Anthony Verano
424th Regiment
106th Infantry Division

January 26, 2006 - Battle of Bulge recalled: 'They just kept coming at us'

Anthony Verano doesn't remember exactly where he was — cities and towns tend to blur together in his mind — but he knows he was there. And he knows exactly what happened.

In December 1944, Verano was serving with the U.S. Army's 106th Infantry Division along Germany's border with Belgium. The young staff sergeant found himself in a cold, foreign land fighting for his country. Soon, he would be fighting desperately for his very life.

On Dec. 16, the German army launched a massive offensive that would turn into one of World War II's biggest, bloodiest struggles, the Battle of the Bulge, which ended on today's date 61 years ago. And Anthony Verano, now 83, was right in the middle of it.

"It was an experience I'll never forget as long as I live," the former Palmyra resident said as he sat in his room at the Lebanon VA Medical Center.

Verano's 424th Infantry Regiment was on the front line when the Battle of the Bulge broke out. He remembers being on a scouting mission and seeing more than a dozen German medic trucks filled to the brim with ammunition — an ominous sign.

"We saw that and knew something big was going on," he explained. "The captain told me to get my men and get them out of there fast. I was worried sick. I knew something was happening, and we needed to move out."

Over the next five weeks, nearly 1 million soldiers on both sides would fight in Germany's last-ditch effort to turn the tide of the war, with more than 180,000 total casualties.

As Verano and his men retreated from the front, trying to get away from impending danger, they were met with an unpleasant surprise.

"We came out of the woods to this big hill and started going up it, but the Germans had tanks up there," he remembered. "They had about 90 of them coming over the hill. Everything just started to break out."

Verano and his men immediately turned around to seek refuge back in the woods, but they were greeted again by the enemy.

"We get into the woods, and it was just packed with Germans," he said. "They were everywhere. Everyone was just running. We didn't know what was happening. Eventually they surrounded us, and we had to give up. The whole company was given up."

Verano's men weren't alone. More than 23,000 Americans were captured during the more-than-month long battle. Nineteen thousand faired worse, killed in action during one

of the most violent fights of the war. In Verano's 106th Division, 564 men were killed, most in the first three days of the battle.

As for Verano and his men, they set out on a two-day trek into German territory as prisoners of war, eventually ending up at a prison camp called B-12. The camp was eventually bombed by advancing American forces, killing 150 U.S. soldiers in the camp. Verano and his men were moved to a second camp further into German-held land, where they were held until April 1945.

"They were really just bombing the hell out of us," he said, shaking his head. "They didn't know they were hitting us, Americans. They were just trying to push back the Germans, and we got in the way."

Eventually, the Allied forces did push back the German army, which had suffered nearly 100,000 casualties during the Battle of the Bulge. Verano and his men took control of the prison camp as the German soldiers who had been their captors fled. The Americans held the camp for several days until they were rescued by Allied forces.

Verano said being a prisoner wasn't too harsh; the Germans knew they were close to being defeated and were running for their lives. But he will never forget that day, that cold December day, when the battle erupted.

"It was truly one of those things where things just kept getting worse," he said. "Everywhere we turned, they were there. They just kept coming at us. It just seemed to last forever."   DAVID MEKEEL, Lebanon Daily News - Lebanon,PA,USA