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December 15, 2004 - Battle of the Bulge revisited. Two local vets return to battlefields thousands of U.S. troops never left.

The day started with a sense of urgency for Vernon "Buck" Bloomer and John Swett, but neither understood the gravity of what was about to happen.

On Dec. 16, 1944, Bloomer, 21, and Swett, only 19, were among the legions of American soldiers in Belgium occupying the front lines just outside Nazi Germany.

The largest and most deadly land battle of World War II - the Battle of the Bulge - was about to begin.

Some 250,000 German troops had quietly massed along the Belgian-German border. Adolf Hitler would throw everything he had at the thinly held enemy line in a last-gasp effort to turn the war in his favor.

Over the next 41 days, more than a million men - including some 600,000 U.S. troops - would fight through bitter cold and desperate opposition. The German army pushed 50 miles into the Allied defenses, creating the bulge that gave the historic battle its name.

But the Allied forces of American and British soldiers never broke and turned the tide of the war in Europe.

The casualty numbers were staggering - some 100,000 Germans killed, wounded or captured; 81,000 American casualties, including 19,000 killed and 23,500 captured; and 1,200 British soldiers wounded and 200 dead.

By comparison, Operation Iraqi Freedom lasted 43 days and involved 300,000 coalition troops. In taking Baghdad, 138 U.S. soldiers died, and even with the steady number of U.S. deaths in Iraq since, the current war there has taken less than 7 percent of the American lives lost in that single battle 60 years ago.

This week, Bloomer and Swett are the only Tucsonans among more than 200 U.S. veterans of the battle attending 60th anniversary ceremonies in Belgium and revisiting the battlefields of their youth.

Bloomer was assigned to the Army's 12th Infantry Division in the town of Ouren, Belgium, where his unit had spent the previous two weeks monitoring German troop movement across the Our River.

"We were sleeping at 5:30 in the morning and we got a wake-up call. A sentry came running through our camp saying 'The woods are full of Jerries!' " Bloomer, 81, said of that Saturday morning six decades ago tomorrow. "We had no idea what was going on. We thought it was a little skirmish."

Swett, who was serving with a heavy weapons unit of the Army's 106th Infantry Division in the town of Born, was awakened at the same time as Bloomer although their units were some 25 miles apart.

"They got us up at 5:30 and said, 'There's something going on here,' " said Swett, now 79. "We didn't even have time for breakfast. We were headed toward Germany."

Swett and Bloomer, who became friends through the Southern Arizona Chapter of the Veterans of the Battle of the Bulge organization long after their Army days were over, had vastly different experiences in the war.

For Swett, the battle lasted just three days before he was taken captive and imprisoned for the remainder of the war.

Bloomer fought his way through the Battle of the Bulge, then survived more fierce combat in the Alsace-Lorraine region of France, before marching into Nazi Germany.

But their experiences bind them and brought them together for the journey back to Belgium and Luxembourg - the first since the war for Bloomer.

"I've been back to Europe, but I had no desire to go back there," Bloomer said, decades-old emotions betraying his face.

He decided to make the 10-day trip at the urging of Swett, who has returned four times previously.

"This fellow has not been back to the battlefields, and I thought it was a good idea to go back with him," Swett said while sitting at Bloomer's dining table last week. "I'm going again mainly to be with Buck."  
(C.T. REVERE, Tucson Citizen)

## **My Bulge Story**

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### *My Bulge Story*

At 5:30 on December 16, 1944, we were awakened by a distant rumbling and the word that we must be on our way at once as the enemy was shelling our lines with the possibility of a ground attack coming soon. I remember thinking that I would dress warmly but leave the remainder of my equipment in my duffle bag in the sleeping room on the second floor of our billeting home as we would probably be back by evening. What a mistake. I never saw any of my personal items or clothing again. The greatest loss was my Waltham watch given to me as a graduation present from High School and the silver dollar with my mother's birth date, 1890, given to me by Dad just before I left for the service.

Our convoy stopped in St. Vith before proceeding to the front – possibly to receive detailed (?) orders. After much starting and stopping going basically east, we ended up well east of Schonberg and near Bleialf pulling in between an artillery battalion and the Germans at a very late time in the night. Our mission was to hold off the enemy until the artillery people could extract their pieces and move them toward the rear. Research would probably give me this unit's name but at that time all we knew was that its personnel was black (Negro) and that we had a job to do. It was after midnight before all but one 155mm were removed. The one piece not removed was too mired in the mud to get out.

The remainder of that night and much of the next two and one half days and two nights is a blur in my memory, with some notable events standing out but I am unable to place them in a firm order. The problem of retaining precise memories is at least partly due to the weather – it was constantly raining, sleeting or snowing with always low visibility – probably less than a quarter of a mile. There was no sun to guide us and we lowly privates had no compasses. We were instructed who to follow in a convoy, or given instructions for short one or two road trips. Some of the events I do remember were: The road from "*Purple Heart Comers*" to Auw was along a ridge and open on the side facing the enemy. It was downhill and open on the German side and open fields. On our side (still in Germany) also went downhill but there was the cover of a forest only a few hundred feet below the ridge. Our motor pool sergeant Jacob Antonovich thought we should be down near the trees in what turned out to be a very soft muddy field. All of our vehicles had to be winched out of the mud. Sarg's weapons carrier may have been the only one that moved out on its own power. It was a good thing that we didn't have an emergency evacuation.

Another exciting event took place on what road I don't remember, but we were in convoy, stop and go, when a plane flew over strafing the vehicles. I was right behind a truck carrying ammunition which must have been hit as it started to smoke. Both vehicles in front and back of me were very close, leaving no room to turn around or turn onto the shoulder. My thought was to remove myself from the scene of a gigantic explosion. I jumped out of my Jeep and hopped on a six wheeled armored truck going in the opposite direction. It took me back to our Company "H". The truck never exploded and I still feel it was Lloyd Diehl who retrieved my Jeep for me.

When we were together as a platoon in the forest and near the Engineer's Cutoff, several German prisoners were brought to our area. They had been separated and one was being interrogated, so we had a good chance to observe the one we were guarding. He appeared to be very young, perhaps 14 or 15 years old. He had a deep vertical slice in his back, perhaps 12 inches long and down to his rib cage. He had been given a cigarette and seemed to be unconcerned about his condition. Probably he was in a state of shock. He had evidently been treated by a medic as the wound seemed clean and free of fresh blood. These were events that I saw first-hand, I heard many other stories from buddies that were very interesting, but I do not intend to include in this bio, any events that I can't verify by my own observations.

The sharpest memory still with me after all these years is the events that took place on the evening of December 18, and the day of the 19<sup>th</sup>, the day we were

surrendered. As it was getting dark, we received orders to form up our vehicles on the Engineer Cutoff to attempt a run down the Bleialf/Schonberg road in order to make a breakthrough to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, giving us a better chance to fight our way through the encirclement and work our way back through Schonberg and hopefully, back to St. Vith. All 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion vehicles were lined up ready to go as darkness fell. As it was almost pitch black we shoved off to drive as fast as we could down the enemy held road. At corners many of our captured field pieces were pointing down the road directly at us. I must have been near the front of the line, as nearly as I made out my jeep wasn't hit by enemy or friendly fire. Ken Smith claimed to be riding on my ammunition trailer, but was thrown off on a corner before we reached 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion on a hill just outside Schonberg. I was stopped by 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion personnel and told to dump my jeep in the river as the Germans were on the low side of the road and occupied Schonberg. After detaching my trailer which had some 81mm mortar ammunition in it, I drove to the right and down to the river, and as best I could determine in the dark, dropped off the bank and buried the radiator in the river bank. After doing this I was told that the Germans held the river also.

Going back up the hill I fell into a large hole. I went down so suddenly that I fell out from underneath my helmet. For what seemed like many minutes, I felt around for it. I could not locate it, so climbed out of the hole and went up the hill and lay down. It was drizzling, cold and damp. I hadn't slept in three nights so didn't much care where I slept or under what conditions. This was a deeply forested area. The shells from the German 88's were exploding in the trees above us. I got some sleep this night but several stray pieces of shrapnel from the 88's hit my face and hands (wrist), caused some bleeding of surface wounds, but didn't cause me to lose much sleep. I was bone tired and didn't much care at that point if the enemy got a direct hit on me.

The next morning, December 19, we had no meal (most of us hadn't eaten since dinner on December 15) but went to work defending our hill. I soon discovered that only two of our Battalion vehicles made it through the intense fire on the German held Bleialf-Schonberg road on the previous evening. The other vehicle was an "H" Company Headquarters jeep driven by Ramey Boetcher. Days, months and years later I learned many of the stories of the demise of the other unfortunate vehicles, how they were shot up, went off the road, missed turns and some were captured. God must have had future plans for me as he guided me safely down that road.

I spent the morning hauling 81mm mortar rounds up the hill from my trailer to the one 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion mortars, which had been set up in a clearing over the crest of the hill. During the day, someone noticed my lack of helmet and gave me one that had a bullet hole right through the side. I was told its previous owner had no further use for it. As I was carrying mortar shells up and over the hill, there was a tall lean fellow digging himself a foxhole just to the right of my path and near the forward side of the hill. When he finished his hole he got into it and nothing could pry him loose. As I passed him for more than an hour as he was digging. (Years later at a Division reunion I was telling this story to other members of "H" Company, 423<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Regiment, and Ramey admitted he had been the one who had dug his hole and wouldn't be moved out. He said, "*I was going to stay out of the way of those 88's*")

At approximately 3:30 PM, we were out of ammunition, had been for some time. A loud speaker came up from the base of the hill, and a voice with no trace of German accent said, "*Your officers have surrendered you. Come down off the hill and form up on the road.*" This was repeated a number of times and the lack of firing of any kind (very quiet) indicated this was probably the end of the war for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion. (Later we were to learn that it wasn't only the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 423<sup>rd</sup> Regiment, that had been surrendered, but our commanding officers Colonel George L. Descheneaux of the 422<sup>nd</sup> Regiment, and Colonel Charles C. Cavender of the 423<sup>rd</sup> Regiment, had indeed surrendered our two regiments.) When the truth of the situation sunk in, I had the immediate job of taking my hand weapons apart and throwing their parts as far as I could into the forest. I could see troops already forming up on the road as I came down the hill.

As I came onto the Bleialf/Schonberg Road, I noticed a headless GI lying in the ditch. His body was the shape and size of one of our husky privates. Later I learned our husky private had survived and was in fine shape. Ramey's jeep was still sitting in the middle of the road and Sergeant Webb was sitting upright in the back seat, dead. The motor was still running. Soldiers I didn't know, brought a badly wounded fellow dragging between them. They set him on the far side of the ditch, gave him a cigarette, he took several puffs and died. We were surrendered to an SS troop, and while nothing was said, many of us recently free soldiers may have had some worries as to how they would treat us. Evidently, the German officer in charge knew or felt the war was almost over or perhaps he was one of the few SS officers who were more humane than what we had been led to believe, we will never know which, but we were not treated badly. His troops lined us up on the road and after a half hour or so, we were marched the six or eight miles to Bleialf. It was just getting dark when we arrived in Bleialf. We slept in the church yard that night (December 19). I still had my heavy GI overcoat, but it was cold and damp and as we had no food for several days and little or no sleep since December 16, I was all set up for one of my winter colds.

On the morning of December 20, we were lined up on the road opposite to the one on which we had arrived the previous evening, ready for the 25-30 mile march to Gerolstein. Still no food. By this time Bud Petersen and I had been reunited and we marched together on our way to the rail junction at Gerolstein. Four or five miles from the start of our march we entered to city of Prum. Other than the central church, every other building had been reduced to rubble. For me it was a very depressing sight. This was really the first physical effects of war that most of us had witnessed - bricks and stones piled haphazardly and flowing into the street.

We had yet many miles to go, marching until dark, arriving in Gerolstein an hour or so after sunset. I remember little of the details of this march as I had awakened that morning with a raging fever. I kept throwing my coat off; Bud kept picking it up and putting it back on me or carried it himself. This probably was a life saver for me. I will always feel I owe Bud more than I can ever repay. We slept on the soiled ground at the bottom of a sheep shed that night. We did have a roof over our heads, however. Still no food.

The next morning (December 21) they say we had something to eat, maybe so but I have no memory of what it might have been. Sometime during the morning we boarded a string of 40/8 boxcars. These are small cars and it was very possible we had more than forty prisoners on each car. We had a can to use as a latrine and an open window (very small covered with barbed wire) to facilitate the release of deposits. The can was used very little – nothing going in so nothing coming out. We had received no food or liquids for days.

Our train's progress was very intermittent – stop and goes. We never knew where we were at any time but learned much later (mostly after we returned home) some of the high points of this trip. We were in the same boxcar from the morning of December 21, until the morning of December 25, never being let out or offered food or drink. We tried to sleep but there wasn't enough room for all of us to sit down, much less all lie down at once. The biggest excitement to occur on this short-distance-long-time trip happened in the Koblenz rail yard the night of December 23/24. British Mosquito light bombers bombed the rail yard extensively. One soldier in a nearby car was shouting at the top of his lungs to God for deliverance. I shouted back that God could hear us without shouting. Several cars were hit with some injuries and deaths, but our car wasn't touched. The rail yard just to the east of us in Limburg must have been the British main target that night as their casualty rate was much higher and the tracks were so disrupted, we never saw the prison camp there to which the Germans originally intended for our train load.

Sometime early in the morning of December 25, Christmas Day, before daylight, our train stopped. We had arrived in Bad Orb. As soon as there was any light from the dawn, we could see a few scattered German officers standing and walking on the platform. They were dressed in natty uniforms all in light pastel colors. At this time we didn't know where we were. As soon as it was fully light, we were let out of our boxcars and lined up in a nearby street in columns of four. The Germans soon had us organized and we were marched up the town's main street, up the hill, approximately one and one half miles, to our new home, Stamlager IX-B, or for short, **Stalag IX-B**. We were the first Americans to arrive at this camp.



*Stalag IX B at Bad Orp*

<http://www.battleofthebulgememories.be/stories26/us-army25/919-my-bulge-story.html>  
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