

Ed Roper

106th Infantry Division

December 15, 2004 - WWII vets remember grim month - They battled Hitler's army, coldest winter.

Ed Roper heard the shooting as the German tanks approached. Then, the orders came to move out.

Three days later, Roper and 200 troops of the 106th Infantry Division were captured and dispatched to prison camps for the remainder of World War II.

"You know misery loves company," Roper said. "Well, we had plenty of misery and plenty of company."

For the Columbia veteran and thousands like him, "misery" is the perfect word to describe the winter of 1944-45 that they spent in the mountainous and dark forests of the Ardennes, in Belgium. There, they fought one of the largest and bloodiest battles of World War II involving U.S. forces.

Local soldiers are remembering the fighting as Thursday, the 60th anniversary of the beginning of the Battle of the Bulge, approaches.

Unlike most battles, the showdown between German and Allied forces was not named for a geographic region, town, island, river or creek. Instead, it got its name from the "bulge" that the German offensive forced in the Allies' line.

During the coldest European winter on record, more than 1 million men fought as the German army mounted a last-ditch effort to save Adolf Hitler's Third Reich.

The Americans prevailed in the month long struggle, but they paid a high price: 81,000 casualties, including 23,554 captured and 19,000 killed.

German losses were more staggering — about 100,000 wounded, captured or killed. At battle's end, Hitler's army effectively had been destroyed.

"Hitler had to be stopped," said Bulge veteran Mel Brandenburg, a platoon sergeant in the 78th Infantry Division who lost dozens of buddies and was wounded himself. "It had to be done."

The cold also was as a formidable foe as the German army.

"I wore two sets of long johns, two pairs of pants, two pairs of socks, a sweater over my wool shirt, field jacket, Army overcoat, gloves, stocking cap under the helmet, high (laced) shoes and galoshes," said Bulge veteran Eugene Kaplan, who fought with the 87th Infantry Division, which trained at Fort Jackson. "And I was still cold."

Ice-cold C-rations were the norm for the troops on the front lines. Pick axes and shovels were useless to dig foxholes in the frozen ground.

Veterans also remember the gruesome scene of truckloads of frozen dead being hauled from the battlefield.

Said Brandenburg, “They were stacked just like cords of wood.”

‘BOUNCING BETTYS’

The battle was fought along the “Siegfried Line,” built by the Germans in 1939 in the forests of the Ardennes region to serve as a western defensive wall.

The ends of the line were anchored at the Saar and Mosel rivers, where the borders of Germany, Luxembourg and Belgium meet.

In front of the line was barbed concertina wire. Between the wire and dragon’s teeth — 4-foot-tall, pyramid-shaped concrete fortifications to impede tanks — were buried anti-tank mines.

Anti-personnel mines called “shoe box mines” and “Bouncing Bettys” were in front of the wire. When tripped, the “Bouncing Bettys” would spring up about 14 inches and explode at knee level, crippling soldiers’ legs.

Behind all of this was Nazi Germany’s main line of defense, pillboxes and gun emplacements constructed of reinforced concrete and steel.

Thinking the Ardennes was the least likely spot for a German attack, U.S. commanders chose to lightly defend the line. That would allow U.S. troops and firepower to concentrate on offensives north and south of the Siegfried Line.

The U.S. side of the line was held thinly, by three divisions and a part of a fourth. Many of the troops were inexperienced replacements, 19- to-21-year-olds sent to relieve those who had been fighting in Europe since the June 6th D-Day invasion.

At 5:30 a.m. on Dec. 16, 1944, three German armies plunged into Ardennes, directing the spear of their attack at the [106th](#).

Hitler’s plan was to push his way to Antwerp, Belgium, divide the Allied armies, force a stalemate and win a negotiated peace on the Western front.

A LUCKY MISS

Brandenburg was 20 years old and working at a paper mill in Wausau, Wis., when he was drafted into the Army in 1942.

His unit was sent to England in 1944. A few weeks later, the 78th took its position on the southern end of the Siegfried line in Belgium, near the 106th Division.

Brandenburg, who is now 83 and lives near Batesburg-Leesville, said his unit was on the offensive, aiming to capture the Schwammenaul Dam, when the Germans attacked.

“Maybe that’s why we held that southern hinge” of the line, Brandenburg said. “Because we weren’t sitting and waiting. We had the Germans confused as much as they had us confused.”

On the third day of fighting, Dec. 19, the battle was over for Brandenburg. A bullet hit the frozen ground in front of his foxhole, causing him to flinch. A second shot struck him in the upper left arm.

With the help of a buddy, Brandenburg made a tourniquet out of a belt. Then, he made his way back to a first-aid station.

The wound was severe enough that Brandenburg eventually was evacuated to a hospital.

At the aid station, he also learned he was a lucky man — a bullet had pierced the top of his helmet. “I think the flinch after the first shot saved my life,” Brandenburg said.

CALL TO SURRENDER

For three days, Ed Roper’s unit had been on the road. Then, on the morning of Dec. 19, 1944, his battalion commander sent word he was surrendering.

“The Germans were up in the hills and we were surrounded,” said Roper, 80, a retired pharmacist who lives in Forest Acres.

Before they surrendered, Roper’s unit disabled their vehicles, taking off the distributor caps and ripping out the spark plug wires, and removed the bolts from their rifles, tossing them into the snow.

Roper was herded into a pen with about 600 other American soldiers and left to stand overnight on the snow-covered ground. “We stood close together and warmed each other with our body heat.”

The American prisoners of war marched all of the next day, spending the night in a warehouse. In the morning, the troops were loaded onto rail cars — 60 men to a car designed for 40.

Six days later, they arrived at [Stalag IX-B](#), a POW camp near the German resort town of Bad Orb.

After about a month, German SS troops arrived, demanding 350 U.S. soldiers for a work camp at Berga.

Although Roper did not know it then, “they tried to ferret out every Jew there was. But they couldn’t find enough.”

Raised a Methodist, Roper believes he was selected because of the laziness of a German Army clerk, who probably chose soldiers with short names to fill out his roster.

Roper and the others toiled seven days a week clearing out an underground tunnel at Berga that held Jewish and political prisoners.

Some of the POWs were beaten and tortured. All were starved. A loaf of bread was divided daily among six to eight soldiers.

By the time U.S. troops liberated the camp in April 1945, the 5-foot-10-inch Roper had lost more than 50 pounds, weighing just 99 pounds.

But he considers himself lucky. Of the 350 American POWs taken to Berga in January 1945, 85 died.

Fifty-five years later, Roper received reparations from the German government for the crimes he suffered. He decided to use part of the money to ease hunger among his fellow South Carolinians, setting up a fund named Daily Bread.

Said Roper, “I know what it is to be hungry.”

‘THAT’S WHERE YOU BELONG’

Even though the German offensive was a total surprise, American troops did not give ground without a fight.

Within three days, the German advance ground to a halt, giving way to a bitter siege around Bastogne, Belgium.

The town was critical to German needs. It was a highway and rail center that the Germans needed to move supplies to support their armies.

Heavy fighting took place in the small towns near Bastogne — places like St. Hubert, Moircy, Pironpre, Remagne and Tillet — as the Allies tried to cut off the German supply lines.

Given that the average infantryman lasted only 12 weeks on the front line, only a handful of “old-timers” were left in Eugene Kaplan’s unit as it battled the Germans at Tillet.

“My [Company F of the 346th Infantry Regiment](#) went overseas at full strength — 184 officers and men. In four months of combat, it suffered 240 casualties,” said Kaplan, 79, a distinguished professor of neuropsychiatry and behavioral science at USC’s School of Medicine.

“Every day of survival in combat is a series of improbable near misses,” he said.

“Stepping over the bodies of other GIs felt like repeated rehearsals of my own death.”

On Jan. 9, three weeks into the Battle of the Bulge, Kaplan realized just how lucky he could be on the battlefield. He was dispatched to the rear to bring up three replacement soldiers — men whose names he did not know. “If you didn’t get to know them, you weren’t as affected by their fates.”

As they were headed back to the front, Kaplan heard an incoming mortar shell and shouted to the others to hit the ground.

Flying shrapnel riddled Kaplan’s overcoat. Kaplan was covered with blood and could feel something stinging in his back. Looking around, he saw the three replacements were dead.

At the aid station, pieces of shrapnel were dug out of his back. The wounds were superficial and, a couple of days later, he returned to his foxhole.

Kaplan said he felt guilty about being away from his buddies. “That’s your world,” he recalled. “That’s where you belong.”

As much as the GIs cursed the cold, it could be benevolent to the mortally wounded whose cries were silenced by hypothermia.

Kaplan remembered one GI whose face was blown off in an artillery attack. The medic had run out of morphine and the soldier was in his death throes.

To end the GI’s misery, soldiers carried him outside and loosened his clothing. Within minutes, he froze to death.

“I don’t recall any debate” about whether it was the right thing to do, Kaplan said. “The old-timers, including me, would have wanted the same for themselves.” (CHUCK CRUMBO, the State.com, SC)

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