. Sometimes it would snow and there would be small breathing holes in the snow where the men slept. In the morning we would throw gasoline on tar-soaked shell cases and start a fire to thaw water in our canteens for coffee.

During the day we wore overshoes several sizes too large and stuffed hay into them for insulation. Frozen feet were epidemic, causing thousands of evacuations and subsequent amputations. But the seven of us made it through okay, in large measure, due to our "insulated" overshoes and our bedrolls fashioned with baby-crib mattresses.

-- CHRISTMAS COGNAC, CIGARS --

On Christmas Eve, for the first time in a week, we had a chance to sleep indoors, in the cellar of a deserted house. We spread our bedrolls on the concrete floor not much better than frozen ground, but we were in a house, a real luxury. We brought in a bottle of confiscated Hennessy 5-star cognac (which we kept cradled in straw in an ammo well) and a few cigars. Someone found a scrawny shrub on the front lawn of a deserted home. Now we even had a Christmas tree.

But our hope to celebrate the Holy Night was short-lived. At eleven the captain came to the cellar and told us that Peiper was expected to break through south of the hamlet; we were to go there on outpost, and radio Battalion Command if he appeared.

Merry Christmas!

We followed the captain's jeep through the deserted hamlet and came to a farm, where we set up behind a stone barn. Our field of fire, over a barbed wire fence, was a long, narrow, undulating snowfield that shone a metallic, yellowish-blue under a full moon. We waited for Peiper, staring down the snowfield, listening all night for the clanking of his Tigers. But Peiper was late. No one slept. One of our crew griped all night. In the freezing weather, he stood near the gun, stomping his feet and thrashing his arms as well as his lips to keep from turning blue.

He asked: *"How the hell can we stop Peiper's Tigers anyway with a 37 millimeter peashooter?"* He had a point there, all right, but I knew it would be useless to mention that our mission was to radio for help if Peiper showed up.

I didn't blame him much. In over 10-months of combat, he had proved to be an excellent soldier: He was fearless and could have qualified for the Dirty Dozen. He just got emotional about Christmas and upset at the captain for pulling us out of that cellar. Peiper didn't show up and Christmas Day dawned clear and cold with bitter winds that swept up the snowfield.

-- SMELLING LIKE TOMCATS --

We stayed behind the stone farm Christmas Day, close to the guns. Our gun loader said he smelled like a tomcat and would love to take a bath. We all must have smelled badly, but no one took a bath during the Bulge, not even a whore's bath in a helmet. Except for an occasional change of socks, we never removed our clothes in six weeks.

For Christmas dinner we cooked 10-in-1 rations over our one-lung gas stove. These meals, intended to give 10-men nourishment for one day, consisted of large cans of processed meats, mixed with eggs and other ingredients, which we cut into steak-sized slices and fried.

We finally moved back through the hamlet. MPs were directing traffic. We didn't trust MPs, since many English-speaking Germans, driving American vehicles and wearing our uniforms, had infiltrated our lines and were switching road signs, directing traffic in wrong directions and causing chaos. Those who were captured were shot as spies. General Bradley hadn't forgotten the Malmedy Massacre of 86 GIs.

Moving past snowfields, we came upon recent battle sites. There were many frozen bodies in the ditches and fields, partially buried in drifting snow. A Graves Registration Unit was stacking bodies in deuce-and-a-half-ton trucks as they would stack logs. Many had died before the medics could thaw plasma under the hoods of jeeps.

A day after Christmas, Peiper had run out of petrol, had lost all of his tanks and was retreating back to Germany with 800 survivors.

To the south, Bastogne was finally cleared after Gen. Anthony McAuliffe replied "*Nuts*" to a surrender demand, and the fighting intensified.

Up north, Baron Manteuffel's 5th Panzer Army, after penetrating nearly 50 miles through the Allied lines, was stopped at Celles, Belgium, four miles short of the Meuse River.

The Battle of the Bulge was now checked in all areas. It began on 16 December and fizzled out on 16 January, when the U.S. 1st and 3rd Armies met at Houffalize, Belgium, cutting the Germans off at the waist.

-- HEAVY GERMAN LOSSES --

Now began the task of pushing the Germans back to the original starting point. It was completed on 7 February 1945, 54 days after the initial Nazi breakthrough.

The Germans lost 220,000 men, half of them taken prisoner; they lost all of their tanks and assault weapons. They also lost 1,600 planes. American casualties were 81,000 (19,000 killed). The British and Canadians casualties were 1,400 (200 killed).

The great battle was finally over. Soon the spring campaign into the heartland of Germany would begin.

Source: Dick Goodie, December 2011

Written in 1996 and published on 12/15/96 by The Maine Sunday Telegram

<http://www.battleofthebulgememories.be/stories26/us-army25/832-the-battle-of-the-bulge-remembered.html>

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