

Marion Ray

424
Stalag 2-A

Vets remember Battle of the Bulge



The Telegraph/MARGIE M. BARNES From left are Jim Crafton of Godfrey, a former member of the 99th Infantry, Marvin Grant of East Alton, a former member of the 84th Infantry, and Marion Ray of Bethalto, formerly with the 106th Infantry.

Sixty years ago today, thousands of Allied troops began fending off a massive, bloody, six-week push by German troops in the so-called Ardennes offensive, which became known as the "Battle of the Bulge."

It was considered Adolph Hitler's "last stand" or final counter-offensive to disperse and conquer Allied troops on the Western front. The battles in bitter cold and snow in the Ardennes Forest involved more than a million soldiers -- 500,000 to 600,000 Germans, 600,000 Americans in three armies, 55,000 British and contingents of French, Canadian and Belgian troops.

The Americans and Germans each lost 800 tanks. Americans suffered 81,000 casualties, including 19,000 killed and 23,554 captured, which made the battle the worst for Americans during World War II. There also were 100,000 Germans killed, captured or wounded.

The Germans' push 50 miles into Allied front lines earned the effort the name, "Battle of the Bulge." It ended the last week of January 1945.

Sixty years after the bloody battles, local veterans who faced the fierce fighting -- some as teenagers -- remember the horrors and soldiers' valor during those weeks that changed the tide of the war.

"Most people don't realize how close we were to being under Nazi rule, because if they'd succeeded in this battle, they would have won the war," said Marvin Grant, 79, of East Alton.

Grant said the Allies could have lost the battle, and the war.

"We could be under a Nazi flag instead of an American flag. They were determined they were going to beat us," he said. "I think it's important people don't forget about it. Every time I see an American flag, I get choked up."

Grant said he was in the second wave that stormed Omaha Beach in France during the D-Day invasion on June 6, 1944. He said he was on "R-and-R" (rest and recreation) Dec. 16, 1944, when the Germans began the push, and was

summoned back to the 101st Airborne Division to fend off the oncoming attack.

Richard Schaller, who graduated from Alton High School in 1941 and now lives in Deerfield, Ill., fought in the U.S. Army's Battery A, 288th Field Artillery that saw action in Gen. George Patton's Third Army. In his memoirs, Schaller writes that the Allies knew the Germans were on the move, but there was confusion as to the enemy's location. The weather was "cold, foggy and snow was falling."

Schaller said he "heard for the first time our artillery firing toward the front" in Luxembourg.

"We spent Christmas Day there in one of the homes opened up to us by the residents," he said. "We had a Christmas tree decorated with C-ration cans and a pumper organ on which someone was able to pick out a few Christmas carols. A good Christmas dinner was served by the Army, and we garnished it with the canned fruit brought from the LST (landing ship tank) in Weymouth. Unfortunately, the dressing was tainted, and many came down with diarrhea."

The next day, Schaller accompanied a lieutenant to find a suitable command post, but they instead found American prisoners who had been shot by the Germans.

"The snow presented a false picture of peaceful beauty until the eye detected patches of white snow streaked with a black dirt starburst where shells had exploded," he said.

Former Alton School Board member Leroy Fritz of Godfrey had a similar memory as a member of the mortar platoon of the 745th Tank Battalion attached to the First Infantry Division.

"The most vivid sight was on the fourth day, when the sky cleared and the bombers sailed over," he said. "It was like a white sheet on the ground where someone sprinkled pepper on it."

Fritz, 81, said the troops camped in 3 feet of snow 24 hours a day.

"I always said I was 21 and stupid and could take it," he joked. "I had no choice; what could I do? All the units we were around did their best."

[Marion Ray](#), an 80-year-old Alton native who now lives in Bethalto, remembers that same Christmas as a prisoner of war.

"We were in a circle, saying prayers, reading missals and singing carols, and I looked across the room and saw John Hickey," a fellow Altonian, and asked him what he was doing there, as though he had a choice, Ray recalled.

Ray, a member of the First Army's [1st Battalion, 106th Division and 424th Regiment](#), supposed to be a reserve unit behind the lines, was staying in a house on the border of Germany and Belgium. The Germans were trying to get to St. Vith, "to accomplish what Hitler intended" -- to split Allied forces. In that area, Ray said American troops were spread 2 to 3 miles apart.

"My regiment was the only one to get out of it," he said about the original three regiments, but he was taken prisoner soon after the fighting started and was held five months.

Prisoners had little to eat: a few potatoes, a re-hydrated soup of greens or spinach that the men called "grass soup," or a small loaf of bread for eight or 10 prisoners of war to share, he said.

"It was a starvation diet," Ray said. "I dropped from 165 to 112 pounds."

On Dec. 23, 1944, Ray said the English Royal Air Force mistakenly bombed part of the prison camp, which was located next to a railroad yard, killing two of Ray's officers.

Paul Boschert, 80, of Alton, was serving in the First Army and was captured the third day of the battle when he tried running across an open field.

"The Tiger tanks were awaiting us," Boschert said. "The biggest thing I remember was on the 19th, when there had been some casualties. We had to use a pick ax to dig graves for American and German soldiers. We were scared. I wasn't thinking about too much, just that I wanted to get out of this mess. It was so doggoned cold, it never got above 20 degrees.

"I can't complain about the treatment from the Germans; there just wasn't enough food," Boschert said.

A German officer dished out one ladle of soup to each prisoner one night for dinner inside a barn. Following his mother's upbringing to thank people who gave him something, he said, "Danke."

At first Boschert was unsure what the man's reaction would be. The soldier smiled and replied, "Danke," and gave him an extra ladle of soup. Boschert said he spent his months of capture on the move across Germany so the Germans could avoid Allied and Russian troops.

"At the last one (camp), I walked 400 miles in 38 days" in the cold, Boschert said.

Ray said a number of fellow veterans still live in the Alton area, and they meet each Dec. 16 for a luncheon to mark the beginning of the Battle of the Bulge. They will meet at 1 p.m. today at, appropriately enough, "Memories" International Café and Tea Room, 144 E. Ferguson Ave., Wood River.

The battle started with Germans parachuting down into the forest dressed in civilian clothes in a surprise move against Allied troops under protection of the forest.

Both Grant and Schaller recalled how those "undercover" Germans spoke perfect English; Schaller said those "covers" prompted him to quiz a group of soldiers in-depth about American topics. He finally determined the men to be the "good guys." They had been looking for land mines and were absent when the daily password was issued.

Other published accounts say Germans dressed in American military uniforms, arriving via parachute or in captured Allied Jeeps. They spread confusion by cutting telephone lines, giving false directions and changing road signs.

Six days after the push started, in a now-famous exchange, the Germans sent a message to Maj. Gen. Anthony McAuliffe, in command of Allied troops in the besieged town of Bastogne, asking him to surrender, to which the American general responded, "Nuts!"

The extreme weather was hard on troops from both sides. Americans lacked supplies, and poor weather prevented planes from dropping supplies to Allied troops for several days.

Jim Crafton, 80, of Godfrey, said Hitler's push was unexpected.

"It was a surprise to the American troops; we didn't expect something like that," he said. "It was the biggest land battle ever fought by American soldiers."

Crafton said the Germans hit hard, killing, wounding or capturing 150 of the 187 men in his company within the first three days of the battle. Barely 20 years old, Crafton said he was a private on Dec. 15, 1944, and moved up to staff sergeant by Jan. 1, 1945, because of the heavy loss of officers and NCOs in his company.

"It was survival of the fittest; they needed somebody to take over the leadership," Crafton said. "I wasn't prepared to be a platoon leader. I had no training to speak of, and I wasn't prepared for what we had to face."

He said the Germans were "great soldiers." If they had the necessary equipment and supplies, particularly gasoline, they might have won the battle.

"The day the war ended, I didn't know what day it was," Grant said, having been told to await the arrival of the Russian troops from his position by the Elbe River.