

## Henry Joseph Leibel Jr. WW2 service

This is another segment in my documentation of family members who have served in combat. I had come to realize that several members of our family not only served during wartime but endured some of the harshest and most unforgiving combat of their eras. Alexander Stern, Chris's great-great-grandfather, fought in multiple brutal engagements during the Civil War. My maternal grandfather, Joseph Lozesky, served in World War I and fought in some of its most ferocious battles. My father, Henry Leibel, served in the Battle of the Bulge and, in December 1944, was among the easternmost American units attacked first and at the center of the German assault. I am telling his story today.

My Dad, like most veterans, had little to say about his time in the Army. Maybe it was modesty or because he just didn't want to remember, or didn't think anyone who wasn't there would understand, or he just did his job and came home – no big deal. I picked up a piece occasionally. I didn't know until researching this that he had won a Top-Tier Combat Badge which is a deeply respected decoration for medics. He never mentioned it or displayed it. I have written more about it near the end of this document.

This is my father's story.

**“...remember that we are not descended from fearful men.” Edward R. Murrow.**

### ***106th Infantry Division, (The Golden Lions)***

#### ***424th Infantry Regiment, Unit: 331 Medical BN, Medic, Company D***

Henry Joseph “Hank” Leibel Jr. was born on June 20, 1922, in Plainfield, New Jersey, the son of Henry Joseph Leibel Sr. and a member of a long-established Plainfield family. Like many young men of their generations, his life was shaped by the global conflict that erupted during his early adulthood.

Drafted under the Selective Service system, Hank received the Army serial number 32770549, identifying him as a New Jersey inductee. He entered service in mid-1943, joining the massive wave of young men mobilized as the U.S. Army expanded for operations in Europe.

After basic training, Dad was assigned to the 106th Infantry Division, a newly formed unit built around young draftees and activated at Fort Jackson, South Carolina. The division trained extensively through 1943–44, later moving to Camp Atterbury, Indiana, and finally to Camp Miles Standish, Massachusetts, for embarkation. The 106th was the last Army division created during WWII.

### ***Assignment as a Medic***

Within the 106th, Hank served as a **combat medic**, a role requiring both skill and extraordinary courage. Medics operated close to the front lines, stabilizing wounded soldiers under fire and evacuating them to battalion aid stations. Their work demanded calm under pressure, physical endurance, and a deep sense of responsibility for the lives of their fellow soldiers.

Dad was assigned to the **424th Infantry Regiment**, one of the division's three infantry regiments. I believe he was assigned to D Company (Heavy Weapons). A heavy weapons company would have machine-guns, bazookas and 81mm mortar. But considering the confusion of battle he may have moved between companies.

This assignment to the 424<sup>th</sup> would prove critical to his wartime fate. The other two regiments suffered almost 100% casualties – killed, captured, missing or wounded. 7,000 troops were surrounded and captured.

## Medics

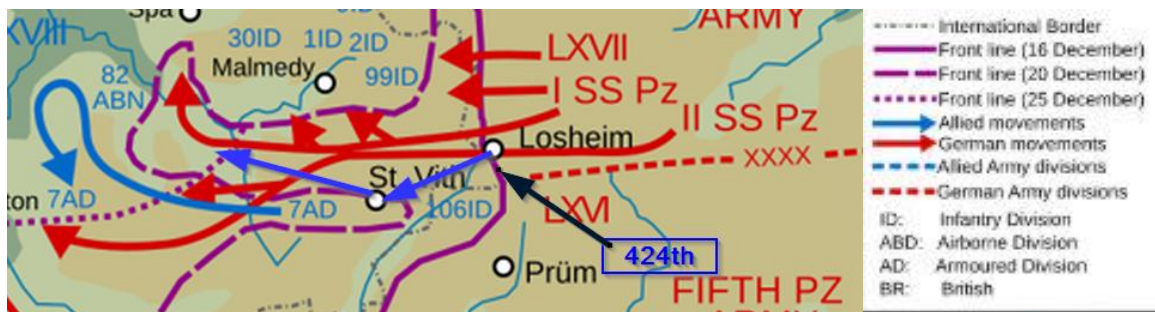
My Dad was a hunter as a kid and was a good shot. He earned an Army sharpshooter badge. He was also a big, strong athlete. I assume that is why they made him a medic. Medics would have treated: Shrapnel and gunshot wounds; blast injuries; hypothermia and frostbite; trench foot and exhaustion and exposure. Medics often worked under direct fire, marked only by a red cross on their helmet and armband. They would carry the wounded to aid. Their courage was essential to maintaining morale and saving lives.

## Deployment to Europe

The 106th Infantry Division sailed for Europe in October 1944, arriving in England on November 17. After a brief period of final training and equipment checks, the division crossed the Channel into France on December 6, moving eastward into Belgium.

On December 10, 1944, the division took over a quiet sector of the front in the Ardennes Forest—an area considered ideal for acclimating new units to combat. The men of the 106th, including Dad's 424th Regiment, dug in along a 26-mile front, unaware that they were positioned directly in the path of the largest German offensive of the war.

## The Battle of the Bulge - December 16, 1944 – January 1945



A more detailed map is at the end of this document.

The Battle of the Bulge was the largest battle fought by the United States in World War II. Over a million men were involved and there were 195,000 casualties. There were multiple reported atrocities by German SS troops against US POWs and civilians. My Dad once said he was a witness to the results of the Malmédy Massacre where 84 US POWs were shot after surrendering. The Battle was fought during one of the worst winter storms in the region in many years, and it was unusually severe even by Ardennes standards.

I will concentrate on just my Dad's division which was in the center of this battle.

## December 15th - The day before the battle

The 106th Infantry Division was positioned on an area called the Schnee Eifel. That translates to 'snow' 'mountain'. It was a ridge in a forest. It was directly in front of the Losheim Gap which was a flat, open, low area cutting through the dense forest with a road and a rail line. The 106<sup>th</sup> formed a salient (bulge) into this area. They were actually in Germany.

The 424<sup>th</sup> was one of the two most forward regiments. The day before the attack the 424<sup>th</sup> regiment was relieved and moved into reserve and was positioned farther south and west. The 422<sup>nd</sup> and 423<sup>rd</sup> regiments were now on the front line. Dad with the 424<sup>th</sup> was now in the rear to get some rest.

## ***December 16<sup>th</sup> - The German Offensive Starts***

On December 16<sup>th</sup> at 5 am the Germans began their attack through the Losheim Gap. The division's two forward regiments (422<sup>nd</sup> and 423<sup>rd</sup>) were quickly surrounded. Cut off from supply and reinforcement, after 2 days of resistance, they were forced to surrender on December 19, resulting in the loss of nearly 7,000 American soldiers. One of those captured was Kurt Vonnegut who was the author of *Slaughterhouse 5* – a book based on his time in a German POW camp. The 424<sup>th</sup> was the only regiment of the 106<sup>th</sup> that remained intact.

I overheard a conversation between my dad and his barber who was also a GI. He said that he was sleeping in a captured German bunker when a lieutenant kicked the door open and ordered them out. When he went out of the door he saw three German tanks coming down the road. He hopped onto a speeding jeep and got out of there.

I have heard that GIs said they would never forget the sound of those tanks. My Dad also once told me he would always remember the sound of the mortars. It was a little “plush” and then silence until the detonation.

## ***December 16<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> - Schnee Eifel***

The 424<sup>th</sup> absorbed the first blows after 7am from the German 62<sup>nd</sup> Volksgrenadier Division. The 424<sup>th</sup> fought a series of intense delaying actions as the German advance threatened to break through to St. Vith, a key road junction. The regiment held defensive positions along the Schnee Eifel and conducted a fighting withdrawal toward St. Vith. Ultimately, they withdrew across the Our River to join the defense of St. Vith.

## ***December 20<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> - St Vith***

St Vith sat at a critical road hub feeding the German advance westward and its quick capture was a key objective of the overall German plan. The 424<sup>th</sup> reinforced the 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Armored Divisions and the 112<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment of the 28<sup>th</sup> Division. The Americans formed what became known as the “St. Vith Goose Egg”, a circular defensive perimeter around the town. German forces from the 5th Panzer Army and 6th Panzer Army attacked aggressively.

Despite being outnumbered and outgunned, the defenders repelled repeated attacks, using the terrain and delaying tactics to maximum effect. By the 21<sup>st</sup> they received orders to withdraw from British Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery. General Eisenhower had decided that because St Vith was in the northern section of the Bulge and Montgomery commanded all Allied forces north of the German penetration the 106<sup>th</sup> should be under British Command. Brigadier General Bruce C. Clarke, who commanded what was left of the 106<sup>th</sup> decided to hold out as long as possible to delay the Germans.

## ***December 22<sup>nd</sup> to the 23<sup>rd</sup> - withdraw to the Salm River***

By the 22<sup>nd</sup> the order to withdraw was unavoidable. The Germans had broken through the flanks of the American “Goose Egg” defensive perimeter, threatening to encircle the entire force. The St Vith defenders began an orderly fighting withdrawal westward toward the Salm River and positions supported by the 82nd Airborne Division, which was forming a new defensive line behind them.

The stand had achieved its purpose. By holding St. Vith for **seven days**, the Americans had delayed the German advance and disrupted the German timetable. This forced German armored units into traffic jams and fuel shortages. It bought time for the northern shoulder to stabilize.

## ***December 24<sup>th</sup> to the 29<sup>th</sup> - The Manhay crossroads***

This movement placed the 424th on the western side of the Bulge, supporting the new Allied line. There they formed a new defensive line west of the Salm River with the 82<sup>nd</sup> airborne and 7<sup>th</sup> armored divisions. The

terrain west of the Salm was more favorable for defense, and the U.S. units were no longer in danger of immediate encirclement. The Germans attempted to exploit their capture of St. Vith, but the American withdrawal had been orderly, and the new line presented a strong, organized barrier. U.S. forces held firm along the new line, preventing any renewed breakthrough toward the Meuse.

The German timetable already delayed because of the stand at St. Vith was now irrecoverably behind schedule.

The Manhay crossroads northwest of St. Vith was another critical road junction the Germans were trying to seize as part of their push toward the Meuse. The 424th, now under the 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division, was committed to defend this critical junction. They engaged in heavy combat to block the German advance after withdrawing from St. Vith. The 424th helped prevent German armored units from breaking through toward Liège.

The U.S. defended Manhay with roughly 5,000 infantry, 30-40 armored vehicles, bazooka teams, minefields, artillery, 20-30 Sherman tanks and P-47 air support, facing a much larger German armored force.

They faced the German 2nd SS Panzer Division comprised of roughly 60–75 armored vehicles and 6,500–8,000 infantry, assault guns, mortars, and heavy artillery. The 2nd SS Panzer Division (in this sector) had 25-30 Panther tanks, 20-25 Panzer IVs, 2-4 Tiger II tanks.

They had roughly half the infantry and roughly half the armor of the attacking German force.

### ***December 30<sup>th</sup> - U.S. line held***

This was the last day the 424th fought in the Manhay sector. The regiment continued to support armored roadblocks and reinforce the defensive arc. German attacks were losing momentum, and the U.S. line held firm. By evening, orders were issued for the regiment to pull out of the line.

### ***December 31<sup>st</sup> - Rest and reorganize***

After six days of continuous combat in the Manhay–Grandmenil sector, the 424th was finally pulled out of the line and moved to Anthisnes, Belgium, northwest of Liège, where the withdrawal allowed the regiment to reorganize, receive replacements, re-equip after losses and prepare for a new defensive assignment. This was its first real rest since 16 December.

### ***January 1945 – Counter attack to where they started***

The 424th Infantry Regiment moved back into the line in the Wanne-Wanneranval sector, where it held defensive positions, patrolled aggressively, and absorbed artillery fire as US forces stabilized the northern shoulder of the Bulge. They held the line under constant artillery and mortar fire, patrolled aggressively against German rear guards, and helped VIII Corps stabilize the northern shoulder of the Bulge.

Then the 424th Infantry Regiment shifted from static defense to limited offensive operations, advancing cautiously through the Wanne-Wanneranval sector, clearing villages and road junctions against scattered German rear guards, and helping VIII Corps begin pushing the Bulge back toward its original line.

The regiment then joined the full counterattack, pushing east through scattered resistance, clearing terrain abandoned by withdrawing German units, and ultimately returning to positions near the Our River, close to where they had been on December 16 before the Bulge began.

### ***February to April 1945 - Our River***

The 424th held the southern flank of First Army along the Our River line, conducted constant patrols and security operations, rebuilt its strength, and prepared for the next major Allied offensive toward Germany. They

conducted patrols and security operations during the Rhineland Campaign, and was then withdrawn to France for rehabilitation and reserve duty. They then performed rear-area and Communications Zone duties rather than frontline operations.

### **May 1945 – Victory in Europe (VE Day)**

The 106th Division's stand, though costly (up to 80% casualties in some sectors), delayed the German timetable by four critical days. This delay allowed the Allies to reinforce other key areas like Bastogne and eventually launch a counteroffensive.

### **Return Home and Later Life**

After the German surrender in May 1945, the 106th Infantry Division was eventually returned to the United States for inactivation. Dad was discharged following the end of the war and returned to New Jersey. That summer he was staying at his mother's bungalow in Seaside NJ where he met my Mom.

Dad passed away in **2001**, leaving behind a legacy of service marked by courage, resilience, and devotion to his fellow soldiers.

### **Awards:**

**Combat Medical Badge GO 1945-076.**

***The Combat Medical Badge (CMB) is a Top-Tier Combat Badge and is one of the most respected and meaningful decorations in the U.S. Army — especially among medics and infantry veterans. The Combat Medical Badge is a deeply respected decoration that only honors Army medics who risked their lives under enemy fire to save others, symbolizing courage, sacrifice, and frontline brotherhood. Only 33 medals were awarded within the 106<sup>th</sup>***



### **Summary**

Henry Joseph Leibel Jr.'s wartime service places him among the men who endured one of the most harrowing battles in American military history. As a medic in the 424th Infantry Regiment, he served in the only regiment of the 106th Infantry Division to escape capture during the Battle of the Bulge. His actions contributed to the regiment's ability to hold the southern shoulder of the German offensive—an essential factor in the eventual Allied victory.

His story reflects the quiet heroism of the medics who risked their lives not to take life, but to save it.



## ***Defense of Bastogne and St. Vith & Vielsalm***

It always seemed that the defense of Bastogne gets all of the attention. Its not that the story shouldn't. It was an incredible and courageous feat. I know both battles well but didn't know the answer. Here is what I found.

The defense of Bastogne and the defense of St. Vith–Vielsalm were both critical American actions during the Battle of the Bulge, but they differed profoundly in character, purpose, and method. Bastogne became a classic fortress defense, where the 101st Airborne Division and elements of the 10th Armored Division held a fixed perimeter after being surrounded. The town's seven-road junction made it a strategic prize, and the American mission was simple and absolute: **hold the crossroads at all costs**. The defense was static, circular, and built around strongpoints, interior lines, and concentrated artillery. Once encircled, the defenders fought from a shrinking island of resistance, relying on limited supplies until the weather cleared and air support could reach them.

In contrast, the defense of St. Vith and Vielsalm was a mobile, elastic delaying action. St. Vith was also a road hub, but the terrain — dense forests, ridges, and narrow valleys — favored a layered defense rather than a fixed perimeter. Instead of holding one town at all costs, American forces executed a series of fighting withdrawals, counterattacks, and shifting roadblocks, trading space for time. **Their mission was not to stand fast indefinitely but to delay the German armored spearheads**, disrupt their timetable, and protect the northern shoulder of the Bulge. This defense lasted longer than the Germans expected and forced the 1st SS and 2nd SS Panzer Divisions into repeated, costly attempts to break through.

In essence, Bastogne held the center, while St. Vith and Vielsalm preserved the northern flank. One was a fortress; the other was a maneuver defense. Both were indispensable to stopping the Ardennes Offensive, but they achieved their effects through entirely different styles of fighting.

Bastogne became famous because it was a dramatic, self-contained siege that produced iconic images, a clear narrative, and a symbolic victory. The town was completely surrounded from December 20–26, cut off from supplies, and defended by the 101st Airborne and 10th Armored in a classic “last stand”. The fact that it sat on seven major roads, making it a strategic crossroads, also elevated its importance in public memory.

The siege produced some of the most famous moments of the war — including McAuliffe's “NUTS!” reply — and the dramatic relief by Patton's Third Army on December 26 became a defining story of American heroism. These elements made Bastogne easy to celebrate, retell, and mythologize.