

The Battle of the Bulge

By ANN DIVINEY
Sun Features Editor

HANOVER — When the 106th Infantry Division arrived in the Ardennes Forest, they were told they'd have an easy task.

Right. It was Dec. 13, 1944, and the 106th had come to relieve the hard-fighting Second Division.

No one told them that in a matter of days, they'd be fighting for their lives in one of the biggest battles of World War II, the Battle of the Bulge.

No one told them because no one knew. Who could have predicted that Hitler would strike here, in the Ardennes, in a move to destroy Allied forces north of the Antwerp-Brussels-Bastogne line.

But that's just what he tried to do. □ □ □

Charles S. Peyser of Hanover commanded 200 men in the 106th — the "hungry and sick," as they jokingly called themselves.

Things had been quiet in the Ardennes for their predecessors, the Second Division, who had made things quite comfortable for themselves.

Peyser remembers snuggling down that first night under a thick comforter, warm and safe.

Right after taps Dec. 15, Peyser went on duty. He worked all through the night, through the next day and into the following night.

At 2:30 a.m. Dec. 16, all hell broke loose. Bombs fell. Soldiers collapsed. Co. A had been hunkered down in a wooded area off to the left. Co. C to the right, and Co. B, Peyser's outfit, waited in reserve.

"There was a good reason for Co. B to be on reserve," Peyser explains. "The most difficult thing in battle is to fill the gaps." Screaming meemies fell all around Co. A. "They had so many casualties it was pitiful," Peyser says.

"All of a sudden, the battalion commander came back from being on the front line and he led our company over to a hilly area, which protected the medical unit."

They marched under cover of darkness, through a foot or more of snow, for four

Charles Peyser

FAMILY: He is married to Gertrude ("Jerry") Tilley Peyser. They have three children: Charles Jr., a psychology professor; Barbara Peyser Mohrman, a school nurse, and Mary ("Betty") Peyser Weil, a substitute elementary teacher.

AGE: 77.

BIRTHPLACE: He was born and raised in Portsmouth, N.H.

EDUCATION: Graduated from the University of New Hampshire in 1937 with a bachelor of science degree in general business and as a second lieutenant in the U.S. Army as a four-year ROTC student.

OCCUPATION: He retired as a manager from Montgomery Wards, where he worked ever since graduation, with the exception of his years of military service. Wards transferred him

hours. Their galoshes felt like they weighed a ton.

It was nighttime, Dec. 17. Peyser's job was to secure the hill. He got two platoons in place, then left with his weapons platoon leader to survey the area.

The lieutenant went left. Peyser went right.

"I came back to where we had split up. I thought I was meeting him," Peyser remembers. "This individual started talking, and it was a German. I didn't realize it until I heard him talk, and then I looked at him."

Peyser did what he had to do. He shot the German.

"If I had spoken before he did, I would have been the one killed," he says. □ □ □

Survival often boils down to just such a matter of seconds.

For Peyser, being wounded ironically also turned out to mean survival. That is how he came to be the only company commander to come out alive.

On Dec. 18, a ricochet bullet hit him in the right calf.



Today (left) and during the war years (right)

to nine locations during that time, but he turned down two promotions to remain in Hanover.

OUTFIT IN BATTLE: Co. B, 424th Infantry Regiment, 106th Division.

RANK DURING BATTLE: First lieutenant.

OVERSEAS DUTY: Left states October 1944, on-line in Germany Dec. 13, 1944, just three days before Battle of Bulge began.

He had been up for three days and three nights.

"I don't think if I'd had my normal senses, and I'd had rest, that I'd even have been hit," he says.

His first sergeant didn't like the way Peyser's wound looked. The leg appeared broken and gangrene threatened to invade the injury.

"The next thing I knew, they were loading me in an ambulance," Peyser remembers.

As the ambulance pulled away, the medic unit disappeared, bombed into oblivion by the Germans despite the big, bright Red Cross on its roof.

Bombs nearly missed the ambulance as it sped away.

Peyser was sent to the rear, loaded on a train, and wound up in a hospital in Paris.

The slug worked its way out of the wound en route, and his leg turned out not to be broken.

In short order, he was up and around, seeing to the wounded and volunteering with the Red Cross. He wrote his wife Gertrude ("Jerry") a 113-page letter.

Even at the hospital, the war made its

presence known.

German planes dropped bombs over Paris.

"I saw the last German plane bomb the railroad station," Peyser remembers. "This hospital was high up on a hill, really exposed, and sirens would ring when there was any possibility of anything."

He remained in hospital 10 days. Then he left for the front again.

Only this time, the odds had changed. By Dec. 22, Patton had attacked north toward beleaguered Bastogne. Devers' 6th Army Group had extended its left to cover his advance.

American and British counterattacks had finished off German penetration by Dietrich and Mantuffel.

By the time Peyser arrived back on line, the weather had lifted and the Allies had made massive strikes from the air.

Hitler's gamble had failed.

By Jan. 18, it was all over.

German losses were some 120,000 men killed, wounded or missing. Allied losses (mostly Americans) were some 7,000 killed, 33,400 wounded, 21,000 captured or missing.

Among the Americans were 86 prisoners captured by the 1st SS Panzer Division at Malmédy Dec. 17, then lined up and machine-gunned to death. □ □ □

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Peyser's memories run the gamut — from the overwhelming responsibility of commanding 200 men, to the pain of being wounded and evacuated, to the suffering of losing close friends and fellow soldiers.

One story — one he actually only heard about later — is especially painful.

After he was wounded, his wife received a telegram. Fearing the worst, she refused to open it. She sat there for hours with the telegram in her lap, believing her husband to be dead.

Recalling the agony she must have felt, Peyser breaks down and cries. He still can't get over it.

What began one cold, snowy, wintry day in a forest half a world away, made its mark on folks the world over.

For some, it was a telegram, unopened. For others, it was a loved one who would not return home.

But for a world at war, it was a victory that helped destroy a tyrant's ambitions and bring about eventual peace.

1992-12-15 Capt Peyser commanded 200 men in the 110th.

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