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The Battle of the Ardennes, Malmedy-Belgium

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The Battle of the Ardennes

Malmedy, Belgium

16 December 1944 – 23 January 1945



In early December, 1944, the 30th Infantry Division was in a more-or-less static combat situation, with much aggressive patrolling going on, probing into the German defenses in the vicinity of Langweiler, Germany, just a little bit north of Aachen.

It was bitter cold, rainy and muddy, and the forward progress was very slow. We were still waiting for the build-up of supplies, to enable us to make the crossing of the Roer River as soon as possible, and to then be able to continue on.

All supplies up to this point were being brought to us from Omaha Beach – 450 miles to the west, so it was a slow process of bringing up adequate supplies, and replacements, to keep a Division in a static position, and yet build up a reserve for future action.

In the meanwhile, all of our Battalions not on line, were being sent back to Kerkrade, Holland, to our Rest Center, an ancient monastery by the name of Rolduc. Each battalion rotated at this time, each one for 5-6 days, so everyone had an opportunity to get some badly needed rest, showers, clean clothes and limited entertainment, as well as good hot meals, and to enjoy hot coffee and donuts supplied by the American Red Cross girls.

Upon returning to the front lines again, each Company received intensive training in tank / infantry tactics, learning how best to coordinate and communicate with each other, in preparation for the big assault that was to come "*momentarily*".

This continued on a daily basis, until Sunday, 17 December 1944. About noon, the entire Division was placed on 'alert', and was to be ready to move out on a moment's notice. An unusual way to announce the beginning of a proposed assault across the Roer River, we thought, but we soon found out that the assault by our Division had been called off.

All weapons, other equipment and ammunition were loaded on to our organic vehicles, and other attached transportation that had been provided, to enable us to move additional supplies, as well as the entire Division's manpower. We then stood by for further orders, to direct the movement at a moment's notice.

Unknown to us at this time, 1800 hours, the German Army had struck the day before, (16th), in a least likely area in the mountains of the Ardennes in Belgium. This particular defensive line, from Bastogne northward to Malmedy, was held by the newly arrived, and "*green*" 106th Infantry Division, and the 99th Infantry Division. The rationale being, that this would be a good place for them to get their initial exposure to combat experience, through patrolling and coming in very limited contact with enemy patrols, and further, no one in their right mind, would mount an attack of any consequence, in a mountainous area in the middle of the winter. It would be too confining to the narrow and winding roads, which would be a prime necessity for attacking troops, and to maintain their supply lines and any traffic across the mountains and through heavy woods, which would impede vehicles and troops.

Guess What?? That is right where they mounted their attack!!

It must be mentioned here, that the 106th and 99th Infantry Divisions were stretched out over 85 miles of a defensive position, with little or nothing to their rear as reserve troops. They were stretched out there all by themselves!!

A big mis-calculation by SHAEF Headquarters, and Damned poor U.S. Intelligence! They had been adequately advised of unusual activity to the front, but it was dismissed as "*rumor*", "*hallucination*" and a few other reasons to downplay any reports of activity to the front.

How wrong they were at SHAEF, in their evaluation of these reports!

Their plan was to break through, capture some supply and fuel dumps of the 1st Army, then race on to Liege, thence to Antwerp, which had recently been cleared and made operational, thereby shortening our supply line from Omaha Beach. This would have effectively cut off the entire Canadian Army, the entire British Army and the U.S. 9th Army. Hopefully, this would allow the Germans to sue for separate peace treaties with

each of these Armies, enabling them to end the war in the West, and allow them to devote their full attention to the war in the East against the Russians.

That was the Plan.

At about 1000 hours the night of December 17th, our 30th Infantry Division was ordered to move out – to where, no one seemed to know. Just follow the vehicle ahead of you! Soon, we were able to realize, by orienting on the stars above, that we were moving South, but to where or why, was still a big question.

Finally, in the early hours of the morning, with some of the men still being awake and partially conscious and listening to the American Forces Network on their radios, there was a break-in on that frequency by our nemesis and rumor monger, 'Axis Sally', the major German propagandist, who informed us:

"The 30th Infantry Division, the elite Roosevelt's SS Troops and Butchers, are enroute from Aachen to Spa and Malmedy, Belgium, to try to save the 1st Army Headquarters, which is trying to retreat from the area, before they are captured by our nice young German boys. You guys of the 30th Division might as well give up now, unless you want to join your comrades of the 1st Army Hq. in a P.O.W. Camp. We have already captured most of the 106th Division, and have already taken St. Vith and Malmedy, and the next will be Liege".

We were stunned, as only then did we have any clue as to where we were going, or the reason for this sudden movement.

We arrived at the prescribed destination on the afternoon of the 18th of December, and light defensive positions had already been established all around.

Malmedy had Not been taken, as Axis Sally had said, and we found that Malmedy had been our objective destination. Malmedy was in our defensive sector, but St. Vith was not, being just south of our sector. However, St. Vith had been captured by the Germans.

Prior to our arrival in Malmedy, it had been hurriedly occupied by the 291st Engineer Combat Battalion, which had hastily erected road blocks on the most strategic roads and approaches to the town.

Colonel Joachim Peiper was the commander of the 1st SS Regiment, of the 1st SS Panzer Division, the spearhead which was to attack Malmedy. Due to the many defensive road blocks established by the 291st Engineer Battalion, Peiper was unable to get into Malmedy, and then he opted to skirt the area to the south, and make a dash for Stavelot & Stoumont by "back-roads". The main incentive for this routing, was to reach our 1st Army fuel depot at Stavelot, where there was over 1 million gallons of gasoline. Had they attained their goal, we could not have stopped them, and they would have been on their merry way to Liege and Antwerp. There were no reserve troops in this area to block his advance.

Enroute through this area, Peiper met up with Company "A" of the 285th Field Artillery Observation Battalion, composed of about 140 men in over 30 vehicles that were passing across the front of Peiper's advance at Baugnez, commonly known as Five Points, as they were enroute to St. Vith.

Needless to say, they were all captured and herded into an adjacent field, lined up, and methodically machine gunned down. Following this, some of the German soldiers walked through the mass of bodies, and any that were moving or groaning, were shot in the head. Thus, this became the noted "*Malmedy Massacre*". This was not the only isolated incident of this nature, in which this type of atrocity was committed.

Their reasoning for committing this act of atrocity, was the fact that they did not have the men or vehicles to keep them as P.O.W.'s nor the food to feed them, and further, they would impede their rapid advance so that they could not maintain their schedule.

This massacre occurred on 17 December 1944, in a field behind a prominent café, at Baugnez, '*The Bodware Café*', and it was not until 1 January 1945, that the uneven humps in the ground – the bodies had frozen in grotesque forms, and were covered with 4-6 inches of snow – were discovered to be U.S. soldiers and were found by men of the 120th Infantry of the 30th Division.

A few of these men did manage to survive, one of whom was Bill Merricken, and his story, and the story of others, led to several of the Germans being captured later on, having to stand trial at the Dachau War Crimes Trial, after the end of the war.

A monument has been erected near the site of the massacre, and the name of each soldier that was killed, is inscribed on a plaque along the wall, about 100 feet in length, and the U.S. Flag flies there, day and night. It is well attended by the local citizens, and fresh flowers are laced at the monument by someone, nearly every day, and is one of the most highly visited sites in the area. Memorial services are held here frequently, particularly when veterans' groups visit the area on Memorial Day and on other special occasions.

Later on that same day of the massacre, Colonel Peiper's troops were passing through Ligneuville, they captured 8 more Americans of the 9th Armored Division, and they were executed by a pistol shot in the mouth of each man. A monument is also erected here in their honor and memory.

Some of the most intense and viscous fighting of the entire war took place in this area due to the cold weather, lack of warm clothing, food, supplies and ammunition. Temperatures hovered below freezing during the day, windy and with snow falling on many days, and temperatures running as low as -20 degrees at night.

During this December – January period, we endured the coldest winter on record up to that time, according to local authorities, and although fighting was severe and

continuous, we actually had more casualties from frost bite of the feet and hands, than actual wounds from enemy action. This required an enormous number of replacements continually throughout these two months. The logistics of keeping us supplied with ammunition, food and replacements, was an on-going nightmare for our Service units.

In order to assist Colonel Peiper in the execution of the Plan, the 6th Parachute Regiment was dropped well behind our lines.

In this area, on the Western outskirts of Malmedy, one of our men, Pfc. Francis S. Currey, engaged a group of German tanks, a half-track and two anti-tank guns, and he single-handedly, with a B.A.R., a bazooka, anti-tank grenades, a .50 caliber machine gun, mounted in a U.S. half-track that had been knocked out and abandoned earlier, and a .30 caliber heavy machine gun. He knocked out 3 German tanks, one of which had the markings, fake of course, of the U.S. Star on the turret and on the sides of the tank, two half-tracks, killed several German soldiers, and in the midst of all of this, saved the lives of 5 of his comrades from certain death, or of being taken prisoner. For this Francis S. Currey was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, and the Belgian equivalent, the Belgian Military Order of Leopold II with Palm.

In the meanwhile, the Germans had claimed the capture of Malmedy, and the headlines of the Stars & Stripes proclaimed this! Thus our Air Corps partners, the "9th U.S. *Luftwaffe*" as we called them, came over with their heavy B-24 bombers on 24 December, and opened their bomb-bay doors directly over Malmedy.

Malmedy had been liberated in September 1944, with little or no fighting, as the Germans were on the run at that time, heading for their defenses along the nearby border of Belgium and Germany. So, Malmedy had been spared of any appreciable damage, and when we moved into the town on 18 December, it was a beautiful and picturesque resort town, where everyone was merrily going about their business as usual.

This suddenly changed the whole picture! Malmedy was a total disaster, with the entire center of the city laid to waste. Many civilians were killed and wounded, but we were fortunate in losing only a very few men of our own. Our biggest loss was our Christmas dinner, which was being prepared that day. Spam and bread is what we got!! Three of our Company's kitchens located within the City of Malmedy, were totally destroyed.

Of course our Air Corps *'friends'* apologized, and they still could not understand just what went wrong. As they were apologizing, the 9th Air Corps was on its way, to make sure of the knock-out, and they bombed Malmedy again on Christmas Day! This in spite of the whole city having been covered with our normal phosphorescent panels, to indicate that the area was occupied by our own forces.

As I mentioned, the entire center of the city of Malmedy was a total wasteland, and the next day, the Stars & Stripes proudly proclaimed, *'that Malmedy had been retaken by our troops, due to the strong support of the Air Corps, in stopping the German advance through Malmedy.'*

At this particular time, I was a Liaison Officer from the Division Hq., which was located in the Hotel des Bruyeres in Francorchamps, to the 120th Regimental Hq. which was located in the City Hall in Malmedy. I drove between these two points frequently, day and night, so it was prudent to find the shortest route between these two points. This led me to an unimproved road up over a mountain to the northwest of Malmedy, and through the settlement of Burnenville, situated on the top of the mountain. This route saved me many miles of travel and hours of time.

On the fateful day of 24 December, as I was traversing this route, and was about to descend the slope of the mountain down into Malmedy, I heard the drone of planes to my rear. I told my driver to stop right there. We looked back and saw this great flight of B-24 bombers. What a wonderful sight to behold! I said to my driver, "*The Germans are going to catch Hell somewhere*", and he agreed. Little did we know at that moment that their target was Malmedy!! In a few moments, we were appalled when we could see the bomb-bays of the planes open, and the bombs began to tumble out!! It was total horror as we watched the bombs drop all the way down to their target, the heart of the City of Malmedy!! Clouds of smoke erupted from this point, then flames reaching hundreds of feet into the air over Malmedy. I had a small camera with me, and I took a few photos of the planes, dropping their bombs, and then of the city shrouded in smoke and flames.

It was later learned that three of our 3rd Battalion kitchens had been totally destroyed, and about 25 of our men were missing in action, all presumably in and around the kitchen areas, and no trace of them was ever found.

There is some question as to just when this action occurred, as everything and every body was in a state of chaos. Whether this action took place on 24 December or 25 December is questionable, but the fact remains that we WERE bombed on both days. All of the Company's records were destroyed in these bombings, so all we have is the accounts written in the history books, and the recollection of others many years after the event.

We cranked up our Jeep, and raced down the slope of the mountain, and crossed the bridge over the river on the north side of the city. That was as far as we could go, as there was debris from the bombing all over the streets, making them impassable. People were running around screaming for help and needing assistance. Knowing where all of our medical facilities were located in Malmedy, all that I could do was to direct them to the nearest medical facility, where they could get help. Upon reaching the Regimental CP located in the City Hall, I found that all of the phone lines were out, and radio communication with the Division Hq. was not possible due to the distance and the interference of the mountain between the two headquarters.

I was delegated to race back to the Division Hq. and advise them of the disaster that had just occurred, and to summon assistance at once. Almost immediately, as many of the Medical officers and staffs were summoned and dispatched to go to Malmedy to

render any assistance possible to our own troops first, then to render assistance to the civilian population as needed.

Needless to say, the 105th Engineer Battalion was dispatched also, to render assistance in clearing the main routes through the city as quickly as possible.

It was remarkable to note that, although the entire heart of the city was destroyed, the St. Quirin Cathedral was virtually untouched! Talk about Miracles!!

However, we recovered from this disaster rather quickly, as most all of the necessary ground support was almost immediately available, since we were in the midst of the 1st Army supply depots, which had been abandoned by them on 16, 17 & 18 December 1944.

In another action, in the small village of Petit-Coo, another of our 30th Division men, T/Sgt. Paul Bolden, earned the Congressional Medal of Honor. He charged a building housing 35 Germans, under the cover of one of his comrades, who was armed only with a rifle. The Germans had pinned down his Company for some time with heavy automatic weapons and small arms fire. His covering comrade was killed by this intense fire, but undaunted, he hurled fragmentation and white phosphorus grenades into the doorway and windows of the house. He received return fire, and was hit by 4 bullets in this action, then, despite his wounds and weakened condition, he charged the house again and sprayed it with a sub-machine gun. He waited for the Germans to come out to surrender, but none came out. Thirty five dead Germans were in the house. None escaped. T/Sgt. Paul Bolden was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, which was presented to him by President Harry S. Truman in Washington, DC in September 1945, after returning home with the Division.

Many more actions such as these two C.M.H. recipients occurred, but were never adequately documented, so those involved in these incidents were awarded 65 Distinguished Service Crosses, and an untold number of Silver Stars.

Finally, by the end of January, the "Battle of the Ardennes" had ended, (More commonly called the "Battle of the Bulge), and the front lines were nearly back to where they had been when the attack was first made on 16 December 1944.

Hitler's elite 1st SS Panzer Division, the Adolph Hitler Leibstandarte, had been totally destroyed, and was never able to reorganize and come back into battle, as it had done before.

Around the 1st of February, 1945, our 30th Division was relieved in this area, and we returned to Germany, to nearly the same position that we had left in mid-December, and again prepared to attack over the Roer River.

This escapade of Hitler's, cost us all very dearly!

U.S.A. German Civilian

10,000 K.I.A. 12,000 K.I.A. 2,500 Killed

70,000 P.O.W. 80,000 P.O.W. 600 Severely Wounded

150 Massacred 200 Massacred

20,000 Homes destroyed

Source: Frank W. Towers 1998. <http://www.30thinfantry.org/ardennes.shtml>

<http://www.battleofthebulgememories.be/stories26/us-army25/771-the-battle-of-the-ardennes-malmedy-belgium.html>

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