AMERICAN TRAGEDY: 106TH INFANTRY DIVISION'S BATTLE OF THE BULGE

THOUSANDS OF U.S. SOLDIERS WERE DOOMED BY CIRCUMSTANCES BEYOND THEIR CONTROL.

BY JERRY D. MORELOCK

December 1944. This seized German photograph shows a German tank passing a column of American prisoners taken during the Battle of the Bulge. Two regiments of 106th Infantry Division were captured in the early days of the German offensive after they were cut off east of St. Vith.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

ON DECEMBER 19, 1944, the fourth day of the World War II German Ardennes Offensive, known as the Battle of the Bulge, an American tragedy occurred in the forested hills just east of the small Belgian crossroads town of St. Vith. Hugh Cole, author of the official U.S. Army history of the battle, judged it "the most serious reverse suffered by American arms during the operations of 1944-45 in the European Theater." That "reverse" was the surrender of two regiments of U.S. 106th Infantry Division to advancing Germans – nearly *8,000* American Soldiers captured at a single stroke. To put the disaster into perspective, it was exceeded only by the April-May 1942 early war surrender of 15,000 U.S. troops on Bataan and Corregidor in the Philippines.

Yet the tragedy that befell the 106th was *not* due to lack of bravery or fighting spirit on the part of the division's Soldiers. Instead, decisions made by U.S. War Department policy-makers and senior operational commanders in Europe long before the Battle of the Bulge began on December 16, 1944, doomed the 106th to disastrous failure in its first combat action.

Winston Churchill once famously lamented, "The terrible *ifs* accumulate" – certainly the 106th's destruction is a tale of the "terrible *ifs*" of World War II manpower mobilization and personnel planning. For *if* the United States had mobilized more than 89 divisions to fight a multifront global war, and *if* the competing military services had better distributed the available manpower pool, and *if* Army staff planners had more accurately predicted the tremendously high casualties infantrymen would suffer, and *if* a less disruptive way to replace those losses had been implemented, and even *if* the European Theater supreme command had developed an operational strategy to utilize its divisions without having to assign nearly every one of them to front-line combat, then perhaps those thousands of 106th Division Soldiers could have been spared suffering and death. But those things were not to be, and the result was that the 106th's story became a tragic case study of the true *human cost* of flawed military policy.

TOP LEFT: "Golden Lion" shoulder patch of 106th Infantry Division. ABOVE: December 1944. German Waffen-SS troops ride in a halftrack during the Ardennes Offensive. By choosing to attack through the thinly defended Ardennes region, Adolf Hitler achieved much initial success, including the capture of nearly 8,000 106th Infantry Division Soldiers near the Schnee Eifel.

"POSTER CHILD" DIVISION

No American unit in World War II suffered more from Army manpower policy failures than did 106th Infantry Division. It was the "poster child" division of everything wrong with the system. Four of those policy failures proved major influences on the unit's ultimate destruction: the insufficient number of U.S. divisions created; the manner in which military services' competition for available manpower was handled; a poorly designed system for dealing with casualties and replacements; and the implementation of a "broad front" strategy.

NUMBER OF U.S. DIVISIONS. The most basic decision when mobilizing an army for war is determining how large that force will be – i.e., how many divisions (an army's basic building blocks) will be created. Before Japan's Pearl Harbor attack brought America into the war, Army planners led by Major (later General) Albert C. Wedemeyer had projected mobilizing 213 U.S. divisions (September 1941 "Victory Plan") to defeat (with its Allies) Germany, Italy and Japan, whose divisions numbered many hundreds. However, during World War II, the U.S. Army ultimately mobilized only *89* divisions to fight the multifront global war (briefly, 90 divisions were mobilized, but 2d Cavalry Division was deactivated in May 1944).

Several reasons account for the disparity between the projected 213 divisions and the 89 that were actually mobilized. For example, Wedemeyer predicted Russia's early defeat; but instead, the beleaguered Red Army rallied, tying down two-thirds of Adolf Hitler's army for the duration of the war. (See *Battle Studies*, p. 36.) But a principal reason for the disparity was the gross underestimation of the huge logistical "tail" needed to support the fighting "teeth" of modern industrialized warfare. Actually, Wedemeyer correctly estimated the number of *personnel* the Army would mobilize (8 million), but he based his estimate of divisions on one support Soldier for every one fighting Soldier, when in fact at least *three* support troops were required to maintain one front-line fighting Soldier.

The global war's demands stretched those 89 U.S. Army divisions dangerously thin. By 1945, all American Army divisions were deployed in front-line combat – 61 of them, including the 106th, in northwest Europe. What this meant to the 106th's Soldiers was that as soon as they arrived in Europe they were immediately placed in front-line positions – only four days before Germany's most powerful offensive in the West smashed into them.

SERVICES' COMPETITION FOR MANPOWER. Another major policy issue that affected 106th Infantry Division was the competition among the Army, Navy and Army Air Forces for what each service considered its "fair share" of available manpower (16 million Americans served during the war). The problem was determining how large a slice of the "manpower pie" each service would get – and since the size of the pie was fixed, the more one service got, the less the others received. Although not a serious problem during early war mobilization (1941-43), it reached crisis proportions when in 1944 U.S. fighting forces (mainly Army ground combat units in Europe) began suffering massive casualties and a serious shortage of personnel to replace those losses. An inadequate replacement system exacerbated the problem, but its root cause was the services' manpower competition.

That the sea services (Navy and Marine Corps) would get their "fair share" of the manpower was never an issue for Joint Chiefs of Staff de-

1943. U.S. Soldiers stand ready for inspection during maneuvers in Tennessee. Nearly 60 percent of 106th Infantry Division's manpower was gutted during the unit's 20-month training program prior to its deployment overseas, creating a serious shortage of experienced leaders.

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Representative photo
Not the 106th Div

1946. Lt. Gen. Albert C. Wedemeyer (left) meets with Gen. George C. Marshall after World War II. Wedemeyer was the author of the "Victory Plan," which laid out the number of personnel needed to achieve victory in the war.

bate – American forces sent overseas required massive amounts of shipping to transport and support them and strong fleets of U.S. warships to protect them and fight naval battles to control the seas. By 1945, U.S. sea services accounted for about 4 million of the total American military peak strength of 12.3 million personnel.

Army ground forces' strongest competitor for personnel – in quantity and quality – was the Army Air Forces. Even though the Air Force did not become a separate service until 1947, it was essentially treated as one during World War II. Army Air Forces head General Henry "Hap" Arnold was a Joint Chiefs of Staff member, and he, not Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall, ran the "Army" Air Forces. Indeed, theater Air Forces commanders typically answered directly to Arnold in Washington, not to their respective theater commanders (e.g., Ike Eisenhower, Douglas MacArthur and Chester Nimitz). Yet the Army's root problem with the Air Forces was not about who was "in charge." Rather, the issue significantly impacting 106th Division was the immense manpower share the Air Forces claimed, which by 1944 was *2.4 million* personnel.

This huge diversion of manpower was principally due to the air commanders' single-minded pursuit of strategic bombing in Europe and the Pacific – a costly effort to show that the Air Forces could "win the war" through strategic bombing of enemy cities and industries (campaigns whose ultimate effectiveness is still debated). In mid-1944, when Army ground forces were desperately scrambling to replace massive combat casualties, *100,000* men were diverted to the Air Forces' B-29 strategic bomber project. In return, the Army received a few thousand flight school "washouts" – disappointed would-be pilots hardly thrilled at becoming footslogging infantrymen.

The Air Forces' manpower competition deprived Army ground forces of the personnel needed for building more combat divisions and replacing the enormous casualties suffered by existing divisions. Thus the 106th Division found itself prematurely on the front line in mid-December 1944 simply because there was no alternative to its immediate combat use.

CASUALTIES AND REPLACEMENTS. A closely related problem was a *two-part* failure by War Department planners. Their initial failure was grossly underestimating the massive infantry casualties front-line divisions would suffer once American forces entered combat worldwide. The second, more egregious failure was their inability to create a replacement system that functioned smoothly and efficiently without resorting to "gutting" divisions still in training in the United States. As much as any policy failure, the flawed replacement system set up 106th Division's destruction.

Bitter combat experience by mid-1944 revealed that infantrymen accounted for about 90 percent of all ground forces battle casualties. Both the high number and the inordinate drain on riflemen surprised War Department planners, who had based their prewar estimates on the best data available at the time – World War I figures. In Europe, by mid-December 1944, General Omar Bradley's 12th Army Group was short 30,000 Soldiers, 20,000 of them infantrymen. Yet the replacement problem had surfaced months earlier, and the War Department's "solution" was draconian: As had been done in World War I, divisions in stateside training preparing for overseas deployment were stripped of key leaders and thousands of Soldiers who were immediately sent to replace front-line divisions' combat losses.

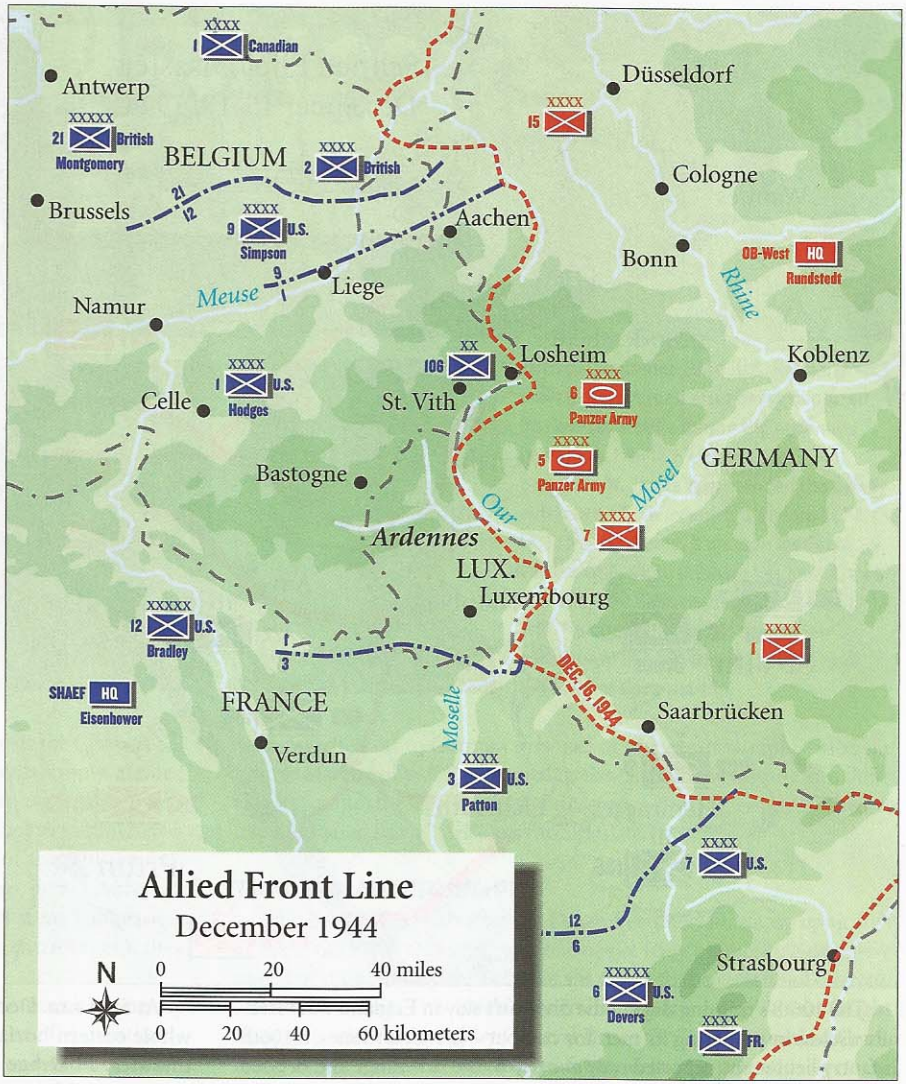
Few units were harder hit by this shortsighted policy than 106th Infantry Division. During April-August 1944, 7,247 Soldiers were stripped from the 106th – whose total strength was only 13,273 – and sent overseas as replacements while the division was in its final months of training. No unit can lose over 60 percent of its "best and brightest" Soldiers and key small unit leaders during its most critical training period and still retain a high level of combat effectiveness. Although by the time the 106th embarked for Europe in October 1944, the division had regained its full *numerical* strength (mainly by assigning non-infantry specialty Soldiers), it could not quickly recover from the staggering loss of trained leaders and men. When the full force of the German Ardennes Offensive slammed into the 106th December 16, 1944, the division's troops paid a terrible price for War Department planners' expedient measures to "solve" the replacement problem.

"BROAD FRONT" STRATEGY. The decision to mobilize only 89 divisions significantly affected the strategy adopted by Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, to fight the war in France and Germany. Often misnamed Ike's "broad front" strategy, it was actually an advance along multiple axes by U.S., British, Canadian and French armies. Despite postwar criticism of Ike's strategy – led by British Field Marshal Montgomery – attacking an outnumbered, outgunned, outresourced enemy along multiple axes in the reasonable ex-

pectation that he must break somewhere was a proven war winner (one famous example was Ulysses Grant's winning Civil War strategy against the outnumbered Confederacy). But Ike's strategy had two flaws in practical application: It required enough combat divisions to maintain a continuous, 350-mile front from the English Channel to the Swiss border, as well as sufficient divisions to mount multiple offensives; and it required a constant flow of replacements to keep all divisions up to fighting strength in the face of the tremendous casualties such a strategy produces.

These dual flaws disastrously determined the 106th's tragic fate. Ike could only maintain multiple offensives with a limited number of divisions by intentionally leaving the 80-mile Ardennes sector of the extended front line dangerously thin. Thus when the brand-new 106th Division arrived in Europe – already victimized by having thousands of Soldiers ripped from it during its critical training phase – the division was immediately plugged into a perilously exposed front-line position.

Within four days of occupying the Ardennes position, the 106th was hit by the German offensive's main attack. Four days later, the "poster child" division of everything wrong with U.S. Army World War II manpower policy was destroyed. War Department policy failures, theater strategy flaws and the massive surprise German offensive combined to create a "perfect storm" that literally swept the 106th from the battlefield.



GHOST FRONT. To gather combat power to maintain Allied offensives, Ike Eisenhower thinly manned the 80-mile Ardennes sector. This deceptively quiet section of the 350-mile Allied line seemed a safe area for rebuilding battle-shattered divisions and introducing newly arrived units – like 106th Infantry Division – to combat.

GOLDEN LIONS IN THE ARDENNES

The 106th Infantry Division, nicknamed "Golden Lions," was activated March 1943 at Camp Jackson, S.C. Comprising over 13,000 personnel, its major combat formations were the 422d, 423d and 424th infantry regiments plus supporting artillery, engineer, signal, tank destroyer, anti-aircraft, reconnaissance, medical and logistical units. Under division commander Major General Alan W. Jones, the unit conducted a 20-month training program that included basic soldier and advanced individual training, combined arms exercises and the March 1944 Tennessee Maneuvers. Yet that same month, Army replacement system failures precipitated the debilitating process of gutting 60 percent of the unit, causing continual training disruptions lasting for the next five months.

The 106th eventually achieved full *numerical* strength before shipping overseas in October 1944 – first to England and then to the front in Belgium in early December. But the division's new men – through no fault of their own – could not make up for the loss of thousands of infantrymen who had trained with the division for many months. To use a football analogy, it was like replacing the vital first string of a veteran football team with rookie walk-ons on the eve of the Big Game – a recipe for disaster.

The newcomers came from three main sources: non-infantrymen scrounged from stateside units (many whose original units were glad to be rid of them); former air cadets who had washed out of flight school; and Army Specialized Training Program participants. The ASTP was an elite program sending promising inductees (150,000 at the program's peak) to colleges with officer commissioning upon their graduation. Each division received 1,500-3,000 "ASTPers" to backfill ranks depleted by the replacement crisis. Canceling most of ASTP and sending the disappointed men to serve as "foxhole filler" infantrymen understandably created morale problems among these extremely bright young men. One infantry company commander praised the former ASTPers' intelligence, but complained that their effectiveness was severely limited by their continual "smart-ass attitude." The 106th sailed for Europe with many unhappy Soldiers in its ranks.

to better defensive positions farther west near St. Vith. An inexperienced switchboard operator inadvertently disconnected the line for a moment at a critical point in the discussion, leading to confusion regarding the agreed upon course of action for the two regiments: Middleton thought Jones was safely pulling them back, while Jones believed Middleton had approved his decision to keep them in place. Leaving the two regiments exposed on the Schnee Eifel effectively sealed their fate – and cost Jones his division.

ABOVE: December 1944. U.S. soldiers march down a road after being captured by German troops during the Ardennes Offensive. **FAR LEFT:** Harris (1943). Maj. Gen. Alan W. Jones commanded the newly activated 106th Infantry Division. **LEFT:** Lt. L. Martin Jones, a platoon leader in Company G, 423d Infantry Regiment, was one of 8,000 Soldiers captured near St. Vith. He spent the rest of the war as a POW until liberated May 2, 1945, near the town of Bad Orb.

Yet the 422d and 423d regiments' dire fate still might not have been beyond redemption if the units had been led by determined, combat-experienced commanders able to thoroughly train their regiments prior to entering combat. But neither Colonel George L. Descheneaux Jr., commanding the 422d, nor Colonel Charles C. Cavender, commanding the 423d, proved able to meet the challenge. As the battle swirled around their regiments, the two commanders – operating independently without coordinating their actions – did little to impede the German advance around their units' flanks. Instead, the colonels simply awaited Jones' orders. By morning on December 18, both units realized their regiments were cut off and surrounded, yet they chose not to execute determined, coordinated counterattacks to break out of the still tenuous enemy encirclement. (See Schnee Eifel Disaster map, p. 38.) Although Descheneaux and Cavender finally cobbled together some halfhearted, uncoordinated attacks in an attempt to escape the encirclement, they gave up even these weak efforts December 19.

At 4 p.m. December 19, with food, water and ammunition nearly gone, both commanders – once again, independent of each other – decided to surrender their regiments. To the 422d and 423d's Golden Lions, who had hardly been given the chance to engage in serious combat, the surrender decision seemed a betrayal. One Soldier recalled, "The order came down the line to throw up our hands. My destroyed rear weapons, stunned, and cried, felt empty and lonely inside. Our fighting was over. We were beaten, tired, hungry and cold." An enlisted man, overcome by frustration and anger, approached a 106th Division officer who had passed along the surrender order and punched him in the mouth.

Whether the 422d and 423d could have fought their way out of the encirclement had they been better led, thoroughly trained and more combat-experienced remains debatable. But one artillery battalion commander who became a true hero in the Battle of St. Vith and who led his unit out of enemy encirclement twice on the battle's first day said, "A Boy Scout could have led them off of that hill."

Although the 106th's Soldiers fought the best they could, they were betrayed by an egregiously flawed system that permitted a partially trained, inexperienced division to enter combat ill prepared to deal with the consequences. The 106th's "American Tragedy" – nearly 8,000 Soldiers marched off to German prisoner of war camps – represented the ultimate failure of War Department policy. Echoing Winston Churchill's famous quote, the 106th's destruction was a horrific example of what happens when those "terrible responsibilities"

TRAGEDY AND TRIUMPH

The Battle of St. Vith after the December 19, 1944, catastrophic loss of the 106th's two regiments was one of the truly heroic, epic defensive stands of those during the Battle of the Bulge that ensured the German offensive's defeat. The 106th's surviving regiment, the 424th, fought alongside other units led by General Bruce C. Clarke's Combat Command B, 7th Armored Division, to finally delay for an entire week the Germans' capture of the vital crossroads. More than any other action – including the much heralded 101st Airborne Division's stand at Bastogne – Clarke's inspired St. Vith defense turned the tide of the Battle of the Bulge. And St. Vith was clearly Clarke's triumph. On December 17, a shaken and demoralized General Alan Jones had turned over the battle to Clarke, saying, "You take command. I've lost a division quicker than any commander in the U.S. Army."

Jones' admission notwithstanding, the tragic fact was that the division was "lost" before the Germans even fired the first shots of the battle. The 106th's "American Tragedy" in the Ardennes is an enduring lesson of the human cost of flawed policy decisions – an object lesson that military planners and their civilian leaders should never forget. ★

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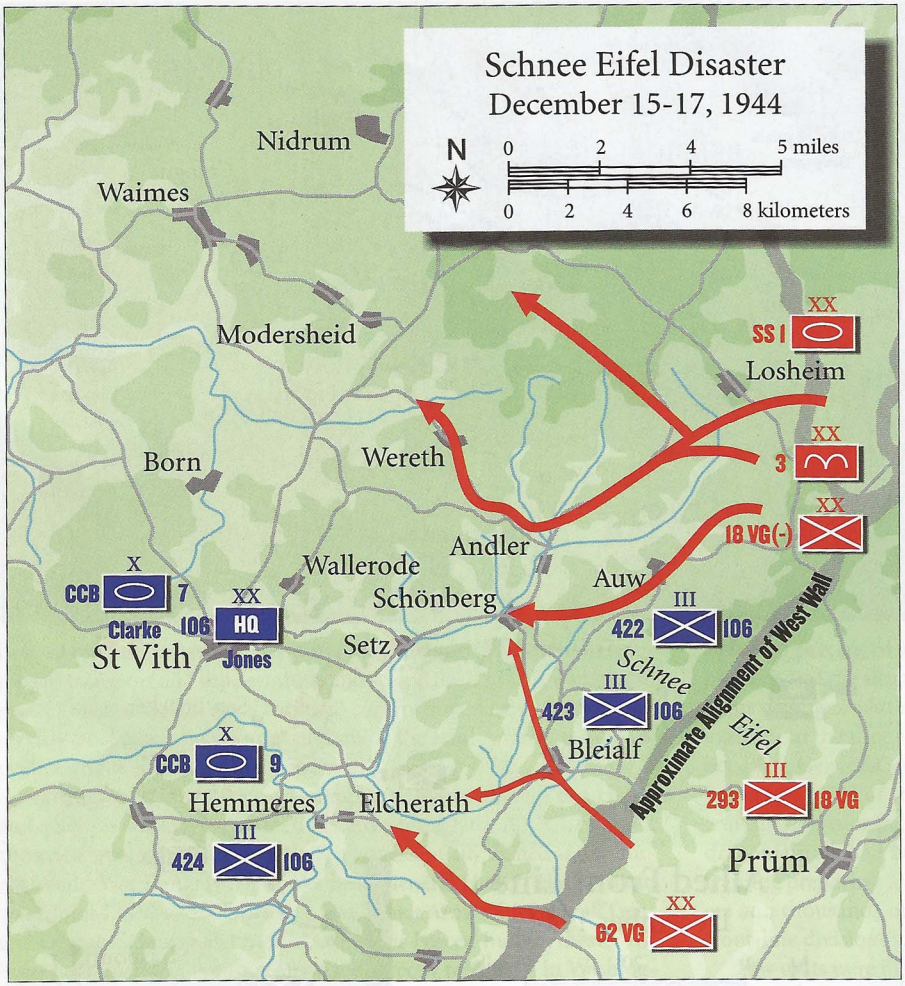
For further reading, check out Morelock's book "Generals of the Ardennes: American Leadership in the Battle of the Bulge" (University Press of the Pacific, 2005).

"ACE" thanks L. Martin Jones of Lawrence, Kan., for his assistance with this article. Jones was an infantry lieutenant who endured the 106th Division's Battle of the Bulge ordeal. Read "Martin Jones' Odyssey" in the January 2006 "ACE."



SCHNEE EIFEL DISASTER. The momentum of the December 16, 1944, German attack quickly enveloped the flanks of 106th Infantry Division's two regiments occupying dangerously exposed positions on the Schnee Eifel plateau east of St. Vith, Belgium. When the regiments' weak, belated breakout attempts failed, their commanders surrendered the units December 19.

The 106th's training during the division's stay in England was virtually useless in preparing its men for combat – L. Martin Jones, a 106th infantry lieutenant, reported only *one* trip to the rifle range and decried most "training" as merely attending lectures and watching films. The division departed England in early December 1944, and then December 10-12, it took over front-line positions east of St. Vith from the battered 2d Infantry Division, which was still recovering from heavy losses in the brutal Hürtgen Forest battle (September-December 1944).

General Alan Jones chose a former school in St. Vith for his division headquarters, but higher headquarters directed *exactly* where he was to position his infantry regiments. So although Jones was held accountable for the 106th's combat performance, he had no control over the division's tactical disposition. The reason for the extraordinary restriction placed on Jones was that the 106th's 22-mile sector of the Ardennes, which was three to four times wider than a normal division sector, included hard-won positions within the German Siegfried Line (West Wall) fortifications on the Schnee Eifel plateau's key terrain, heavily forested high ground 12 miles east of St. Vith. Jones was ordered to place two infantry regiments – two-thirds of the 106th's combat power – in the exposed Schnee Eifel positions. He worried that if the Germans mounted a major attack, these regiments could quickly be cut off and surrounded. Beginning December 16, that's exactly what happened.

No one in the Allied high command imagined that Hitler, at this stage of the war, would launch a surprise attack through the rugged Ardennes – despite the fact the Germans had invaded through the Ardennes in 1870, 1914 and 1940. The 80-mile Ardennes sector was known as the "Ghost Front," a presumably quiet sector where battered divisions were rested and brand-new units, like the 106th, were introduced to combat with what was thought to be little risk. (See Allied Front Line map, p. 49.) To maintain multiple offensives, Eisenhower purposely manned the Ghost Front with only three divisions: the 106th, and the 4th and 28th infantry divisions recovering from the Hürtgen Forest debacle. Although the new 9th Armored Division was present, one of its three combat commands was away reinforcing V Corps north of the Ardennes. The divisions were under Major General Troy Middleton's VIII Corps command, headquartered in Bastogne.

DISASTER ON THE SCHNEE EIFEL

At 5:30 a.m. December 16, 1944, 106th Division Soldiers saw the whole eastern horizon erupt in bright flashes. Then for the next 45 minutes, a barrage of high explosive shells from 2,000 German artillery guns blasted U.S. front-line positions, pummeled road junctions and cut communications wire lines between rear headquarters and forward units. Even before the bombardment stopped, the initial assault troops spearheading 200,000 German infantrymen and 1,000 panzers hit Middleton's Ardennes sector defended by barely 80,000 infantrymen and 240 tanks.

Despite cut wire lines, Jones received front-line reports indicating a major German offensive had begun all along the division's overextended front line. The 422d and 423d regiments on the Schnee Eifel reported enemy attacks already moving around their flanks, and the 106th Division's inexperienced staff was quickly overwhelmed by the fast-moving battle. By midday, the division's meager reserve had been committed, yet the German juggernaut kept moving relentlessly forward.

That evening, the battle's most pivotal moment affecting the 106th's fate arrived when Jones spoke by telephone with Middleton, his corps commander. The issue was whether Jones should withdraw the 106th's two dangerously exposed regiments on the Schnee Eifel