

# Hitler's final furious offensive failed

**EDITOR'S NOTE** — At 5:30 a.m. of Dec. 16, precisely 40 years ago, Hitler's final furious offensive began. It roared through the snowy forests of Belgium and Luxembourg and left 80,000 Americans dead, wounded or captured. The first unit hit and virtually wiped out in the so-called Battle of the Bulge was the 106th Division. An AP reporter who joined the outfit as a rifleman replacement after the battle links up with thousands of veterans searching for the snows of yesterday.

**BASTOGNE, Belgium (AP)** — They got off a tour bus in Place McAuliffe and posed for pictures beside the bust of the American general who said "Nuts" to a German invitation to surrender and ruined Adolf Hitler's Christmas 40 years ago.

Veterans of the 101st Airborne Division, they were graying, balding, mostly fit but a few wheezing or fitted out with pacemakers. The "Battered Bastards of the Bastion at Bastogne," as they called themselves, had lived to tell about being the "hole in the doughnut" when Bastogne was encircled by elite Panzer 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.

The "Screaming Eagles," as the division emblem on their caps and the side 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 dutch ranches in Belgium.

Some remembered that four decades ago, crouched in the snow by the railroad tracks, they were shooting at Germans dressed as GIs 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.

Now, laughing at the obstinate courage that upset the timetable of three Panzer armies racing to cross the Meuse River and reach the port of Antwerp before fuel and ammo ran out, they hunted up their old foxhole legions on the outskirts of town, recalling how each man was issued a block of TNT to blast those foxholes in the frozen ground of Europe's oldest winter in 25 years.

Solemn faced, some in tears, they filed silently through the star-shaped Memorial to the Battle of the Bulge, which draws 1,500,000 tourists a year. At the nearby historical center they relived World War II's greatest pitched battle in films, slideshows and a wax museum featuring Gen. Dwight Eisenhower in his jeep and George Patton with his pearl-handled pistols. With wives and grown-up kids in tow, the returning veterans bought postcards and Belgian lace in the

shops around the square, where its namesake, Brig. Gen. Anthony McAuliffe, borrowed tablecloths and bedspreads from the merchants to camouflage his guns and troops.

But in the 40th anniversary year, the Bulge survivors were unable to go down into the dank coal cellar beneath the administration building of the former German barracks, where on Dec. 22, 1944, a sergeant typed McAuliffe's reply to the surrender ultimatum:

"To the German Commander,  
"NUTS"

"The American Commander."

Now home base for a Belgian artillery unit, the barracks was closed to visitors during the summer after a nocturnal raiding party, believed to be a terrorist group, made off with machine guns and explosives from the arsenal.

So the 101st tour bus rolled on into the hauntingly familiar countryside, criss-crossed with the pig pens that produce the famous sausage and jambon des Ardennes and where the Germans advancing without wire cutters across the fog-shrouded fields were caught in the barbed wire by murderous mortar and machine gun fire from the defenders of Bastogne. Their corpses hung frozen for days like ghost scarecrows in their white snowsuits.

Hardly a day and never a weekend goes by without some U.S. veterans group — the 10th Armored, the 28th Infantry, the 17th Airborne, etc. — invading the towering pine forests of the Ardennes by the busload and occupying the old inns and fishing hotels, flanked often by a waterfall or a trout stream but more often by a Sherman tank and a long-barreled German 88 gun.

"Business is always good. God bless General Patton," says Franco, the young Italian waiter at the Claravallis hotel in Clervaux, where like every place else in Luxembourg the Third Army commander is a national hero for liberating the tiny duchy. Four decades ago, when the bulge erupted along what was supposed to have been a quiet front, this hotel was the command post for a regiment of the U.S. 28th Division, defended by a single tank destroyer in the parking lot and a platoon of riflemen who were burned out of the chateau on the hill by the flame-spouting German Tiger tanks.

The restored chateau, which serves as the "mairie" or town hall, now houses a museum to the Battle of the Bulge. Waiting tourists spoon their ice cream in a pleasant courtyard decorated with flower beds, a fountain and the inevitable Sherman tank and German 88 anti-tank gun, now as much a part of the scenery as gothic cathedrals and medieval castles.

In a small park near the crossroads of Eitelbruck, a twice life-sized General Patton, in helmet, tank jacket and holstered twin .38-caliber pistols, seems to be peering through field glasses across the valley at the old Diekirch brewery, which survived

the battle and now also has become a museum of the Bulge.

The bronze statue, flanked by a Sherman tank, is inscribed "In memory of George Patton Jr., commanding general of the 3rd U.S. Army, whose forces liberated Eitelbruck on the 27 December, 1944, during the Ardennes counteroffensive. Presented by his son, George S. Patton, Capt. U.S. Army."

To take advantage of the better weather, the Belgian government set the official celebration of the 40th anniversary of the Bulge for the weekend of Sept. 22-23. The long line of graying vets however will keep coming right through the Christmas holidays, the time of year when the surrounding pine forests are hip-deep in snow.

Field Marshal Ger von Rundstedt's last-ditch counteroffensive broke out at 5:30 a.m. on Saturday, Dec. 16. Some 220,000 German troops organized in 22 divisions with 980 tanks and 2,000 big guns came thundering out of the mountains and swept along a 65-mile front through the Ardennes forest. The strategy was to split the American and British lines in half and capture much-needed fuel and ammunition at the harbor of Antwerp.

By the time it was all over on Jan. 4, a week after Patton had raced his skidding tanks across the frozen roads to relieve Bastogne, 76,890 Americans were dead, wounded, or prisoners of war.

First hit and first to surrender or disperse in a panicky retreat was the raw, green 106th Division, a draftee outfit that had entered the line only two days earlier. They left the roads cluttered with abandoned trucks, artillery pieces, burning kitchen equipment and a litter of overcoats and gas masks.

The previous Fourth of July, the division had proudly paraded down North Pennsylvania Street in Indianapolis in brand new uniforms.

"Panic, sheer panic flamed that road all day and into the night," concluded the historian of the embarrassed division. Its commander, Maj. Gen. Alan Jones, toppled over with a heart attack when Gen. Matthew Ridgeway relieved him of his command.

Of the 16,000 "Golden Lions" — so named for the lion's head on their shoulder patch — who took up positions in the old Siegfried Line bunkers, only 4,000 came out, some to

fight bravely in small leaderless groups.

Lt. Eric Wood, a Princeton football star who was determined to fight his own "private little war" after his regiment fled, is remembered by a crossroads marker near the village of Meyerode.

His body was found among 200 German corpses near the command post of Sepp Dietrich, commander of the Sixth SS Panzer Army, who de-

nounced "Ami criminals and scoundrels" for ambushing German supply columns and slowing the breakthrough.

There is a monument to the hapless 106th in St. Vith, which was division headquarters during its brief combat history. The town, which was German until the end of World War I, is still spelled the German way, Sankt Vith, on the highway markers on the outskirts.

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