

Panhandle vets remember battle

SCOTTSBLUFF (AP) — For Al Heintzleman of Scottsbluff, the pre-dawn calm in eastern Belgium on Dec. 16, 1944, was shattered by screaming artillery shells.

"They opened up in the sky all around us," said Heintzleman, who was a U.S. Army sergeant 50 years ago when Adolf Hitler sent his mighty panzer brigades, 250,000-strong, crashing into the dense Ardennes Forest.

It was Nazi Germany's last-ditch effort to turn the tide of World War II, and it caught U.S. troops off guard.

"There were tanks coming after our infantry, and there was no way we could hold," said Richard Reinhardt, a retired dentist and a Scottsbluff native. He also was an Army sergeant serving at the front during the Battle of the Bulge.

The fight took its name from the 60-mile-deep bulge in Allied lines created by the German offensive before it was turned back.

Reinhardt had been holed up in a farmhouse with other medics from

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Richard Reinhardt, veteran

the untested 106th Infantry Division. It had replaced Heintzleman's 2nd Division on the front lines six days before.

To the south, in the middle of Luxembourg, Pvt. James E. Thayer and his fellow 95th Division combat scouts had just left the front for the first time in nearly four months.

In the six months since the D-Day invasion, Allied forces had swept the Germans back to the German-Belgian border.

Heintzleman's 741st Tank Battalion, part of D-Day's first wave on Omaha Beach, reached the border at Schonberg, Belgium, in October.

Thayer, now a Sidney physician, was nearing Germany's wine-grow-

ing Moselle Valley.

But cold, snowy weather grounded Allied planes and forced U.S. Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower to pause before resuming the assault. Heintzleman's unit and other 2nd Division units were pulled back to rest and regroup farther north.

U.S. commanders replaced them in the line with Reinhardt's 106th Division, which hadn't come under fire during its several weeks in Europe.

That's what Field Marshal Karl Gerd von Rundstedt, Hitler's commander on the Western Front, was counting on. His generals sent their spearheads right at the 106th and three other weak U.S. divisions.

The attack roused Reinhardt and the medics, who hurried 100 yards

to the front line, then fell back as they evacuated the wounded of the 424th Regiment. It was the only one of the 106th Division's three regiments to survive.

For three days, Reinhardt and the medics recovered fallen GIs under heavy fire as the 424th stubbornly held. One mission, to evacuate an infantry squad surrounded by German tanks, earned Reinhardt a Bronze Star and a battlefield promotion to second lieutenant.

In the north, Heintzleman's tank battalion sloshed through 18 inches of fresh snow to the village of Rocherath, the northern point of the Germans' 25-mile battle front.

Heintzleman, a communications sergeant in the 741st's B Company, joined his outfit's 150 men and 15 tanks in a three-day wrestling match for Rocherath's homes and churches.

"Some of our guys woke up in a church, and they woke up one morning with German tanks on one side of the church and our tanks on the other side," said Heintzleman.

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