

John Swett

**Heavy Weapons Unit
106th Infantry Division**

December 15, 2004 - Battle of the Bulge revisited. Two local vets return to battlefields thousands of U.S. troops never left.

The day started with a sense of urgency for Vernon "Buck" Bloomer and John Swett, but neither understood the gravity of what was about to happen.

On Dec. 16, 1944, Bloomer, 21, and Swett, only 19, were among the legions of American soldiers in Belgium occupying the front lines just outside Nazi Germany.

The largest and most deadly land battle of World War II - the Battle of the Bulge - was about to begin.



Image from La Roche, Belgium, during the Battle of the Bulge as Swiss and U.S. troops meet.

Some 250,000 German troops had quietly massed along the Belgian-German border. Adolf Hitler would throw everything he had at the thinly held enemy line in a last-gasp effort to turn the war in his favor.

Over the next 41 days, more than a million men - including some 600,000 U.S. troops - would fight through bitter cold and desperate opposition. The German army pushed 50 miles into the Allied defenses, creating the bulge that gave the historic battle its name.

But the Allied forces of American and British soldiers never broke and turned the tide of the war in Europe.



The casualty numbers were staggering - some 100,000 Germans killed, wounded or captured; 81,000 American casualties, including 19,000 killed and 23,500 captured; and 1,200 British soldiers wounded and 200 dead.

By comparison, Operation Iraqi Freedom lasted 43 days and involved 300,000 coalition troops. In taking Baghdad, 138 U.S. soldiers died, and even with the steady number of U.S. deaths in Iraq since, the current war there has taken less than 7 percent of the American lives lost in that single battle 60 years ago.

This week, Bloomer and Swett are the only Tucsonans among more than 200 U.S. veterans of the battle attending 60th anniversary ceremonies in Belgium and revisiting the battlefields of their youth.

Bloomer was assigned to the Army's 12th Infantry Division in the town of Ouren, Belgium, where his unit had spent the previous two weeks monitoring German troop movement across the Our River.

"We were sleeping at 5:30 in the morning and we got a wake-up call. A sentry came running through our camp saying 'The woods are full of Jerries!' " Bloomer, 81, said of that Saturday morning six decades ago tomorrow. "We had no idea what was going on. We thought it was a little skirmish."

John Swett was captured days into the Battle and imprisoned in Germany's Stalag 9B for three months before being freed by American troops.

Swett, who was serving with a heavy weapons unit of the Army's 106th Infantry Division in the town of Born, was awakened at the same time as Bloomer although their units were some 25 miles apart.

"They got us up at 5:30 and said, 'There's something going on here,' " said Swett, now 79. "We didn't even have time for breakfast. We were headed toward Germany."

Swett and Bloomer, who became friends through the Southern Arizona Chapter of the Veterans of the Battle of the Bulge organization long after their Army days were over, had vastly different experiences in the war.

For Swett, the battle lasted just three days before he was taken captive and imprisoned for the remainder of the war.

Bloomer fought his way through the Battle of the Bulge, then survived more fierce combat in the Alsace-Lorraine region of France, before marching into Nazi Germany.



Vernon "Buck" Bloomer fought in the cold Ardennes Forest during the

But their experiences bind them and brought them together for the journey back to Belgium and Luxembourg - the first since the war for Bloomer.

Battle of the Bulge, then into Nazi Germany during World War II.

"I've been back to Europe, but I had no desire to go back there," Bloomer said, decades-old emotions betraying his face.

He decided to make the 10-day trip at the urging of Swett, who has returned four times previously.

"This fellow has not been back to the battlefields, and I thought it was a good idea to go back with him," Swett said while sitting at Bloomer's dining table last week. "I'm going again mainly to be with Buck." (C.T. REVERE, Tucson Citizen)

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