

Floyd Ragsdale
424th Regiment
106th Infantry Division

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Parade to honor those who served
World War II vet proud to wear his uniform Sunday.

GALESBURG - This year's Galesburg Veterans Day parade will step off on Sumner Street at 2 p.m. Sunday. Organizers remain confident plenty of participants will show up, but by Thursday, only about 20 units were committed to the parade. Larry Anderson has done the bulk of planning for the fourth annual parade. Asked how things are shaping up, he said, "kind of slow, but I think they'll be there." The American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars and AMVETS will be, along with the Galesburg police and fire departments, the Boy Scouts and a peace coalition group. After a small number of participants and spectators last year, blamed on bad weather, the question is whether interest is waning, just three years after 9/11.

Floyd Ragsdale of East Galesburg is an example of why the public's short interest span, if that is the case, would be sad. Ragsdale, who is 79, was drafted by the Army in 1943, two weeks after his 18th birthday. He dropped out of high school to fight for his country. "Like every other kid, I was determined to do my part," he said. "I remember sitting in a fox hole (months later) and thinking 'If I had stayed in high school, I wouldn't have been in this predicament.'"

A member of the 106th Infantry Division, Ragsdale fought in one of the final great battles of the war in Europe, the Battle of the Bulge. He was sent overseas in October 1944. After training in England, his division crossed the English Channel in November. Ragsdale was picked as one of the soldiers invited to attend a Thanksgiving dinner the royal family was having in Buckingham Palace. "I was looking forward to that, but the Army had different ideas," Ragsdale said.

The GIs landed on Omaha Beach in Normandy, France. A truck convoy took them to the German/Belgium border. Ragsdale said when the doors of the landing crafts opened on the beach, "we were thinking of those guys who landed there in June," D-Day.

He narrowly missed being in D-Day himself. He was still in the United States, on a shipping list of 1,400 men, classified as an extra. From that list, "there were seven of us and they took every one of them but me," he said. The Army couldn't ship 18-year-olds overseas until they had a year in the military. However, "They would have taken me if they had wanted me because they had ways of getting around the rules," he said.

This year's Veterans Day is particularly significant. Dec. 16 is the 60th anniversary of the beginning of the Battle of the Bulge. Ragsdale remembers. The battle continued until Jan. 28, 1945. "They (the Germans) started with an artillery barrage that lasted for seven hours," he said. "I read later it was the greatest concentration of artillery fire in the entire war."

After that, the foot soldiers would arrive.

"This was our first engagement," Ragsdale said. "We had no battle experience, so we didn't realize the magnitude of this affair. We were outnumbered 10 to 1 in a lot of cases." There were three regiments to a division. Ragsdale's 424th Regiment and the 423rd Regiment were pushed back by the Germans. "Out of 15,000 men, we lost about 9,000 or 10,000 in two days time," he said. Many were prisoners of war, others were killed or wounded.

He said the tide turned when the 82nd Airborne Division and an armored division were brought in. The Allies were pushed back 60 miles. "Then we had to take it back a village at a time," he said. "When you're in the infantry, you do the Army's dirty work." The infantry suffered 70 percent of all the casualties.

Not only did the soldiers face enemy fire, temperatures dropped as low as 20 degrees below zero. "Your second enemy was the weather," Ragsdale said.

Ragsdale said Hitler planned the battle around the theory that bad weather would keep planes grounded for four weeks. Mother Nature took the Allies' side and in two weeks, B-17 bombers and U.S. fighter planes filled the skies. "You could see B-17 bombers from one end of the horizon to the other," he said. Fighter planes strafed German tanks and soldiers. By March and April, the Germans were surrendering, desperately looking for the Americans and British armies, not wanting to surrender to the Soviets.

Ragsdale returned home, a civilian again, in April 1946.

Asked what it means to him, Ragsdale sighed, then said, "Well, I guess it means a lot to me. I don't have the words to express what it means." He remembers things Hitler did before the United States entered the war, and Neville Chamberlain giving in and proclaiming "peace in our time." "If somebody had just stood up to him, all of this wouldn't have happened. I'm proud to have had a part in bringing it to an end," he said.

One last thing brings a smile to Ragsdale's lips. Before the 2001 Veterans Day parade, he tried on his World War II uniform and discovered it still fit. "It was about an hour before parade time," he said. He put on the uniform, buttoned it and marched in the parade. He has worn it in every Veterans Day parade since, and will once again Sunday. (By JOHN R. PULLIAM, The Register-Mail, Galesburg, Illinois)

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A Gargantuan Battle

Much as been written about the Battle of the Bulge but this is an individual story that gives a personal touch to the campaign. Those tales relate what the individual GI had to withstand. Not only fighting against extreme odds in numbers but the bitter cold weather as well.

A simple decision concerning matters at hand could save one's life, or take it away. One night, after resting for several hours in a bunker, it was my turn and that of a fellow soldier to stand watch for several hours out in the foxholes. As we approached

our battle stations, he asked, "*which foxhole do you want?*" "*It doesn't matter,*" I said. Then I thought it best to take the one near our mortar position in case a flare needed to be fired. That decision saved my life but took his. In another hour he would be killed instantly by a direct hit from a German 88 artillery burst.

Bellow is a story with a better ending. It happened several days after the 16th of December, or about six weeks before that battle would be brought to a conclusion.

Someone sad, "*Old soldiers never die; they just fade away.*" Yet, we should not let our stories fade away with us. Needless to say, there is a multitude of stories yet to be told.

Five Uneasy Men

Over the years many incidents of army life from basic training to combat in the Battle of the Bulge have faded from reminiscence. Yet some situations seem to be engraved in my memories and are easily recalled; as if they took place just a short time ago.

The story concerns five men, of whom I was one, from "G" Company, 424th Regiment of the 106th Division. It occurred several days after the colossal German offensive began. The stage is in the Schnee Eifel Region of the Ardennes Forrest. Our company had a sweeping, unobstructed, view of the terrain in front of us and well concealed foxholes. The gunfire laid down on the advancing German infantry was lethal the first two days of that engagement.

Late at night, on the 17th of December I observed, from my foxhole, a German armored outfit advancing directly toward our company. When they were about a hundred yards from us they abruptly turned parallel to our lines and faded into the distance. Little did we realize, at the time, that the Germans had punched a hole between our Regiment and the 423rd Regiment to our left. Battle news, beyond our Company, was sparse and there was an abundance of rumors.

Before the night of the 18th had passed five of us from "G" Company, separated from our outfit, were in a precarious predicament that was to last until the next morning.

That evening, as twilight covered the battle sector, combat activity diminished to occasional gunfire. Well into the night two of us located at our mortar fortification received a company messenger who relayed orders that everyone should pull back from their posts in a systematic way. Heavy weapons and related ammunition are to be left behind. The word was, travel light. Our squad was the last one in our area to leave. The Germans, some how, knew the moment of our withdrawal as they commenced firing volleys of rockets (screaming meemies) at intervals all through our exit maneuver. They made frightful sounds when launched; the louder the noise the closer they came. As our squad descended the hill, the Germans fired them in our direction. As the first one exploded, everyone hit the dirt. I believe that a volley contained six rockets. We fell, with faces buried in the turf, as each one fell closer and closer from left to right, exploding with a deafening discord. A slight feeling of relief came when they began exploding to our right; then the chances of remaining alive a

while longer increased dramatically. Several more barrages detonated around us before we reached Company Headquarters. It was an intensely scary incident.

Arriving at Company Headquarters officers ushered everyone into bunkers and instructed us to remain inside for further orders. The interior was dark as pitch. Our squad leader fell into a deep sleep. Everyone was fatigued from ceaseless battle conditions since the morning of the 16th.

Some time later, maybe several hours, the bunker door opened. A calm low voice advised, "*we will move out soon, proceed single file; each one take hold of the man's coat belt in front of you. Move quietly, no conversation; the woods are full of Germans.*" Of course it was quiet--too quiet. A GI behind me said, "*Do you have a hold of the man in front of you?*" I replied, "Yes." Wondering then, my hands sought the arm of the man ahead of me; then groped for his hand that was firmly attached to a wooden post. With disgust I said, "*You have hold of a post.*" That statement provoked instant response from our gunner who yelled, "*You a dumb s.o.b.*" What fighting words! One shoved the other outside the bunker and both faced off like two bandy roosters. The commotion awoke our squad leader who, surrounded in complete darkness, didn't remember where he was or what day it was. He came out of the bunker like a wild man yelling "*Where is the company--where am I?*" Two of us subdued him by wrestling him to the ground and slapping his face to end his nightmare. The squabble no doubt lasted just a few moments, but at the time it seemed like an eternity. Somehow the other two came to their senses and stopped quarrelling. Then we realized that we were alone. The Company was nowhere in sight.

Five of us, now separated from the company faced a serious situation. Our immediate concern was being taken prisoner or shot; a compelling incentive to get out of there. Without a map, our intuition and clues had to be trusted. We looked for foot traffic in the various paths that led out of the vicinity. We pursued the path with the most footprints after awhile, forks in the trail appeared and, dead reckoning had to be applied from that moment on. A footpath led us near a log home in the forest. In a way it was a welcome site with smoke curling from the chimney top. How easy it was to imagine the warmth and comfort inside. Yet, a premonition forewarned us about that place. Quietly, we circumvented the cabin hoping to be unobserved by the inhabitants.

Through the night, five motivated GI's traversed hills and valleys, pausing now and then to whisper opinions and offer suggestions. All froze at the slightest movement, or sound, in a forest that was no longer friendly territory.

As dark gave way to daybreak, another cabin came into view; in like manner we bypassed it. Further ahead loomed another hill to climb. As the ascent started voices became audible. Are they American or German, we wondered? Cautiously we moved forward, to listen. As the crest of the hill was reached not a soul was in sight, however the sounds increased in loudness. Reaching the summit of the next hill we observed army personnel. But, are they friendly or enemy? Gingerly, we moved ahead seeking to ascertain their identity. Finally men wearing familiar olive drab clothing could be seen. What a relief to see American soldiers! Lo and behold what a revelation; it was

our own regiment. Exhausted, yet jubilant in overcoming extreme odds we soon learned that our situation remained acutely grim. There were many rumors and sounds of combat surrounded us.

For some reason our company was not engaged in any action that day. To say the least, for the next few hours some shut eye and rest felt like a luxury. We had no thought, at the time, our division was involved in the largest campaign in the history of the American Army and that it would last almost another six weeks. There were two enemies to fight. The German Army and bitter cold days and nights still ahead of us.

Source: Bulge Bugle, February 2003

<http://www.battleofthebulgememories.be/stories26/us-army25/759-a-gargantuan-battle.html>

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