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A Sherman tank and bust of Gen. McAuliffe commemorate spot where Germans were told 'Nuts' on surrendering.

Back to Bastogne

40 years later, 'Battle of the Bulge' memories remain

By Hugh A. Malligan
AP special correspondent

BASTOGNE, Belgium — They got off a tour bus in their hometown and posed for pictures beside the bust of the American general who had told "Nuts" to a German invitation to surrender and named Adolf Hitler's Christmas 40 years ago.

Veterans of the 101st Airborne Division they were graying, holding a steady 10, but a few shivers or filled out with fatigues. The "Bastogne Bastards of Bastogne" as they called themselves, had tried to hold out being the "Nuts" to the "Schnitzel" when Bastogne was encircled by other Power divisions.

They visited the "Nuts Museum" across from the "Nuts" garage and climbed aboard one of the Sherman tanks that seem to decorate every town square in Belgium and Luxembourg.

Restored jeeps

The "Screaming Eagles" as the division emblem on their caps and the sign of the bus proudly identified them, were escorted around town by a convoy of vintage American jeeps lovingly restored and driven by young Belgians wearing authentic GI uniforms, a fantasy game of dress-up that has become even more popular than date ranches in Belgium.

Some remembered that their cakes ago, crunched in the snow by railroad tracks they were about to cross as German drunks as GI who tried to bust into town in a column of captured Sherman tanks, playing a water-ski game of make-believe Christmas present.

Some, inspired at the distant coverage that upset the lineable 101st Airborne division raising a cross the Meuse River and reach the port of delivery before had a column out, they hunted up their old fashion locations on the outskirts of town, calling how each man was issued a box of TTY to limit those vehicles in the frozen ground of Europe's coldest winter in 50 years.

Fled through memorial

Isolated forest, some in hand, they fled slowly through the star-shaped Memorial to the Battle of the Bulge, which draws 1.5 million tourists a year. At the nearby historical center they retraced World War II's greatest ground battle in three dimensions and a wax museum featuring Gen. Dwight Eisenhower in his jeep and Gen. George Patton with his pearl-handled pistol.

With wives and grown-up kids in tow, the returning veterans sought postcards and Belgian beer in the shops around the square, where in notebooks, Brig. Gen. Anthony McAuliffe, borrowed tabacco and held above from the merchants to commemorate his post and troops.

But in the 40th anniversary year, the battle survivors were unable to get down into the dank cold cellar beneath the administration building of the former German barracks, where on Dec. 23, 1944, he reported.

McAuliffe's reply to the surrender ultimatum: "The German Commander: 'NUTS.'"

The American Commander: "Hardly a day and never a weekend gone by without some U.S. veterans, including the 73d Airborne, etc., in Belgium, the following year, 1945, of Ardennes by the heaviest and heaviest, followed often by a waterfall of a road drawn but more often by a Sherman tank and a long-legged German 88 gun.

In a small park near the crossroads of Emborah, a two-mile-long Patton, in helmet, tank jacket and helmeted "Nuts" (McAuliffe) jeeps, seems to be peering through field

Field Marshal Gen. von Rundstedt's last-ditch counteroffensive broke out at 5:30 a.m. Sunday, Dec. 18, some 20,000 German troops organized in 27 divisions with 800 tanks and 2,000 big guns came thundering out of the mountains and swept along a 60-mile front through the Ardennes. The strategy was to split the American and British lines and cut capture much-needed fuel and ammunition at the border of Ardennes.

By the time it was all over on Jan. 4, a week after Patton had routed a leading tank across the frozen roads to relieve Bastogne, 40,000 Americans were dead, wounded or prisoners of war.

First hit and first to surrender or disperse as a parity retreat was the First Army, Gen. Omar Bradley, a division, Gen. Omar Bradley, a division.

Some remembered that four decades ago, crunched in the snow by the railroad tracks, they were shooting at Germans dressed as GI, who tried to bust into town in a column of captured Sherman tanks, playing a winner-take-all game of make-believe to deliver Bastogne to the Führer as a Christmas present.

Some that had entered the line only two days earlier.

of the 101st "Cotton Lanes" — named for the lion's head on their shoulder patch — who took up positions in the old bagged line tanks, each 400 crew and, some to fight bravely in small isolated groups.

Ten miles north of St. Vith, a shy other museum in the Bulge, just opened across from the sudden old characters of all the monuments in the Ardennes, the six stone walls bearing the names of the 84 victims of the Malmedy massacre.

It happened Dec. 12, the second day of the battle. A company of the central reserve of the U.S. Seventh Armored Division, on its way to help on the demoralized 10th, and a field artillery observation battalion came

deposited the road from Malmedy just as the last tank of Obersturmbannführer Jacobus Pieper's 1st Pioneer Regiment topped the rise of the crossroads in Bastogne.

The quickly captured Americans — about 100 of them — were herded into the open field beside the cafe, searched and relieved of weapons, compasses, maps, cigarettes, wallets, watches and rings.

"It's a long way to 'Temporary Home,'" bawled Pieper, who was proud of his English, as he turned to his captured American jeep.

Pieper, a command of what was called the "Lafayetteville," Hitler's personal SS bodyguard, was not all ways a recognized society of warfare. But the main body of Pieper's battle group disappeared around the bend in the back of one of the city-carrying trucks rose up and fired the pistol into the crowd of unarmed prisoners.

Fired on prisoners

Other than savagery or under the impression that a flight had erupted, the few tanks at each end of the field gazing the prisoners suddenly opened fire with their machine guns. Other passing tanks joined in firing on the prisoners now huddled the ground amid the tangle of bodies.

Sometimes, half-drunken Americans managed to escape into the woods and tried to fight against Pieper at a war crimes trial that sentenced him to be hanged. His sentence was commuted to life jail in 1947 but was released from prison.

On July 14, 1978, Bastogne Day in France, the church body of Jacobus Pieper was found next to his haunting rifle and several empty clips in the smoking ruins of the Bavarian-style chateau, a group calling itself "The Avengers" lightened the Paris newspaper L'Express claiming responsibility for the assassination.

Grim statistics

More than any monuments, the grim statistics written in stone in the military cemeteries near the 2nd Luxembourg airport attest to the course of the Battle of the Bulge. On the battlefield, kept green by the hands of 100,000 soldiers are buried under individual crosses and some are identified and named as if they were the Third Army troops, Gen. Patton, after the war.

Less than a quarter of a mile away is a woodland grove visited by an occasional weeping widow or orphaned child. 10,000 German soldiers are buried in the Sinsbierler military cemetery.

A few days before the Germans launched their last offensive, Eisenhower had led British Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery the war would be over by Christmas.

It wasn't, but the Battle of the Bulge ended the German war.

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