Carl Giesler

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December 16, 2004 - Local veterans braved Germans, biting cold at Bulge 60th anniversary of WWII battle is today

Carl Giesler reached the front line in early December 1944, in a part of Belgium where things had been calm for weeks. The U.S. Army had picked a spot where Giesler, 22, and other inexperienced 106th Infantry Division replacements could ease into World War II.

"They wanted to get us on the line but in a very quiet sector," Giesler said. "That's what that sector was — nothing had happened there for a month or so."

Within days, an hour long artillery barrage shattered any illusions of a quiet introduction to combat.

In the early morning of Dec. 16, 1944, the Germans launched an all-out counter-offensive through the Ardennes Forest of Belgium and Luxembourg. It would become known as the Battle of the Bulge, the U.S. Army's largest land battle of World War II.

"For the first couple days we didn't know how broad it was," said Giesler, of Allouez. "We thought we were the only ones being hit, and we kept thinking, 'We're giving up land that everybody else fought for.' It turned out it was a huge attack."

Giesler was part of an artillery unit on the line near St. Vith, a town that would become a crucial juncture in the battle. In December 1944 and January 1945, he and more than a million men from both sides ended up in the woods of the Ardennes, trying to keep warm and alive.

The German goal was to split the Allied armies and drive to the key Belgian port of Antwerp. This last gamble for Hitler depended primarily on surprise and the use of captured American supplies to keep the offensive alive. In the densely wooded region, highway access and junctions, such as Bastogne and St. Vith, were key objectives.

With Germans breaking through Allied lines, units were rushed forward to plug gaps and shore up sagging defenses. Rest ended almost before it began for units that had recently been pulled out of combat.

Both the 82nd and 101st Airborne divisions jumped into France and Holland in the summer and fall of 1944. The divisions had been off the front lines for a just few weeks when they were thrown back into battle in the Ardennes, their ranks bolstered by replacements.

On the offense

By late December, the 106th was near St. Vith. Like the 101st at Bastogne, they were surrounded but holding the area. Just before Christmas, the 82nd Airborne created a lane out. After a day's rest, the 106th was back on the attack.

"We knew it was Christmas Eve and we griped about being shoved back in that quickly," Giesler said. "But it had to be done. And we were glad to start picking at that area that was lost." They fought all night and through Christmas Day, gaining just 500 yards.

The battle would continue that way for days as the Allies painstakingly won back ground they'd lost. "We'd maybe make a thousand yards if things went real well," Giesler said. "We didn't gulp it back with any big swoop."

As the momentum of the battle shifted and the Allied troops took the offensive, Giesler's job changed from laying mines to defusing them. On clear, moonless night, he and other engineers draped themselves in white sheets and crawled out to dismantle a field of landmines.

They worked as fast as their numb fingers allowed. "It's a wonder we didn't blow ourselves up," Giesler said. They were nearly finished when the artillery opened fire.

Giesler was 150 or 200 yards from the German line when American artillery began pounding the Germans with white phosphorous-filled shells. When detonated, phosphorus burns whatever it contacts. "I never heard so much screaming in all my life," Giesler said.

Record-breaking cold

Everyone who lived through the Bulge recalls the cold. Many considered it as dangerous as the enemy across the line. "I can't emphasize enough — the cold was sometimes worse than the danger," Giesler said. "You were always cold, day and night, with no hope of it being any better the next day."

"It started snowing the day we got there and it didn't let up for a long time," said Giesler, who arrived at the front on Dec. 17. The feel of that cold comes back to him "every winter when it starts. Sixty years and I still don't forget."

He credits his platoon sergeant — "an old graybeard, he was 22 years old" — with saving him from the frostbite and trench foot that plagued so many. "He said, 'You take three pair of socks and put them between your long johns and your skin,'" Giesler said. The sergeant told him to change socks every six or eight hours, always replacing a wet, cold pair with a pair that had been warmed by his body heat.

The weather and the Germans combined to make the experience in the Ardennes miserable.

In the dense forests, the trees surrounding the GIs compounded the effect of German artillery fire. When a shell burst in the trees, it not only sent shrapnel raining down on the GIs below, but it also sent shards from the trees with it. "You're helpless. You can't fight back, you can't shoot back, you can't run at it, you can't attack it," Giesler said about the artillery fire. "You just stay there and get pounded."