

“Tell Them We Were Brave”

**The Story of the 106th Infantry Division
In the Battle of the Bulge**

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This paper is dedicated to my Father
Sergeant Robert Marsh, D Company
423rd Regiment, 106th Division
And all of the men of the 106th Division
Both Alive and Deceased.
You men are my heroes.

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On the morning of December 16, 1943 in the snowy forests of Belgium, the men of the 106th Division received their baptism into the horrors of war. At 5:30 a.m. they were assaulted by two full German armies in what would be known as the Battle of the Bulge. The men of the 106th were asked to defend a twenty-two mile stretch of a “quiet” sector of the Western Front with an inadequate number of troops for the assignment in what General Eisenhower called a “calculated risk” in order to get their feet wet as to the ways of combat. With their warnings of an attack ignored and unable to withstand the weight of the assault against them, the 106th lost over two thirds of its unit strength either killed, wounded or captured in the first days of the battle. From this disaster word began to spread that the 106th had failed to perform its duty and had disgraced itself. This unfair criticism gained acceptance in the history of the battle and has obscured the reality of the true events of the battle. Books like Charles Whiting’s *Death of a Division*¹ continue to place blame on men who do not deserve it. This paper is an attempt to set the record straight and to give the men of the 106th the honor they deserve.

By the fall of 1944, the German army was suffering one defeat after another as the Allied Armies of Russia, Britain and the United States pushed closer to the borders of the Fatherland. The daily situation briefings brought nothing but bad news to the leader of the German people, Adolph Hitler, but Hitler was nothing but a shell of his former self and was living in a world of fantasy where he still commanded the powerful *Wehrmacht*

¹ Charles Whiting, *Death of a Division* (New York: Stein and Day Publishers, 1981)

of 1940. As he stared at his maps, he would make plans for divisions that no longer existed and were not possible for the German Army of 1944.²

On the morning of September 16 as the regular morning briefing took place, Hitler was listening to the usual bad news when he heard of successful counter attacks by Panzer units in the Ardennes against American units attempting to break through the German border. As Hitler listened to this news, he jumped to his feet and exclaimed, "I have made a momentous decision, I shall go over to the counterattack!" Pointing to the map he continued, "Here, out of the Ardennes, with the objective—ANTWERP!"³ With this simple outburst Hitler put into motion a plan that would result in the largest land battle of the entire war on the western front.

Hitler had several intentions in attacking in the west. First the Allies were spread over a large area, thus enabling his army to gain an advantage in superior strength. Second he hoped that by capturing the port of Antwerp he would cut off a key supply port for the Allied armies. Third, in doing this Hitler hoped to split what he thought was a fragile alliance between the British and Americans. He planned to cut off the British and Canadian Armies from their supplies and force them to withdraw from the war as public opinion turned against continuing the war. Hitler could then gain a favorable peace treaty in the west and turn his efforts to the Russian Army in the east.⁴

Hitler did not have the support of his generals for his plan. His general staff was much more aware of the actual condition and capabilities of the German Army at this late

² Joseph M. Giarrusso, "*Against All Odds: The Story of the 106th Division in the Battle of the Bulge*" (Masters Thesis, San Jose State University, 1998) 4

³ Danny S. Parker, *Battle of the Bulge: Hitler's Ardennes Offensive, 1944-45* (Philadelphia: Combined Books, Inc. 1991), 17

⁴ Giarrusso, 6-7

stage of the war. None of them believed that they could capture the port of Antwerp, and several suggested a less ambitious plan to surround and cut off a large pocket of the American Army in the Ardennes area. Hitler rejected this plan outright.

Hitler's generals devised five plans with different objectives. Hitler already had his mind set on Antwerp so he asked that two of the plans submitted be combined into one and it was this plan that was presented to Hitler on October 11. The plan called for the deployment of three German Armies. The newly created Sixth SS *Panzerarmee*, led by Joseph "Sepp" Dietrich was to advance to Losheim and then cut Northwest and cross the Meuse river on both sides of the town of Liege and then advance on Antwerp. This was to be the main assault. To the south, the Fifth *Panzerarmee*, led by Hasso von Manteuffel, was to strike through the Ardennes and cut through the American 106th and 28th Divisions. The Fifth was to provide protection to the flank of the assault until it joined the Sixth *Panzerarmee* in the assault on Antwerp. The final part of the plan called for the Seventh *Armee* to advance West to the Meuse river dropping troops off along the way to prevent the American Allies from sending reinforcements to the American forces under attack by the other armies. (See figure 1)

Hitler liked the plan and code-named the operation *Wacht am Rhein* (Watch on the Rhine) in hopes of fooling the Allies into believing that the Germans were planning a defensive battle in the event that the Allied intelligence intercepted information on the plan.⁵ With the plan in place, Hitler chose the date of November 27th to launch the assault, but difficulties in bringing up supplies and troops forced the date to be moved back several times. The final date was to be December 16, 1944.

⁵ Parker, 42

When the assault hit on the morning of the 16th, the Germans were able to achieve almost complete surprise. The advantage of poor weather and Allied over-confidence in the weakness of the German Army would spell disaster for the 106th Division. The German Armies advanced quickly through the surprised Americans and for the next few days they were able to use the confusion and surprise to drive far behind the American lines. Von Manteuffel had decided to use a "double envelopment" on two regiments of the 106th.⁶ The 422nd and 423rd were to be surrounded and cut off from help while the rest of von Manteuffel's Fifth army passed through the gap opened up with the double envelopment and speed on to capture Antwerp before the surprised Allies could react. The plan worked almost to perfection, but Manteuffel did not count on the stubborn resistance put up by the men of the 106th as they fought a desperate battle to stem the German assault. Their tenacious resistance was to be a key in the failure of the German Army to achieve its goal of capturing Antwerp as the 106th would hold up the German time table by several days, allowing reinforcements to be brought into stop the assault. The two Divisions of the 106th that were trapped in the Ardennes were to pay a high price for their stubbornness as about 7,000 men were either killed, wounded or taken prisoner in the first week of fighting. There are no sources that can give us an accurate number for troops captured or killed. Charles MacDonald in his book *A Time for Trumpets: The Untold Story of the Battle of the Bulge*⁷ puts the figure at 6,879 men lost for the 106th

⁶Parker, 22

⁷ Charles MacDonald, *A Time For Trumpets, The Untold Story of the Battle of the Bulge*. (Bantam Books: New York, 1985) 345

Division. The official U.S. Army History on the Bulge states that at least seven thousand men were lost in the Schnee Eifel.⁸

The other parts of the German Army were having limited success as well. After the first few days of confusion wore off and the Allied commanders understood the seriousness of the attack, the Allies struck back with over-whelming superiority in strength. At Bastogne the Americans put up a fierce defense of the town. They were surrounded for over a week before help was able to break through the German lines and force the Germans to retreat. The weather also began to let the Germans down as the skies cleared and the Allies were able to use their advantage in air power to strike at the German tank columns at will. Hitler's hope of driving a wedge into the Allied Armies and forcing the British to withdraw from the war would not be realized.

The Battle of the Bulge went on for over a month before the Allies were able to drive the Germans back to their original starting point. The decision was made to force the Germans back along the entire front of the Bulge instead of attempting to cut off those troops inside the Bulge. The battle was fought during one of the coldest and worst winters to hit the area in centuries and the hardships this placed on the combatants can never be measured. The lack of Allied preparedness and of attention to the intelligence information available to them before the battle is one of the biggest blunders in the history of modern warfare. "The total failure of Allied intelligence must be ranked as among the worst in history, nearly equal in embarrassment to the strategic oversight at

⁸ Hugh M. Cole, *The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge. U.S. Army in World War II, European Theater of Operations.* (U.S. Government Printing Office: Washington D.C. 1965) 170

Pearl Harbor”⁹ This was due primarily to the over-confidence of the Allies and their failure to properly analyze the information they gathered. This over-confidence in the weakness of the German Army would lead to the destruction of two of the regiments of the 106th Division by German forces in the Ardennes and needlessly cost the lives of thousands of Allied soldiers as they fought to push the Germans out of the Bulge.

The 106th Division was activated on March 15, 1943 at Fort Jackson, Columbia, South Carolina with a total of 16,009 men. The average age of the men was twenty-one years, including all of the officers and the older age group of the 1,800 men from the 80th Division.¹⁰ The 106th was the last combat unit created to fight in the European war. Charles Whiting in his book, *Death of a Division*, attributes the ineffectiveness of the 106th as a combat unit to their lack of proper training and unit *esprit de corps*, as well as their being new to combat. In discussing the inability of the two trapped units to fight their way free from encirclement Whiting states,

The Golden Lions were green and unused to combat, but there was more to it than that. The young men trapped on the freezing heights of the Snow Eifel that night had been let down by the military machine which had snatched them from their homes only a few months before. It had not turned the carefree habitués of drugstore counters drive-in moves and baseball games into real soldiers, with that pride in themselves and their unit, which is known as *Esprit de corps*.¹¹

This is an unfair criticism of the 106th for there is ample evidence to refute this claim. The 106th was activated in March of 1943 but was not sent to Europe until October of 1944. The time between activation and shipment overseas was spent in training in all aspects of combat, both small and large unit exercises, in which the men were instructed

⁹ Parker, 42

¹⁰ Alan W. Jones, 3 February 1948 in *The Cub of the Golden Lion Passes in Review* (St. Paul Minnesota, 1991) 7-11

¹¹ Whiting, 83-84

on how to fight both a defensive and offensive war.¹² There is also a very valid reason why the men lacked some of the unit cohesion of other divisions, one that Whiting overlooks. The 106th Division on three different occasions lost some of its men to the replacement pool needed to fill combat units in Europe with men to replace combat losses. The first was in August of 1943 when 3,000 men were sent to the 28th and 30th Infantry. The second was in April of 1944 when 2,800 infantry and 800 artillerymen were sent to the replacement centers, but by far the most serious blow came only a few months before the division was sent over seas. In August of 1945 the unit lost 500 officers and 3,000 men to the replacement centers.¹³ The division was given new personnel to fill out its ranks, but it would be impossible to develop a feeling of camaraderie with such a large turnover of men.

The idea that the 106th was not properly trained is not true either. The unit received the same training as all other units before being sent to Europe. The 106th received high marks for its training in Tennessee and was well prepared for combat. The loss of over 7,000 men from a unit of 14,000 total would be difficult for any division to overcome, but the men of the 106th did it.

Because of the replacement of 6,600 trained soldiers, we had only a short time to train the replacements. We had good training. We did not have the advantage of having gone through maneuvers, the training we got, was in my estimation excellent. If anything was missing it was "camaraderie". Not enough time together. That's not our fault, that's the Army's fault.¹⁴

This is the common view held by the men this author has spoken with. They believed that under the circumstances, they did the best that they could to mold

¹² Leo P. Kreusef to Author, 14 December 1999, (Personal collection of the Author) 2

¹³ Jones, 7-8

¹⁴ John Kline to Author, 14 March 2001, (Personal collection of the Author) 1

themselves into a tightly knit group, but four months was not enough time to develop the type of camaraderie needed to be as effective as older, experienced units.

In October of 1944, the 106th Division sailed for England, arriving late in the month. They spent the next few weeks in various camps around the Midlands of England working on improving their training and preparing for the trip across the Channel. The trip took place in late November and early December and the 106th hit French soil at Le Havre and Rouen where the men bivouacked in the cold and mud from December 1st through the 8th. For the next few days there were conflicting orders and rumors of where the 106th was being sent. Finally on the 6th of December they were sent to the Ardennes area of Belgium around the town of St. Vith. The men were loaded onto open trucks for the three hundred mile trip in terrible weather to what was supposed to be a quiet sector along the German border. ¹⁵

The 106th was to take the place of the 2nd Division, which was being relieved to rest and refit. The men of the 2nd told the men of the 106th that they were in a good place to gain combat experience. "The guys from the Second Infantry Division told us we would have it easy because only patrol action and some artillery shelling had been going on for some time. It was a good place to get some combat experience." ¹⁶ The German Army was using the area in much the same way the Americans were, as a place to give new units experience and tired ones a place to rest. Neither side seemed interested in attacking the other in anything more than scouting missions. This was to lead to the Americans' false sense of security in the weeks before the Bulge.

¹⁵ Alan W. Jones, 9

¹⁶ George K. Zak, *Soldier Boy*, (New York, Vantage Press, Inc. 1998) 27

The Ardennes front in early December of 1944 was a relatively quiet place. This was about to change as Hitler's surprise offensive was gathering its strength for an all out assault to capture Antwerp. For almost a week before the battle the German Army moved into position along the German-Belgian border. Bad weather was preventing the Allies from using air reconnaissance to gather information in the area so they were relying on ULTRA, a machine designed to break the German secret code, for much of their intelligence information. Here is where most writers and historians assert that the Americans were caught by surprise and were unprepared for the assault as American intelligence failed to detect the German build up. In truth, most of the Allied Command did not think the German Army capable of launching an attack of any real strength anywhere and most certainly not in the Ardennes area. The Twelfth Army Group, under the command of General Omar Bradley, expressed this belief in German weakness in its summary for December 12th,

It is now certain the attrition is steadily sapping the strength of the German forces on the Western front and that the crust of defenses is thinner, more brittle and more vulnerable than it appears on our G-2 map or to the troops in the line.¹⁷

The feeling in the Allied camp was that the Germans were beaten and the war would be over soon. However the men of the 106th along the front lines could hear the movements of the Germans as they brought their tanks and artillery up to the launching area for the attack. In the days immediately preceding the assault, men from the 106th had captured prisoners who, under interrogation, reported that a large-scale assault was coming in the next few days. All of the information gathered by the 106th was passed along the chain of command but was dismissed due to the 106th being so new to combat.

¹⁷ Gerald Astor, *A Blood-Dimmed Tide: The Battle of the Bulge by The Men Who Fought It* (New York, Donald L. Fine, Inc.) 76

Inexperienced front-line U.S. troops from the U.S. 106th Division clearly heard the sound of motors on the night of December 14th and what they thought sounded like tanks near their front. Reporting their experience to VIII Corps, a staff officer told them, "Don't be so jumpy. The Krauts are only playing phonograph records to scare you newcomers."¹⁸

The most important information about the impending assault came from a Luxembourg woman named Elise Dele. She had been picked up by the Germans as she crossed the border and had been taken for questioning in Bitburg. As she made her way back to her village that night, she noticed a sharp increase in military traffic, piles of military supplies along the sides of the road and large concentrations of troops, some of which she recognized as SS troops. On December 14th members of the local underground picked her up. When she told them what she had seen they took her to a hotel where American Intelligence and Reconnaissance troops interrogated her. The Americans showed much interest in her story, and they took her farther back to Diekirch for more interrogation. From there she was taken to VIII Corps in Bastonge, with the intent to move her to Spa. However she would spend quite a long time in Bastonge, hiding in a cellar as the Germans encircled the city. In what was the biggest tip-off of German intentions, the Allies had wasted their time because of red tape.¹⁹

All of this points to a failure by the Allied intelligence corps to correctly use the information gathered by various sources before the battle began. To put the blame on the men of the 106th who reported what they saw and heard is unfair and does them a disservice.

The 106th was at a severe disadvantage when the assault began. The Allies had been faced with a problem; they needed troops to replace those lost in battle. The losses

¹⁸ Parker, 45

¹⁹ MacDonald, 74.

in battle, the lack of speed with which troops were being shipped to Europe and the length of the front left them with too few troops to effectively continue fighting. This meant that some areas would have to be thinned so that others could be bolstered. General Bradley believed that the Ardennes area was a safe place to leave protected with fewer troops than normal. This decision to thin out the line left the 106th protecting a front twenty-two miles long. The Allies believed that the Germans would not attack in the Ardennes during the winter. When Eisenhower discussed his apprehension concerning the Ardennes, Bradley called the thinning of the lines a “calculated risk,” and convinced Eisenhower to accept the risk.²⁰ (See figure 2)

This put the 106th in a tough spot. They had to cover an area too large for the number of troops they had. This left huge gaps in their lines, gaps that the Germans would exploit in their assault to surround the 106th.

It is usual for a division (15,000 men) to cover six miles of front in open country. We were covering a 22-mile front in forested low mountain terrain. Our first battalion held the middle position of our regiment. The second battalion was on our left (north). There was a one-mile gap between them and the 14th cavalry (reconnaissance) battalion. Twice a day we would send a patrol over there to make sure they were still there.²¹

There is no way any division of troops could have held back an assault of the size and strength that hit the 106th on the morning of the 16th. They were spread out over too large an area to mount an effective and coordinated defensive effort without the support of other units. Major General Troy Middleton and his VIII Corps were not able to form a continuous front in which they could effectively fight a defensive battle against a large assaulting force.

Because of his frontage, Middleton had no proper system of mutually supporting dug-in positions in depth, but rather a series of widely separated defended points

²⁰ MacDonald, 68

²¹ Bob Wiedlin, to Author, 15 August 1995. (Personal collection of the author) 7-8

strung out along river lines, such as the Our, with large gaps between them, gaps which often included the roads themselves.²²

The Allied command had decided to gamble and leave the Ardennes area lightly defended; the men of the 106th Division were the losers of this gamble.

On the morning of December 16th, the men of the 106th who were on guard duty in the freezing cold were treated to a light show the likes of which they had never seen before. The sky to the East was alive with hundreds of lights, which left the men to wonder what they were. The answer came a few moments later as over 2000 guns began to rain shells down on the entire American front in the Ardennes region. The 106th was getting its baptism of fire.

The German bombardment caught the Americans by surprise and the men who were on guard rushed to get undercover. After a few minutes the shelling moved off to the rear positions of the American headquarters and giant searchlights came to life and shined their lights off the low hanging clouds. This provided an eerie moonlight effect under which the forward shock troops began to infiltrate the American positions in an attempt to get behind the American lines to create more confusion when the main assault force began its attack.²³ At 6:15 the German shelling stopped and the main assault forces began their attack. The shelling had cut the phone lines of many American units, leaving them cut off from other units and headquarters causing confusion and panic among the troops and back at headquarters. This left the units on their own to try to stop the German assault without the ability to coordinate defensive moves with nearby units. In many cases the loss of communications meant the loss of the units as German troops seemed to be everywhere.²⁴ It

²² John Strawson, *The Battle for the Ardennes*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972) 78

²³ Wiedlin, 7

²⁴ Kreuser, 3

is at this point in the story that Mr. Whiting claims that the men of the 106th began to panic and flees the battlefield. Nothing could be further from the truth. "All in all, the situation of the trapped men was not too desperate. They had food, ammunition and most of the regimental vehicles were still intact: and they were not overburdened with wounded men"²⁵ This is what Mr. Whiting has to say about the situation facing the men of the two trapped regiments of the 106th as the German Army surrounded them. What Mr. Whiting does not allow for is the conflicting orders being sent to the two regiments. As more information streamed into regimental headquarters regarding the confusing situation at the front, the two trapped regiments were told to both hold their positions and to await help from the 7th Armored Division and to attempt to break out of the ring around them.²⁶ None of the commanders fully understood the situation facing the 106th. The men trapped in the Schnee Eifel were basically on their own. They would have to find away to escape the trap but they did not know to just what extent the Germans had cut them off. The delays in deciding what to do to save the two regiments would prove to be their death sentence.

Because Jones had been promised more reserves from Middleton, which included the Combat Command B of the 9th Armored Division and the entire 7th Armored Division, he decided to leave the two regiments on the Schnee Eifel instead of pulling them back across Our River. However, a severe underestimation of the time of arrival of the 7th Armored Division led to some troop decisions which would prove to be costly. Ultimately, command decisions based on inaccurate information would lead to the loss of the two regiments on the Schnee Eifel over the next two days.²⁷

By the next morning, the commanders of the two regiments were fully aware that they were in danger of being encircled. During the night German troops had moved into the town of Winterspelt forcing the 424th Regiment to pull back further to the Our River.

²⁵ Whiting, 83

²⁶ Parker, 106

²⁷ Giarrusso, 53-54

After a few hours an order came from General Jones to pull back across the Our river and take up defensive positions. In doing this, the 106th was contributing its most important contribution to the battle, that of delaying the German time table and giving American commanders time to send reinforcements to stop the German assault. The Germans were unable to fully exploit the gaps in the 106th Division sector and take the town of St. Vith as quickly as they needed to. This town was extremely important to the German plans due to its vital road net connections. These roads were important to German success because the Ardennes area was devoid of good roads for tanks to travel on; failure to capture them early in the battle doomed their entire plans in this section of the Bulge. The town was the goal of Manteuffel's Fifth *Panzerarmee* which had just completed the encirclement of the two regiments of the 106th. Manteuffel commented on this failure to capture St. Vith quickly in a letter to General Clark after the war.

As I pointed out during our tour in the Ardennes for these reasons has the fighting of your troops--the brilliant, outstanding delaying action around St. Vith was decisive for the drive of my troops and for the 6th SS Panzer Armee too! In that respect the battle of St. Vith was of greatest consequences for the two armies and the whole German offensive.²⁸

This is the true importance of the 106th Division and its contribution to the defeat of the German Army in the Battle of the Bulge. The men, both those trapped on the Schnee Eifel and those of the 424th around St. Vith, fought a desperate fight to hold back the German assault as long as they could. They fought in groups as small as two or three men wherever the opportunity presented itself. Their refusal to give up under extremely difficult odds is an important reason why the German attack failed to achieve its objective.

²⁸ Hasso Von Manteuffel, to General Clark, July 5, 1976. (Personal collection of the Author)

The biggest insult to the men of the 106th that Mr. Whiting delivers is that of calling them cowards. Mr. Whiting seems to feel that the 106th should have been able to do what was an impossible task, hold a front that was too large for their forces to hold, against an all-out assault. The American High Command was unprepared for the Bulge and without the inspired fighting ability of the 106th, the German Army might have made it to its objective. The confusion of the first days of the battle, with the accompanying poor weather, allowed the Germans to exploit Allied overconfidence and eventually surround and capture two regiments of the 106th. Whiting writes that,

The first indication for Colonel Fred Warren, acting head of the Combat Command R, newly arrived at the St. Vith perimeter, that he'd already been outflanked by the enemy, was the arrival of a lone soldier who staggered into his H Q outside Recht. He was bareheaded, bleeding from a face wound and almost incoherent. But he wore the triangular patch of the 7th and was not attempting to run away like the rabble of the 106th and 14th.²⁹

This comment is typical of those found throughout Whiting's book. The men of the 106th did not and could not run away when the battle began. They were not aware of the extent of the German penetration. On the contrary, the 106th reacted in the way they were expected to; they began to fight back with all they had. "Most of the unit attacking us apparently withdrew as they really had walked into a hornet's nest with mortar and machine gun fire concentrated on the gully."³⁰ There are numerous stories of heroic fights involving groups of men acting independently to stop the German assault. To call these men cowards or "rabble" is an injustice not only them, but to all soldiers who fought in WW II.

²⁹ Whiting, 87

³⁰ Wiedlin, 8

The two regiments trapped on the Schnee Eifel had to decide on what to do. They were out of contact with each other and any attempt to break out if the trap would be difficult to coordinate. The anticipated attack by the 7th Armored Division never took place due to the confusion surrounding the battle for St. Vith and fears of the 7th being cut off as well.

The fog of war was particularly obfuscating and the scene in St. Vith was one of wild confusion; no one was really sure what German forces lurked east of the Schnee Eifel. Some intelligence reports had mistakenly identified a full German panzer regiment in the area. Regardless, the German attacks that had flared up convinced Gen. Hasbrouck that his 7th Armored Division was itself in danger of encirclement.³¹

The two regiments on the Eifel were in serious trouble. They received a message from division headquarters that an airdrop of supplies was to be attempted that night in the vicinity of Schlausenbach, but the drop never took place. On the morning of the 18th, the two units received orders from General Jones to fight their way out along the Schonberg-St. Vith road and make their way to St. Vith proper. The message was ambiguous and, with the only form of communication between the two regiments being that of patrols, extremely difficult to pull off. The units attempted to comply with these orders but the terrain and weather made it impossible. They only made about three miles and by nightfall found themselves in a state of mixed units and never fully got themselves straightened out.³²

On the morning of the 19th, after two days of attempting to fight their way out and with neither regiment knowing for sure where the other one was, the end was near. The units had been on the move almost constantly and the men were tired and worn out. The

³¹ Parker, 107

³² Giarrusso, 68-69

airdrop never took place and it was clear that the 7th Armored Division was not going to rescue them. They had fought several engagements as they moved through the woods and everywhere they turned they ran into German units. The units were completely cut off from any possible outside help. Finally at evening on the 19th, the units surrendered. This surrender was the biggest single surrender of American troops in history. The official U. S. Army History on the Battle of the Bulge states that all told, at least seven thousand men were lost in the Schnee Eifel, although the figure was probably closer to eight or nine thousand, and the loss in equipment was no less significant.³³ This was the worst loss by American arms during the European Theater of Operation.³⁴

Even though the surrender had taken place, the fate of the two units was not known to General Jones and his staff or to the VIII Corps. There were also several small groups of soldiers that had not been at the scene of the surrender and who continued to fight a guerrilla style of war for weeks until, "a far as is known, every last one of them was hunted down and killed."³⁵

The one regiment that was not surrounded, the 424th, played a key part in the defense of St. Vith. The 424th was, by good fortune, far enough to the north to escape the initial intentions of the German Fifth Army. By the morning of the 18th the Germans were around the town in force. St. Vith was extremely important to the German offensive due to the road network that met in the town. The roads were needed for the Panzers to follow to the Meuse River. If the Germans were held up here for any length of time it could

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Giarrusso, 83

³⁵ Dupuy, 145

mean a failure to reach Antwerp. It was here at St Vith that the roughly 3,300 men of the 424th Regiment of the 106th would make its stand.³⁶ (See figure 3)

The American defensive position around St. Vith resembled a fortified goose egg.³⁷ Facing them were about 100,000 men, including four Panzer Divisions.³⁸ For two days, December 19th and 20th, the Germans probed the American defenses looking for a weak spot in which they could penetrate. On the morning of the 21st they launched their first serious attack in their attempt to capture the town. After a heavy bombardment that lasted until dark, the Germans began a powerful assault with full armor support and by midnight had succeeded in taking most of the town.

With the fall of St. Vith the Americans were in danger of having another large force surrounded. Field Marshall Montgomery, who had been given command of all forces to the north of the German penetration only two days earlier, ordered all of the forces withdrawn to a more secure defensive position. The units began their withdrawal as soon as possible under difficult conditions as most of them were under attack. The withdrawal was helped by the clearing skies, which allowed Allied planes to roam the battlefield. The last units escaped over the bridge at Salmchateau with German tanks close behind. After the units crossed, engineers of the 82nd Airborne Division demolished the bridge. Thus the 424th was able to escape the fate of its sister regiments. The 424th was able to continue fighting, as the Allies were able to halt the German assault far short of its intended goal. The battle of the Bulge would continue until January 28th when American forces once again stood on ground they had occupied at the beginning of the battle. The 424th would

³⁶ Kline, 2

³⁷ Parker, 157

³⁸ Dupuy, 146

fight its way back to the area they held at the start of the Bulge, earning respect and honor along the way.

When we look back at the Battle of the Bulge we must look at the cost paid by the 106th Division, but we must also look at what they accomplished. An overwhelmingly superior force that was not expecting the resistance they found in the units in the Schnee Eifel attacked the 106th. The 106th forced the Germans off their timetable as they blocked access to one of the main road nets at St. Vith for over four days. This was time that the Germans could not afford to lose. This action allowed the rest of the Allied Army to regroup and send forces to the Bulge to stop and finally push the Germans back from the Bulge. The two units trapped in the Eifel occupied the attention of German units for several days as they attempted to capture them. Finally, the one remaining regiment, the 424th, was able to carry out a successful withdrawal from the St. Vith area under difficult conditions and return to battle at a later date to help push the Germans back to their starting point. It is clear from this evidence that the men of the 106th were anything but the cowards that Mr. Whiting likes to call them. As Von Manteuffel said in a letter to General Clark, "The battle of St. Vith was of greatest consequences for the two armies and the whole German offensive. In the end St. Vith fell, but the momentum of the main drive had been destroyed."³⁹

The actions of the 424th Division in the St. Vith area compelled Field Marshall Montgomery to send a message after the withdraw saying, "They can come back with all

³⁹ Manteuffel, 1

honor. They can come back to secure positions. They put up a wonderful show.”⁴⁰ Indeed they did.

The importance in the delaying of the German timetable cannot be underestimated. Had the Germans been allowed to gain access to the supplies, mainly gasoline, that were located in the rear area of the American positions, there is no telling what kind of damage they could have inflicted on the Allies. The men of the 106th were one of the main keys to this delay.

The failure of American intelligence coupled with an overwhelming feeling of an imminent German collapse allowed the 106th to be put in an impossible position that directly led to the loss of two of their regiments in the first few days of the battle. General Bradley’s decision to make the Schnee Eifel so lightly defended as a “calculated risk” and the failure of intelligence officers to accurately interpret the information they did have is where the true blame lies, not with the 106th. Mr. Whiting claims to be telling the story of the 106th, but it is a story based on false assumptions and incorrect information. Mr. Whiting does not quote any of the men from the 106th who were there, nor does he give credit to the quotes he does use. Instead he chooses to blame a group of young men for events that were out of their control.

But not in the woods of the Snow Eifel where the 106th US Infantry Division came to such a shameful end. Those dark forests are still heavy with the “feel” of the frightened young men who fought and died there. The foxholes and the rotting remains of the 106th Division are everywhere... the shame of the 106th Division is still palpable in the forest.⁴¹

⁴⁰ MacDonald, 487

⁴¹ Whiting, 13-14

The men of the 106th knew that the Germans were up to something in the days before the battle. There were prisoners captured that gave information about the impending assault and the men themselves could hear the build up of troops and equipment. "Hell yes we knew they were over there in strength. We could hear them as they brought up their tanks and heavy guns. We reported this information but they wouldn't believe us."⁴²

This is the common feeling of the men of the 106th. They knew something was about to happen but their information was dismissed because they were so new to combat.

After the men of the 422nd and 423rd Regiment surrendered, they were kept together in groups and stripped of all valuables before being marched back into Germany. The men were forced to put their hands on their heads as they passed through German towns for the satisfaction of the German people. They were treated poorly on their march to prison camp, receiving very little water and even less food.

We walked from daylight to dusk (25 miles) with no food and only one water stop. We spent the night in Gerolstein. We were given three crackers, a sort of hardtack. It was only my second meal in five days. We were so exhausted we laid down on a pile of frozen sand in an open shed and slept.⁴³

Most of the men were dismayed that they were now POW's. They had not prepared themselves for such a possibility. They did however conduct themselves in a manner fitting an American soldier. Mr. Whiting quotes unnamed German soldiers' observations after watching a group of American prisoners pass.

Endless columns of prisoners pass; at first, about one hundred of them, half of them Negroes...American soldiers have little spirit for fighting. Most of them

⁴² Robert Marsh, Personal interview with Author, (November 22-25, 2000)

⁴³ Wiedlin, 15

often said: "What do we want here? At home we can have everything much better"⁴⁴

Mr. Whiting offers no names or other information to support this quote; only stating that one of the German soldiers watching the prisoners pass made it. This is the type of unfair and unfounded criticism leveled against the men of the 106th by Mr. Whiting.

The men were eventually loaded into dirty boxcars, 65 to 90 to a car, that were meant to hold 60 men. The conditions were terrible, as the men were not allowed to get out of the cars to relieve themselves. The conditions inside the cars as the men were forced to use them as bathrooms led to an epidemic of diarrhea and infections.⁴⁵ They traveled for five days before being unloaded and marched to different prison camps throughout Germany to wait out the war.

The men of the 106th Division played an important part in the Battle of the Bulge. Mr. Whiting unjustly blames them for the German Army being able to penetrate into the rear area of the American positions during the early stages of the Bulge. He is not alone in his criticism of the 106th. Harold Denny in a newspaper report on January 7, 1945 stated,

It happened in this present battle that one new unit was stationed in the middle of that line where it was not supposed that the Germans would attack... When that German tide rolled over it, crushing its defenses, wrecking its communications and breaking its chains of command, many of its green troops broke."⁴⁶

This report was written at a time when the military was releasing very little information on the battle. It is hard to see how Mr. Denny could know what really happened during

⁴⁴ Whiting, 126

⁴⁵ 106th Infantry Division Association, "Bad Orb Atrocities," *The Cub*, Vol. 4, no 5, (June-July, 1948)

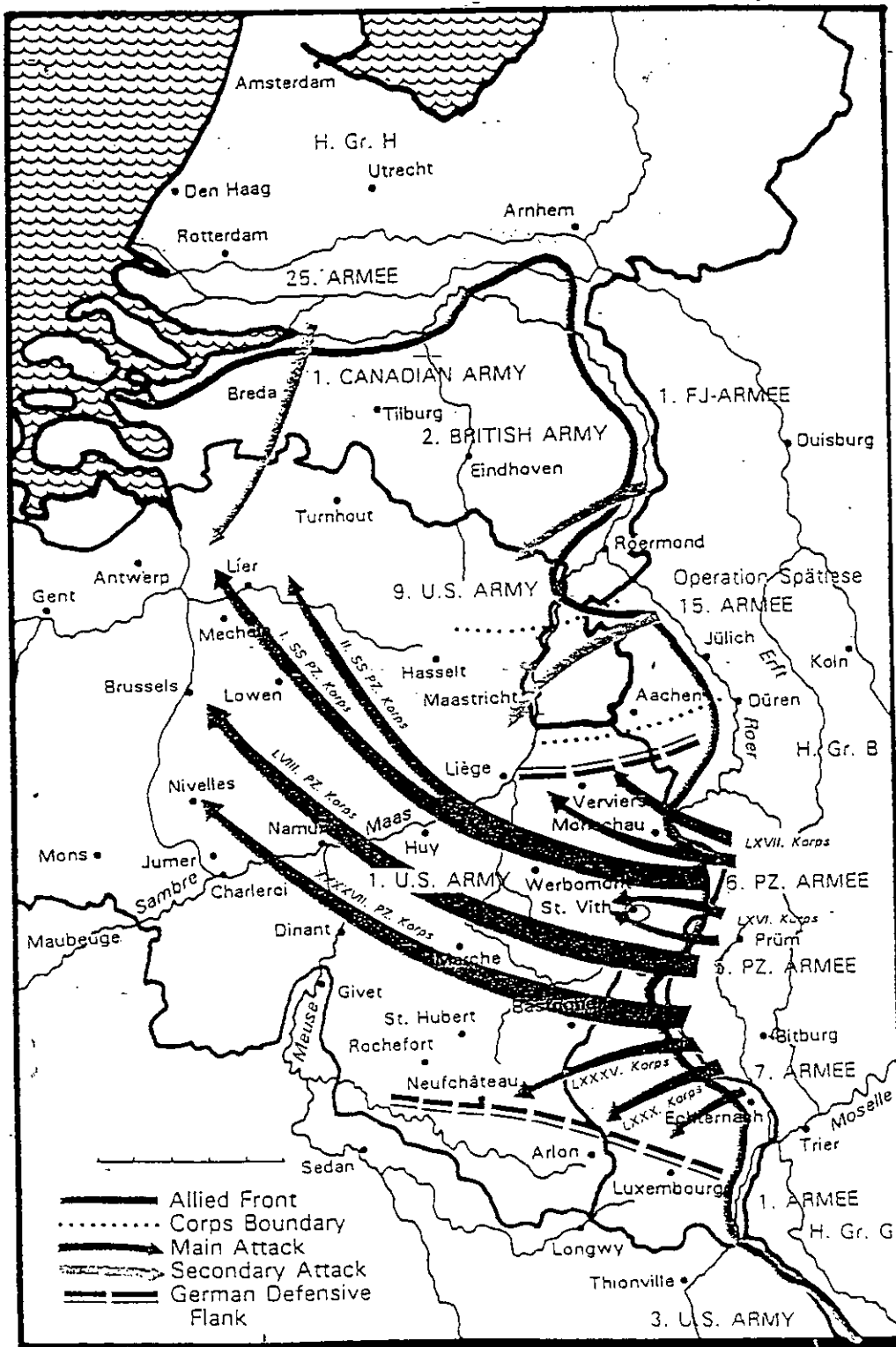
⁴⁶ Harold Denny, *New York Times*, January 7, 1945. (Section VI,) 5

the first few days of the battle when he was not there and was relying on second hand information.

The problem with this type of reporting is that there was no way for the men of the 106th to defend themselves. This information became accepted as the truth of the performance of the 106th in the Bulge. Add to this the American desire to cover up their intelligence failure before the Bulge and the fate of the 106th's reputation was sealed. Mr. Whiting's book only adds to this unfounded reputation.

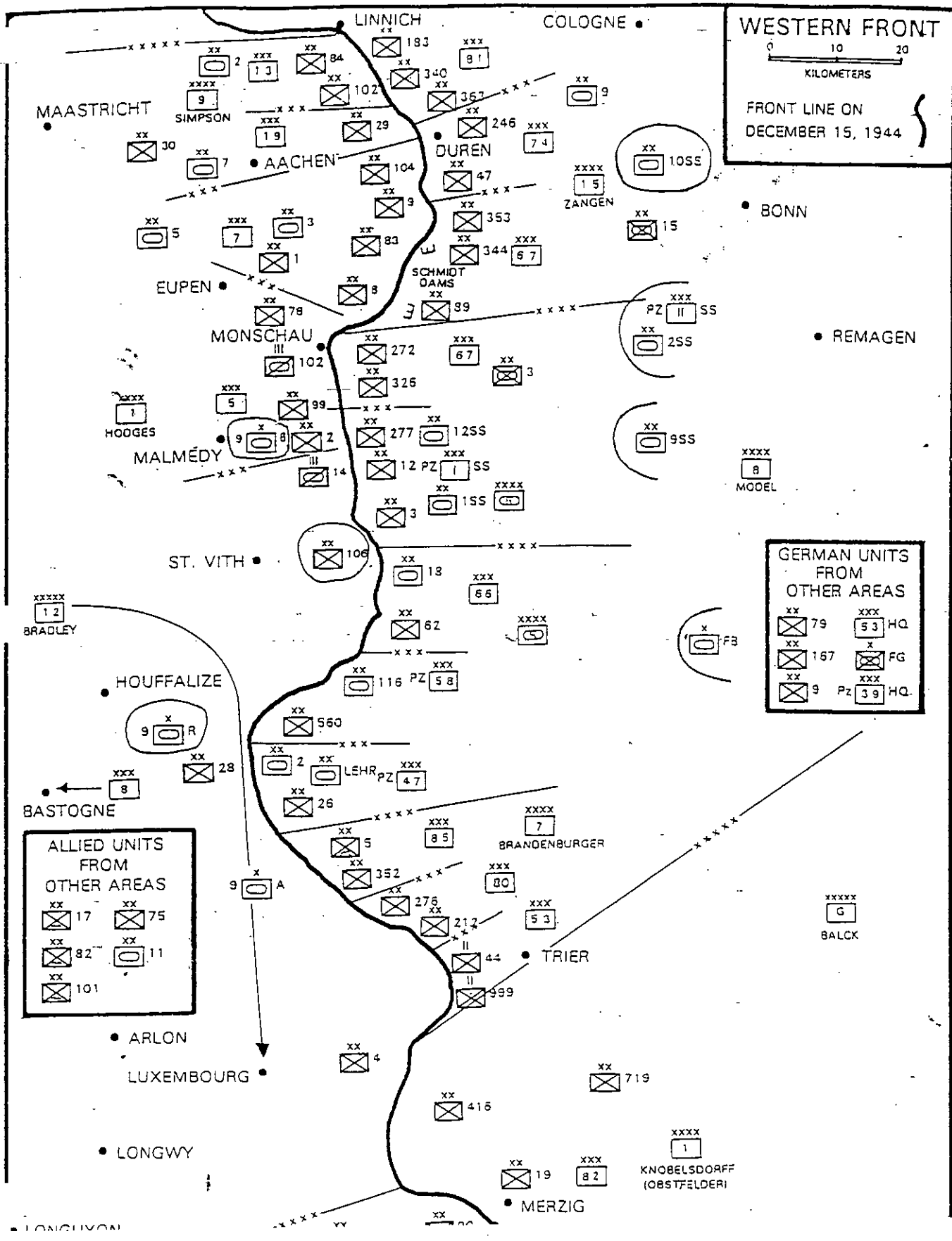
The men of the 106th were young and inexperienced in the ways of combat. They were asked to protect an area too large for their Division to cover in accordance with proper military protocol. A force of superior strength and weaponry in brutal weather conditions then attacked them. In spite of this the 106th held up the German assault for several days, effectively destroying the German timetable and allowing for the Allies to send enough troops to the area to stop and turn back the German penetration. Without the valor and sacrifice of the men of the 106th the outcome of the Bulge might have been different. Their courage in the face of overwhelming odds is a tribute all that America stands for.

Figure 1: Operational Plan for "Wacht Am Rhein"⁴⁶



⁴⁶ Parker, 23

Figure 2: Situation Map, December 15, 1944⁴⁷



⁴⁷ Parker, 28

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