

Christmas Eve 1944: Haunted by screams, grateful to be alive

Many years later, when Bill Arrington finally talked about the Battle of the Bulge, he told two stories — one about the screaming Belgian woman in a rancid boxcar filled with light from the sky.

So haunted was he by the woman's screams that he would tell that story only after years of prodding by his son, Jeff, and then he would speak of it only in brief. He more willingly told the second story, writing it down when someone asked him to share a "Christmas memory." That was in 1971. He died in 1984.

We have Bill Arrington's memoir today because the 50th anniversary of the Battle of the Bulge is here, and a son offered it as testament to what happened to his father and other young American soldiers caught in the path of the massive German counteroffensive that would be Adolf Hitler's last gambit to turn the tide of World War II.

The Battle of the Bulge took place in the forested hills of the

Ardennes, where Belgium, Germany and Luxembourg meet. By December 1944, it was the weakest-held section of the Western Front, and Hitler's plan was to regroup his retreating armies, breach the American line with panzer divisions, sweep westward as they had in 1940, cross the Meuse River and reach the port of Antwerp. The battle was launched with earth-shaking surprise in the foggy darkness before dawn, Dec. 16. Twenty-five German divisions struck along 70 miles of Ardennes front held by six American divisions with lots of green troops.

Bill Arrington, a 20-year-old kid from Sykesville was among them.

He had left the United States Nov. 9. Just five weeks later he was a sergeant with Company B, 81st Engineer Battalion, 106th Division, near a place

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BY DAN RODRICKS

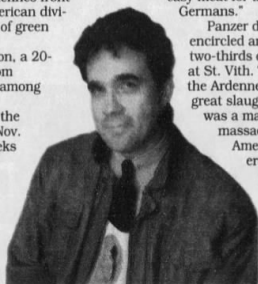
called St. Vith. The 106th was under vicious attack along the north of what became the "bulge" in the American line. In Sir Basil Liddell Hart's history of the war, this is said of the 106th: "Completely inexperienced and suffering from frostbite and 'trench foot,' they were to prove easy meat for the attacking Germans."

Panzer divisions encircled and captured two-thirds of the 106th at St. Vith. Throughout the Ardennes, there was great slaughter. There was a machine-gun massacre of 100 American prisoners by an SS group at a place called Malmédy. There was a bloody and

courageous defense of a crossroads called Bastogne. There was confusion and panic. There were traffic jams that delayed reinforcements from reaching units that had been surrounded by German forces. Everywhere, German armored divisions breached American lines, at great cost to both sides. Between the first surprise attack and Jan. 31, 1945, when the last of the bulge in the Ardennes had vanished, 81,000 Americans were killed, wounded or captured, according to Liddell Hart. German losses were estimated at up to 120,000 soldiers.

Though much of it had been liberated in September 1944, Belgium was pulled back into the Nazi nightmare with the battle in the Ardennes. Some 11,000 houses were destroyed and 2,500 civilians killed. The screams of one Belgian woman, a woman who had tried to help him, haunted

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After the war and his release from a German prisoner of war camp, Bill Arrington came home to Maryland and took up the study of business at the Johns Hopkins University. Those who knew him then never heard him speak of the woman who she was taken by the Germans during the Battle of the Bulge, but the memory of her screams never left him.

1994-12-16 Christmas Eve 1944 Haunted by screams PART ONE

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