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Germans regroup for one final battle

EDITOR'S NOTE: Today's Saturday Headliner feature is a 40th anniversary remembrance of the Battle of Bulge. The information was compiled from interviews with participants and published historical accounts.

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Courier Staff Assistant

Through the debris and forests of the Ardennes, Adolph Hitler's and the German Panzer Divisions rolled — and rolled and rolled.

Few seriously expected the all-but-defeated remnants of Adolph Hitler's army to strike on that cold morning of Dec. 16, 1944.

But it was the beginning of the Battle of the Bulge, so named for the deep the German army made in the western front of the Allies. Almost 40 years ago today, the battlefield had finally quieted.

The Bulge involved more than 1,000,000 combatants and made these forces the number that fought in Gettysburg decades earlier.

In late summer of 1944, the Germans retreated from France to the prewar borders of Germany. By mid August, the Germans were finished; the Allies had pushed the Germans back against the wall and were anxious to make it official. To the east, the Russians also had the Germans cornered.

But Hitler would not concede the defeat of his Third Reich. Assembling what was left of his army, he prepared what turned out to be his last and most ferocious counteroffensive against the Allies.

The German invasion "should never have been launched," said Dr. Ronald T. Furgason, a history professor at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Although in France the Germans had suffered heavy losses in soldiers and equipment, it still had some supplies and support remaining.

"But after the Battle of the Bulge, they had nothing to fight with," Furgason said.

The Germans held along, and later attacked, a front stretching about 60 miles from Monschau, a German border town in the north, to Echternach, Luxembourg, in the south.

Their target was the Belgian port city of Antwerp. If the Germans captured it, the northern outlet of Allied food, armaments and supplies would be cut off. Hitler hoped to create an invasion across Belgian Ardennes would split American forces stationed to the south and British forces in the north.

Communications and supplies cut off, the Allied threat would be ended and the Germans could concentrate the bulk of his forces against the Soviet Union. Not only would the Germans serve the Americans a setback, but they would also, Hitler thought, buy protection for the vulnerable German industrialized area of Ruhr and Rhine.

Allied commander Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower reasoned that the terrain of the Ardennes was not conducive to combat and instead stationed troops in more maneuverable areas north and south of the region. Although the Ardennes contained steep, rolling hills weaved by dense forests, it was also a region dotted by roads and was less forbidding than thought.

Allied defenses in the central Ardennes were thin. When the Germans charged, there were only six American divisions stationed along the front. Two of the divisions were in what "quiet sector" were either surpassed soldiers tattered from previous combat or had little or no combat experience.

But more was happening than these American troops knew. Under a veil of secrecy, Hitler's Wehrmacht and Waffen-SS soldiers, German Panzer divisions gathered for attack, primarily in the forested Eifel region behind the German border.

All the while, "the American Army was expecting peace," said Furgason, in light of the setback they dealt the enemy in the summer.

Lt. Ronald Hallidin, a member of a pass unit along the front at night, a warning by an Army intelligence officer and indications of an impending attack during confessions by captured prisoners, the threat was mostly discounted.

But rumor became reality on the dawn of Dec. 16, when more than 1,000,000 German troops moving to the sound of 200,000 German troops slowing through deep snow, under the glow of spotlights bounced off clouds as artificial moonlight.

Led by Gonzaloberst der Waffen-SS Josef Dietrich, the 6th Panzer Army, the Germans had the element of surprise and intended within 48 hours to take bridges over the Meuse River, which was about 70 miles west. Once that primary geographical obstacle was crossed, it would have been a straight shot into Antwerp.

Providing support to the south was the 5th Panzer Army, aiming for Bastogne, Belgium, and the extreme southern end of the front came the German 7th Army.

Also participating was a brigade of some 2,000 men from Panzer Brigade 150 in Operation Greif. Some dressed in American uniforms, speaking English and using American weapons and equipment, Greif was to create havoc behind the lines of the Panzer armies by raiding, capturing bridges and spreading rumors while slipping behind American lines.

An American staff sergeant in the 12th Armor Company of the 30th Division, Alex Yarkowsky of Lorraineiana had been "taking it easy for a couple of weeks" in a small town north of Luxembourg when German tanks of the 5th Panzer unit rolled in, their advance halted at the highway crossroads in Scheid.

Yarkowsky, a veteran of Normandy, resting from previous combat, were told about 2 a.m. on Dec. 16 to set up mortars because an enemy patrol was sighted down the road. Although the men of the 28th responded with Sherman tanks and 40mm mortars, the Germans "just came through our line ... They went in like it was nothing," Yarkowsky said.

When his commander ordered the troops to give up their mortars, "We got the heck out of there."

Confused and wounded, the soldiers fled into the woods under darkness, forced and swift crossing. Stumbling toward the direction of American forces, they came upon a house and found a dead American commander inside. They dug foxholes in the yard before retiring.

He and 30 other men in the basement and about as many holed up on the upper floor were resting when the sounds of tanks shook them.

"I counted 13 tanks," said Yarkowsky. "The first three were (American made) Sherman tanks, but they were occupied by Germans. They were dressed as Germans, but they weren't American."

Yarkowsky and the other men **jumped into a foxhole dug for them. In the distance, Americans artillery responded to the Germans. In the ensuing fighting, shrapnel hit Yarkowsky — in the head and hand — as Germans of his companions.**

Yarkowsky remembered the ensuing **halftrucks in search of prisoners arriving the foxholes. Yarkowsky still remembers the order of "hands up, hands up" as men were taken prisoner. In his foxhole, a blinded soldier was crying from pain.**

"I said, 'Shut up, or they'll get you all killed,'" Yarkowsky said.

Fortunately, the foxhole was strewn with timber that concealed the men from a hasty inspection by an enemy soldier.

As the Germans moved on, the men crawled out, one by one, and fled into the woods. Yarkowsky, wounded and without a compass (his compass didn't seem to point him to the right area, again roamed the trees and fields in search of an American outfit.

Muddy, with only one hand grenade on his belt, he stopped at a farm house and knocked on the door of woman. She gave him an apple and directions to an American outfit.

Soon, Yarkowsky spotted some soldiers in a jeep down the road, but aware of German use of American equipment before, he prepared to hide in a ditch.

"What the hell hit you?" one of the soldiers hollered at him.

Recalled Yarkowsky, "When he said that, I was convinced they were Americans."

While Yarkowsky rode off to Bastogne for rounds with medics and military intelligence, then to a hospital in Paris and eventually back to front line), two other units of his 28th Infantry Division were spread thinly near Luxembourg on high ground dubbed by Americans as Skyline Drive. Although they were few and far between, the men of the 28th Division, Yarkowsky said, rigged bridges across a river and moved in with tanks. One northern regiment of the 28th pulled out, intact.

Two regiments of the 106th Division were not as lucky. To the north, the Germans, with tanks and pass-pierced soldiers were surrounded. An armour division that was sent to the rescue was held up by poor roads and visibility, and the Germans closed in on Dec. 19. The surrender of hundreds of Americans was perhaps the worst setback in the campaign.

The 7th Armored group, an infant regiment of the 106th, did manage to delay the German capture of St. Vith by three days, until Dec. 21, when they were permitted to withdraw. The Germans had planned on, but later than they had planned.

The German 7th Army, though not as powerful as its counterparts in the north, penetrated American defenses in the far southern end of the front. Although platoon and company outposts of the 4th Division and a regiment of the 28th were spread thin and overpowered, Germans were held up for four days by a handful of gritty American soldiers defending from an isolated farm.

The worst attrocity of the war in Germany, the Malmedy Massacre, occurred Dec. 17 in a Malmedy. The 6th Panzer Army's 1st SS Division, commanded by Col. Jochen Peiper, broke through cavalry holding the Americans' 99th and 106th divisions. The day before attacking gasoline stockpiles and shooting 30 unarmed American soldiers, Peiper's 2,000-man force gunned down 71 American prisoners of war at a crossroads near the town. More than 100 Americans were assembled in a field and sprayed with machine gun fire. Only a few managed to escape.

Peiper's Panzers sent out their flags and headed toward Stavelot.

By mid-December, the 99th Division and three of its regiments had dug in along a 25-mile front between Hofen and Lauberie, Belgium. Prior to the attack, on Dec. 13, several soldiers of the 99th assembled at Elsenborn Ridge with units of the 2nd Division to secure the Urftsalpere Dam. Hitler had ordered that the surrounding towns in advance of an American offensive.

Command was concerned that if an offensive was launched across the Rhine, the Germans might open the gates of the dam and flush soldiers and equipment downstream.

Command, Lauer, Hoover seven guessed, he would be marching in 2nd Division machine gun section toward a dam he couldn't visualize — or even pronounce.

"They said I'd never see combat," Hoover said, recalling the time he was called into service.

Lauer, a member of Hoover's unit took an abrupt about-face on Dec. 19, back to the ridge to provide support. They suddenly had more to fear than the Germans flooding the river, as they learned the Germans were pouring in to the south.

Ron Johnson, who went on to serve as Indiana County prothonotary for more than 20 years, was a communications sergeant with the 99th's 393rd Infantry Division when the Germans hit. Until then, "it was real quiet" along the Siegfried line, Johnson remembered, "only about 22 miles. Although German patrols would occasionally go through, so would American patrols routinely penetrate the other side.

But this was no routine enemy patrol. Johnson recalled a barrage of mortars followed by tanks, and jumping into his foxhole.

"We held out for a while" before being ordered to withdraw, he said. Soon came enemy paratroopers, some of whom "could speak American — and well enough," presumably to confuse the enemy.

He encountered another German plan to wreak confusion, this time over the radio.

"We got a message to attack El-senborn Ridge," Johnson said. "When we went up, (the Germans) were waiting for us; it was a trap. We got a lot of guns."

The enemy became "very good disguiser" and wore American uniforms and drove jeeps, Johnson said.

Johnson escaped his brush with the Germans and would again later, when he was repairing communication wires that were stretched over the ground to another unit.

"I counted 13 tanks. There were six or seven Germans," he said. "I hid."

During the battle, he was wounded and hospitalized and never returned to the front.

Art G. Hallidin, an Indiana publisher, was a tech sergeant in the 99th Division's 395th Regiment. Central issues were the Germans attempt to cut off the supply of fuel to Hitler. His unit was conducting an offensive on German soil when suddenly the enemy pounded with tanks and artillery.

The 106th Division, on the left, "was struck and almost completely wiped out," Hallidin remembered. The 28th held its position around the towns of Krinkelt-Wirtzfeld until the night of Dec. 18, when it received a radio order to retreat to the outposts near Elsenborn Ridge.

"The men had it rough, dashing through the woods and fields," he said Hallidin. "It was in the St. Vith area where the Germans captured a number of our men, lined them up and shot them."

Hallidin's company continued its retreat toward Elsenborn and was continually pummeled by artillery and jet fighters. Hallidin got a look at the carnage the Germans had wrought as his unit along the way.

As the commander of the 395th, Col. Alexander J. MacKenzie learned when arriving at regimental headquarters at Elsenborn that the radio order to retreat was false — "a German trick."

In "Battle Hatrick," Gen. Walter E. Lauer, 99th Division commander, wrote that the withdrawal opened up the area around Krinkelt-Wirtzfeld, which thus "could have been rolled up by the enemy, who all that day had been attacking in every increasing strength from that very direction."

Lauer learned about the mistake after seeing MacKenzie at the command post.

"I almost passed out," Lauer wrote of his surprise. "Failure to turn the regiment meant disaster."

He ordered the regiment to turn and fight.

"All men, including clerks, cooks, mechanics, truck drivers ... became riflemen," Hallidin said. "This was the greatest German offensive."

The troops made it back to their original position.

"God was on our side that night," Lauer wrote. "The Germans did not take advantage of that mistaken operation. Maybe they did not know it was a trap. Maybe they were too tired to care. Maybe they thought it was a trap. Maybe the heavy casualties they had suffered at the hands of our troops had left them too shattered to follow up closely."

On Dec. 23, Hallidin was wounded by artillery shrapnel and later sent to England for surgery.

Both the Allies and those participants and historians differ as to which units played the most important role and where, the end result was that American troops held the north shoulder at Elsenborn and contained the enemy from taking rendezvous at Stavelot. Although fighting, the 5th German Army was halted near Hofen-Elsenborn. The 6th Panzer Division was eventually stopped between the Orth and Meuse rivers.

Critical to Allied plans to prevent the Germans from reaching that point was the defense of the road center St. Vith and, further west, Bastogne.

With the help of the 82nd Airborne Division, the Americans slowed the advance of Peiper's move toward St. Vith.

All was not well in Bastogne on Dec. 19, however, when the 47th Panzer corps surrounded American troops and sent emmissaries to demand surrender. That brought the now-celebrated response of "Nuts!" from the acting commander of the airborne division, Brig. Gen. Anthony C. McAuliffe.

Lt. Gen. George Patton's troops broke off an engagement in the south and used toward Bastogne with relief. His 4th Armoured Division rolled into the city on Christmas.

No other general would have attempted that," Ferguson said. "They marched a hundred miles all night; they had no hot food or rest."

Fighting in Bastogne was William Ewen, now comptroller for the Gazette. One of the "Tough Umbers" of the 9th Infantry Division's 39th Regiment, the 19-year-old Jersey native was wounded in Belgium's Ardennes, south of the Bulge division, and escaped the initial German onslaught.

But his regiment soon became involved, halting its activity along the Siegfried line to relieve a corrobor of troops in Bastogne the first week of January.

Although combat was intense — he dodged machine gun fire while running through open fields — "Saving to the elements was the worst part," Ewen said. "It was so cold ... and we had no coats on."

Ewen later crossed into Germany and Czechoslovakia, where he was injured, and recovered in a hospital in Paris.

The situation had deteriorated in St. Vith. Americans held tough until Dec. 18, when the Germans broke through and were again on their way to the Meuse.

But the Germans were running out of fuel. Americans scrambled to scrap fuel reserves for fear the Germans might tap them. At one point, the Germans ran out of fuel within a half mile of a large Allied fuel bin near the U.S. 1st Army headquarters.

But on the evening of Dec. 20, following foiled attempt by Americans to sink bridges, Panzer divisions crossed the Ourthe, a small river, and the next before the Meuse.

At that point, about 72 miles short of the Meuse, the Germans ran out of gas. Although they were refueled and went a little farther, nature and the Americans came against them. A cold snap firmed up mud and gave American troops an easier journey west from St. Vith.

The next day, the skies cleared for the first time, providing enough visibility for American planes to strike at German columns. Only the 2nd Panzer division got through, but was deterred by the Americans' 2nd Armour Division on Christmas Day.

Throughout the rest of December and January, American air and ground forces held the Germans from further advance. His counteroffensive lost, Hitler began withdrawing troops from the tip of the bulge, which was eliminated January 1945. By Jan. 25, the battle was over.

Ironically, on the other side of the Meuse sat a huge fuel depot.

The Germans paid dearly for their quest for domination. Aside from incurring 100,000 casualties, Germany lost about 800 tanks and 1,000 planes. The losses in equipment were hard-to to replace for a strapped Germany.

The Allies also lost about 800 tanks, but had an easier time replacing their equipment. Americans suffered approximately 77,000 casualties, including 19,000 killed and 23,000 captured.

Allied troops spent the following spring fighting through the ashes of the German army. On Mar 7, Germany surrendered and the war in Europe was over.

Local World War II veterans, from left, Alex Yarkowsky, William Ewen and Art Hallidin remember the Battle of the Bulge.
(Gazette photo by Bechtel)

1985-01-26 Germans regroup for one final push

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