

Yank Valor In 'Bulge' Made Bitter Christmas Of 1944 An Epic Chapter In American History

Reporters of The Star-Times-Chicago Tribune Service who were on the scene continue their series of notable accounts of major American engagements which paved the way for Nazi defeat in Europe.

BY WILLIAM STRAND,
A Star-Times Exclusive From
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THE ALLIED winter offensive was exactly one month old when the German line burst into flame along a 70-mile front southeast of Aachen on December 16, 1944. The thunder of German artillery that cold December day and the roar of advancing enemy tank columns heralded the start of the Battle of the Ardennes.

The events of those four fateful weeks constitute one of the proudest chapters in the history of American arms. The story of how the Yanks fought and died in the German Bulge has taken a prominent place in the lore of American valor.

In Bastogne's public square today is a sign placed there as a permanent reminder of the battle for that city, which marks the turning point in Hitler's last gamble for victory. It says:

"This is Bastogne, Bastion of the Battered Bastards of the 101st American Airborne Division."

It was the 101st which sent back the reply, "Nuts!" to an enemy demand for surrender of the beleaguered garrison.

FIELD MARSHAL VON RUNDSTEDT gambled on the weather as an ally for his surprise blow. For days before he launched the Battle of the Bulge, extreme cold and lack of visibility through fog and snow had kept both combat and observation planes grounded. Thus the Nazis were able to assemble their striking force secretly.

Von Rundstedt's lungs carried his armored spearheads 60 miles into Belgium and only five miles from the French frontier. It was checked on the famed Monschau shoulder and on the Stoumont-Malmody Line. It was split at Bastogne, delayed at St. Vith, and finally smashed at Celles in a tank battle of unbelievable fury in which the cream of German armor was destroyed by the mechanical monsters from America.

If the German commander had reached Liege he might have been in position to destroy the American First and Ninth Armies plus the British Second and Canadian First Armies. A thrust from Liege to Antwerp and the sea would have bottled up these forces and their vast stores of weapons and other supplies.

Paratroopers were dropped behind our lines and specially trained teams of saboteurs wearing American and British uniforms infiltrated our positions. Elements of more than 28 German divisions were identified in the Bulge, including 10 Panzer or Panzer Grenadier divisions and two crack paratroop divisions. These represented the bulk of the enemy's strategic reserves.

AS VON RUNDSTEDT prepared to strike, six Allied armies were grouped along the western

approaches to Germany. The front had been pushed to the Roer River after a month of hard, steady slugging in which the daily Allied gains were measured in yards. The weight of the Nazi blow was aimed at the lower section of Hodges' 8th corps and the entire length of the United States eighth corps.

The pre-dawn barrage was ferocious, with shells crashing down on the forward positions at the rate of more than 250 an hour in some sectors. When it lifted, doughboys crouching in their foxholes saw the vanguard of two armored spearheads rumbling forward suddenly out of the morning mist.

These were what the Germans call "reconnaissance in force." They were heavily armored combat teams, designed to hit a terrific punch on a narrow front and go as far as they could. Bursting through the thin American defenses, both met with unexpected success. The northern column carved a salient 10 miles wide and six miles deep in the first 24 hours. The one on the south had two prongs which executed a quick pincer movement, cutting off thousands of American troops the first day and completing a penetration of five miles on a five mile front.

North of Trier, meanwhile, local attacks by the 5th Panzer army had found another soft spot in the American lines in the direction of Bastogne.

Von Rundstedt put on the pressure through these three gaps and pouped his divisions into the bulge as fast as he could move them along the highways. The next day the First and 12th SS spearheads joined just east of St. Vith and formed a single wedge, 12 miles deep and 20 miles wide, in the heart of the western front.

IT WAS increasingly plain in those first terrible hours that some one had erred; that the Germans' ability to mount an offensive of such magnitude had been grossly underestimated.

There were other reasons why the enemy won an early success in the Ardennes. Allied officers, from the field to the high command, were optimistic-minded and had grown careless in such ordinary military safeguards as laying mine fields, prepping road blocks for emergencies and otherwise planning a complete defensive system.

A marked contrast became apparent as soon as the German offensive was launched. Fervent preparations for defense in depth were started immediately all along the front the first day and continued until commanders were certain the drive had been stopped.

The Allies had believed the Ardennes was not an advantageous spot from which to launch a winter offensive. The lightly held Eighth Corps line, officers insisted afterward, was a calculated risk that had to be taken. As a consequence, this sector became a rest area for battle worn divisions or for new untried outfits. The full strength of the German attack burst on men of the green 106th division, which had arrived in Germany only five days before.

THE story of the 106th disaster began at 5:30 a. m. with the opening of the tremendous barrage which moved with dread

certainly across the fields into the artillery emplacements. By 6:30 a. m. more than 100 rounds had hit squarely on one group of batteries. An eerie note of unreality was added to the scene when the Germans switched on dozens of searchlights, hoping the beams would bounce off the low clouds and light up the American positions while their troops advanced unseen through the shadows. However, the device failed to work.

Five minutes after the shelling of the front lines began, the Germans opened up against division headquarters. By early morning of December 17 two Nazi divisions were swarming through the 106th's area.

By mid-day they had swamped the 422nd and 423rd regiments. Their last brief radio message were received that afternoon. The Americans were ordered to stay and fight and this they did until captured or killed. It was their stubborn valor which made the first contribution to the disruption of the Nazi time schedule.

One German drive beating around the 106th on the north had been headed toward Manderfield. At the same time, another column was pouring down the road to Bleialf. The latter force swung north to link with the other column at Schonberg, making the entrapment complete on the Eifel slopes east of St. Vith.

That road junction was vital to the Germans, who fought bitterly to take it, but combat command B of the 9th armored division reached it after an all night race. Together with what was left of the 106th, the combat command put up fierce resistance.

Hodges, seeing instantly that St. Vith was vital, sent Brig. Gen. Robert W. Hasbrouck's Seventh Armored Division roaring across the path of the German armor to the aid of the sorely pressed garrison.

The Seventh Armored, though virtually surrounded, stood like a rock for five days of constant battering. It was another example of the courage that delayed the Nazi rush and, in the long run, saved the situation.

The First and 12th Nazi SS divisions, meanwhile, were driving on after bigger game. They by-passed St. Vith to the north in a headlong drive toward Liege. The 12th SS ran head-on into the veteran American First Division which was rushing south from a rest area.

With the American First, which had been in corps reserve, was the veterans Ninth Division, supported on the right by the Second and 99th Divisions. The 99th had not been in a major engagement before. But it passed its first big test.

At one time the enemy drove to within 300 yards of the Second Division command post, then was hurled back with a loss of 50 tanks. The Ninth never yielded an inch.

And true to its great traditions, the historic First stopped the German drive cold in bloody fighting December 21-22-23 thus enabling the American fifth Corps to secure the northern shoulder of the Bulge.

(The concluding chapter of the Ardennes campaign will appear tomorrow.)

FOURTH OF A SERIES

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