

Ken Smith

**423rd Regiment
106th Infantry Division
Stalag IX-B, Bad Orb**

**PRISONER OF WAR
DECEMBER 19, 1944-APRIL 2, 1945
STALAG IXB**

**A DAY IN INFAMY
December 7, 1941**

Ken's story begins on a Sunday afternoon December 7th, 1941 as a sixteen year old boy. It was a beautiful day. Ken and his brother came into the house and from the look on their father's face the two brothers knew something serious was going on. Ken's father was listen-ing to the old Zenith six volt battery operated radio. He told the boys that the Japanese had just attack Pearl Harbor and told them to set down and listen to it because it was going to affect all of their lives. "I don't know what happened to me at that moment, but I can remember it as if it was yesterday. I knew I would be in the military as soon as I was old enough. I wanted to be.

I was 16 and had already quit school and I worked for a oil contractor. I worked most of the time until my 18th birthday which was January 25, 1943. About a week later I went to the draft board and told them that I wanted to be in the next bunch that was going in. In March they called me up. I wanted to go in the Marines. They sent me to Chicago for my physical and told me then that the Marine quota was full. I asked for the Navy and I got orders for Scott Air Force Base. I thought well that won't be to bad to be in the Air force and after I got to the base I got another set of orders and two days later I was headed for Fort Jackson. South Carolina for Army Infantry. They were just activating a new division. The [106th Infantry division](#)"

**TRAINING WITH COMPANY II, 423RD INFANTRY REGIMENT
March 1943**

Ken was assigned to a heavy weapons unit H Company 423rd Infantry Regiment. He felt fortunate to be in a newly formed unit because for the most part everyone was equal. Basic training was a little more demanding than Ken thought it should be." I was fighting the system for about the first three weeks because I thought it was a little tougher than I wanted," Ken said. "I had a platoon Sergeant, Sergeant Webb. He called me into his office one night. He said he wanted to talk to me. He told me that I was just going to make it harder on my self by rebelling and talked with me for a long time to try and change my attitude. I am glad he did because I did change my attitude and at the end of training I was promoted to Corporal."

Orders came down that a number of men were going to be taken out of the outfit and sent overseas as replacements. Ken had enlisted to fight and he volunteered to be a replacement, but they turned him down. Instead he went into advanced training and finally ended up in the Tennessee mountains on maneuvers. Ken was ambitious and an excellent soldier, but once again he ran into trouble. He and a Lieutenant got into a disagreement and in the end Ken was busted back to Private.

AWOL

It made Ken so mad that he went to a bar, got drunk, and went over the hill. "I had some friends in Indianapolis and I went and stayed with them, Ken said. "I worked for thirty days driving a truck for Roadway Express under my friends name and social security number. After that I went back home in Mt. Carmel, Illinois. the Chief of Police saw me and told me that if I didn't get out of town he was going to arrest me because he had a warrant. I left town and went back to Indianapolis. Three days later I was walking down the street and I saw a Mess Sergeant from H company. The unit by now had moved to [Camp Atterbury](#) near Indianapolis. I asked how things were going. I knew I had to go back, but I didn't want to be caught. I still felt a duty to my country, hut I had made a mistake and I didn't know how to correct ~t. I decided that I would turn myself in to the company hoping that it wouldn't be as bad on me. I caught a bus back up to Atterbury and walked into the barrack. The first sergeant was setting behind his desk and I said, "First sergeant I want to turn my self in." He looked at me and said. "Smith. my ass bleeds for you." Then he told me to go over to a certain barracks and we would take the matter up the next morning.

The next morning the company commander called me in. He had all my records. Lip to the time that I went over the hill I had a good record. He wanted to know what made me do such a thing. I probably wouldn't have done it if I hadn't been drunk, but he told me that he would have to court martial me. He would go as light as he could. I had a special court martial and I got six months at hard labor and loss of two-thirds of my pay. They took me back to the barracks. I didn't have any gear and I was waiting for them to take me to the stockade. About two hours later the run came over and took me to the Captains office. He had all my records out on his desk and he went over some of them. Then he saw where I volunteered to go overseas. He asked me if I still wanted to go. I told him that's what I joined the Army for and he told me that he was going to send me as a replacement. I-Ic would suspend my sentence, but I would still lose my pay. I was relieved and went back to the barracks still under armed guard. A short time later he called me back to his office. He told me there was a problem that he couldn't send me overseas without a furlough. I swear to God five days later I was home on leave.

When I got back my orders were delayed and I was sent to work in a motor pool. I worked there most of the summer and by Fall we got word that the entire unit was being shipped overseas. We had some proficiency test that we had to take. The Captain came and got me and wanted me to take a squad for the test. We had our water cooled machine guns and the way it worked we would set up fire at targets until we were told to advance. We did this in three stages. I wanted to do something for the Captain since he helped me and I worked my butt off. We got the highest score and that was the end of my motor pool days. I was back in the infantry as a gunner."

CROSSING THE Atlantic October 1944

On October 8, 1943 Ken and his unit left Indianapolis by train and two days later they were in Massachusetts. Then after eight idle days on October 16th they boarded a train to New York Harbor and boarded the Queen Elizabeth. Five days later they had crossed the Atlantic and landed in Scotland. October 24th they boarded a train for a trip to Totington, England where they stayed until November 17th.

BORN, BELGIUM December 1, 1944 -December 15, 1944

On December 1 the 423RD loaded aboard LSTs and started across the English channel. The LSTs returned to England a short time later however because of engine trouble. Five days later repairs were complete and the unit crossed a rough English Channel and landed in France on December 5th. They were trucked from there in open trucks in the rain and four days later made it to Born, Belgium. Company's G, H, and Headquarters Company remained in Born while Companies E and F were moved to the near by village of Medell. These companies were in division reserve. The rest of the outfit had moved up on the Siegfried Line.

Thinking the Ardennes was the least likely spot for a German offensive, American Staff Commanders chose to keep the line thin, so that the manpower might concentrate on offensives north and south of the Ardennes. The American line was thinly held by three divisions and a part of a fourth, while one division remained in reserve. As Ken recalls it was a big mistake, "even in training today a infantry division is only capable of covering over a three mile front. The 423rd regiment alone was covering a seven mile front. One battalion in the 424th was in reserve in another nearby town. The 422nd, 423rd, and 424th regiments were covering a 26 mile front of the Siegfried line. There hadn't been any action in that area in weeks. During the time from December 11th to the 16th, 1944, it was obvious that there was a big build up going on behind the German lines. Reports were going back hourly. about what was going on. but it was all being ignored."

The battle that was to begin on December 16th was Hitler's last big gamble. He sent three powerful German armies plunging into the semi-mountainous, heavy-forested Ardennes region of eastern Belgium and northern Luxembourg. Their goal was to reach the sea, trap four Allied armies, and impel a negotiated peace on the Western front.

BATTLE OF THE BULGE

December 16, 1944 -December 19, 1944

DECEMBER 16TH

At 5:30 A.M. on December 16th the Germans started their offensive across the rough forested and rocky terrain. It was bitter cold. Snow mixed with rain was falling from the overcast skies. The 423RD regiment was right in the middle of it. The first German outfit that hit went around the unit. "We were ordered to move up and set up a defense to secure the roads north and east from Schonberg, Germany." Ken recalls. "We did and were set up on the roads by the evening. The Cavalry and engineer units that had positions at Andler and Auw begin making a fast withdrawal. They were moving from the north headed toward Schonberg.

DECEMBER 17TH

Early in the morning Ken's unit begin to receive heavy resistance. "We lost a lot of men that day. We were ordered to move up the road and support 589th field artillery battalion which was under heavy attack. Their trucks and guns were stuck in the mud and the Germans were going to overrun them. So we attack and got all of them out with everything but two guns. By that time we had lost communications with the division. We were trying to get the artillery unit back to St. Vith, Belgium but every road we tried was either too muddy or filled with German tanks. Somewhere between Auw, Germany we were trying to break through the German Lines. We were moving down a very muddy road. We just had a few rifleman with us because everything was in chaos. No one knew what was going on.

The front of our column hit strong resistance and we were ordered to get off the road. My platoon Sergeant. Sergeant Webb told me to take two men and check out these two houses that were along the road, to see if there were snipers in the houses. The European's build their houses with a barn in one end and living quarters on the other. We went through the barn and there were cattle in the barn. We went into the kitchen and the stove was still warm, but there was no one around. The house was clean and neat. We went up stairs. There were big beds up stairs. They were neat and the floors were shiny. I was a farm boy and the house reminded me of home. The guy with me said he was going to lay down on the bed and I told him that if he did I would shot him. He looked at me really funny when I said that I guess I had a serious look on my face, but we did leave the house as we found it.

We went back to the road and we could hear real heavy fighting ahead of us. We went on down the road with our squad jeep and we got about a half mile down the road from the house. We went around a slight curve to the right and there was a open field to our left. And a wooded area on our right. This Lieutenant that I had had trouble with in Tennessee was now the executive officer of my outfit. He came and got me and told me to set up my machine gun along this fence row about two hundred yards from where we were located. There was a open field in front and a wooded area behind that. There are Germans back there. I was there for just a few minutes and I saw that there was about a platoon of Germans grouping together along the edge of the woods.

I waited until they got in place and I opened up. I think I got most of them. I emptied a two hundred and fifty round belt. There was a lot of yelling and screaming going on. 'Then a mortar shell hit out in front of me about fifty yards. It didn't do any damage, but I knew what was coming. A few seconds later there was one landed just behind me and it must have been a concussion shell because I didn't get any shrapnel, but the concussion almost knocked me out. I picked the gun up tripod and all and headed for the jeep. The column was just starting to advance ahead. The jeep was full so I threw the gun on the tongue of the jeep. We took off and myself and the gun fell off when we hit a bump. I hit hard and I really hurt my shoulder. I was lucky though because a few seconds later the jeep was hit and everyone in the jeep was killed. Then the Germans started pushing the column back. We couldn't hold them so we moved back where the houses were we had checked.'

DECEMBER 18Th

By the morning of the December 18th Ken's unit was being attacked from both sides. The fighting was fierce and the casualties were high. They moved into the Ardennes forest and lost contact with the Germans. That night they bedded down in the forest. It was bitter cold. Heavy snow mixed with rain fell from the skies. But, Ken and his fellow soldiers exhausted from three days of fierce fighting paid little attention. They laid in the mud all night trying to sleep.

The CAPTURE December 19th

As daylight broke on the morning of December 19th Ken's unit came under heavy artillery fire. "It was tree burst," Ken recalls. "It was terrifying. Men were getting killed everywhere, just blown to bits. We had joined with the 422nd division and the commander had already sent a delegation to the Germans to surrender. Our Colonel told the commander that he didn't have the authority to surrender his unit. We were going to fight our way out. We thought we could but we would never have made it and because the

commander of the 422 outranked the colonel he had to surrender. He did tell us though that if any of us wanted to try and get out that we could. Myself and eight other guys took off through the woods toward the artillery because we figured we could run under it before we could run away from it. And we did get out of the artillery fire. We ran through the woods for about two miles and felt like we could get away. We came upon this road and I found out later that it was a road coming directly out of All, Germany which was one of the main roads the German's were using. We came up on this road and as far back as you could see there were troops, tanks, and horse drawn artillery. Anything you could think of. We were laying there trying to figure out what we should do when a German motorcycle with a side car on come wheeling up. A German officer stood up in the side car and spoke perfect English. He told us we were surrounded if we didn't come out of there they were going to blow us

We found out later they had a 20 millimeter gun trained on us down the road. By now I had lost my machine gun. I had picked up a M- I rifle, three rounds of ammo and three hand grenades. We had Lieutenant Thomas with us and he asked us what we wanted to do. The majority, wanted to surrender. but I didn't want to. I had my gun aimed right at this German officer's head. I wanted to blow his head off and to this day I wish I had. We surrendered. Lieutenant Thomas kept saying 'don't Smitty, don't Smitty'. We threw our weapons down and walked down the hill with our hands up. It was the saddest day of my life. That wasn't what I joined the Army for. It was just a absolutely horrible experience to do that. They marched us down to the road. There were a few other prisoners down there. They didn't search us. but they told us to empty our pockets. We started throwing the stuff in our pockets on the ground.

I still had three hand grenades in my pocket and I threw them down. They immediately picked them up. I threw a can of C-rations on the ground and they got them. The only thing I had left was a pocket full of Teaberry chewing gum and Chesterfield cigarettes. I had forgot that I had them. I had gotten them the day before when I was looking for a pair of boots when we were still on the jeep. I had gotten into this duffel bag looking for the boots and I found a carton of Chesterfield cigarettes. a box of Teaberry chewing gum and a fifth of scotch whiskey. We had drank some the night before and then finished the rest of it the next day going through the woods.

I had forgot about the cigarettes and chewing gum but they let me keep them. We started marching down the road and every once in a while we would pick up more prisoners as they were captured and assembled in different areas. By nightfall there was over 500 of us. We knew then that it had been a major offensive. We walked way into the night. We finally stopped and I laid down in the ditch. It was muddy and snow was on the ground. I reached in my pocket and discovered that I still had a hand grenade in my pocket. I talked with a couple of the other prisoners and asked what we were going to do. One suggested was used in lieu of toilet paper.

The outdoor latrines had approximately forty seats which was insufficient for the needs of 4,000 men. Most prisoners received one blanket, but because of overcrowded conditions supplies ran out and several hundred of the prisoners had no blankets, All the barracks were in poor condition; roofs leaked; windows were broken out; lighting was either unsatisfactory or lacking completely. Only a few barracks had tables and chairs. Every building was infested with bedbugs, fleas, lice, and other vermin.

STALAG IX-B. KEN'S PERSONAL ACCOUNT Christmas Day 1944

“On Christmas day we arrived at a little town of Bad Orb, Germany. Unloaded off the train and started walking up this little mountain road and finally arrived at Stalag IXB.

We stood outside in the rain and cold until each one of was interrogated individually. Although we didn't give anything other than name, rank, and serial number there was no need in getting smart with them because they already knew everything they needed to know about us. One of the things that I remembered during training was that if we were captured it was still our duty to do what we could to cause trouble for the enemy. If we could do something to keep one extra man busy that would be one that couldn't fight. I always kept that in mind and I was sort of mouthy anyway.”

The ESCAPE PLAN

“I behaved for a while and then me. Bobby Lee, and a couple of other guys started planning an escape. It didn't seem like it would be hard to get out of the place. Every night before they would lock us up in the barracks they would line us up in rows of fives and count you off. I figured we could cause some confusion in the count for a couple of days. We figured that we needed to get someone out at night so we could see what was going on and then plan our escape. Myself, Lee, and another fellow were elected to crawl out under the barracks. The barracks were about three feet off the ground and skirted with (2 inch boards.

We got under the barracks and the guys messed up the count. The Germans finally got tired of messing with the prisoners so they let them go back in the barracks. That night we found some places that looked pretty good for escape. Some of the places didn't look like they would be much digging to get under the fence. There was a bathed wire fence, about ten feet of rolled wire and then another barbed wire fence. We figured we could make it if we could figure out where the guards were at.

Well, someone must have been offered extra food and believe me there wasn't much of it because we were found out.”

THE BEATING

“They took our whole group of sixteen men and put us in a little building. It was used as a recreation building where they could play some games. We had to sleep on the floor and branded as troublemakers. When an American died we were made to bury them. They also made us cut wood for the German quarters across from our camp. One day we were cut-ting wood and this German officer came by and was yelling at us. I never even looked. I said. “You Kraut eating son of a bitch.” One of the other German soldiers could speak English real well and he told the officer what I said. The German officer said some-thing to the other German soldiers and the next morning I woke up in the barracks badly beaten. I mean real bad. I couldn't hardly move for about three days. I thought I was going to die. My chest was so bad. I had broken ribs and I was badly bruised, but I survived.

We were kept in this barracks for the duration. We had some more burial details and had to cut some wood, but I never talked much after that.”

RATIONS

“Every morning they would bring us a big container of coffee. It was hot water with a little color in it, sometimes more than others. Some guys used it to shave with. It really wasn’t good to drink, but it was hot and I drank all they gave me.

At noon they would give us a bowl or can of soup. All I had to eat out of was a tin can I got out of the garbage. I had whittled a spoon out of a piece of wood.

At night they would give us a loaf of German black bread which was divided between seven men. Each day a man would take turns cutting the bread. The guy that did the cutting got the last draw. Each day some one else took a turn. You also got the crumbs, but you had to be careful not to make too many crumbs or you would be accused of be-ing too messy. It is humor-ous now, but it was serious then. I weighed about 160 pounds when I was captured and at the end of 105 days and that’s after I had been eating good for a week I still only weighed 94 pounds.”

LIBERATION April 2, 1945

Ken and the other prison-ers in the camp were liberated on April 2. 1945. “There were a lot of English men in the camp,” Ken recalled. “There were a lot of them in bad shape. They wanted to be moved out of the camp first. By the fourth day we were still there although we were eating pretty good. A medic came in one day and said isn’t anyone sick. We looked at him and said isn’t everybody. He told us that if we wanted to get out of the camp before the English we better get sick. That day every American prisoner got sick. They moved us out by truck to a open field where they had open showers set up.

You could imagine how the body lice were in this place. We had long handles on and part of the past time was to pull your underwear off and turn them inside out pop the big body lice. You could imagine the odor on them after a while. We had fleas, lice, and crabs. We went through the showers and took our underwear and burned them. Then they gave us new clothes. Then we were put on C-47s and send to Camp Lucky Strike in France”

DATE / DATES TO REMEMBER

OCT 8 CAMP ATTERBURY, IND.

OCT 10 MYLES STANDISH, MAJ.

OCT 14 NEW YORK (SAILING)

OCT 22 SCOTLAND

OCT 24 ENGLAND (TODINGTON)

NOV 17 SOUTHAMPTON

DEC 5 LE HARTO (FRANCE)

DEC 9 BELGIUM (BORIN)

DEC 14 ARDEAN WOODS (BATTLE)

DEC 19 CAPTURED

DEC 23 BOMBING IN BOK CAR

DEC 25 BAR-ORO GERMANY

X XMAS DAY 1944

DATE LIBERATION DAY

APRIL 2, 1945 (8:27)

THEODORSE J. SMALARA

Box 66

HARWICK, PA.

Robert Leafing 4737m.

2525 30.6 21 St

Louisville Ky

Dates to Remember

1200
105
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12
4
230
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1305
48



GREETINGS 7353

FROM

THE AMERICAN RED CROSS

RUTHERFORD COUNTY CHAPTER

MURFREESBORO, TENNESSEE

[Handwritten signature]

1944 FIRST NINE MONTHS 1945

OCTOBER	JANUARY	APRIL	JULY
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CAMP LUCKY STRIKE

Ken and his fellow prisoners arrived at the camp looking forward to good food and lots of rest. However, their stay started with a tragedy. "The first day that we were there a fellow that I knew by the name of Warren went by a Red Cross set up for coffee and donuts. He didn't know when to quit. The donuts ruptured his stomach and he died. After all that he had went through to die over a doughnut." Ken said.

After about ten days of medical checks, good food, and rest Ken was heading home.

HOMEWARD BOUND

April 22, 1945

On April 22 Ken boarded the USS Argentina and head for the United States. Thirteen days later on May 5, 1945 the ship landed at New York Harbor. As they went down the plank the only people that were there were the Red Cross ladies with boxes of ice cream.

"We went to Camp Kilmore, New Jersey and de-programmed." Ken explained. "We were suppose to forget all about what happened to us. Then they give us a partial pay and 60 days furlough. Why they did that I don't know. There wasn't a man in that outfit that was physically fit to go on furlough. I look back on it now I wasn't ready to meet my family.



Two days later I came home. Mary, my girlfriend, was waiting on the curb for me. We had planned on getting married if I made it back. Two weeks later on May 20, 1945 we were married.

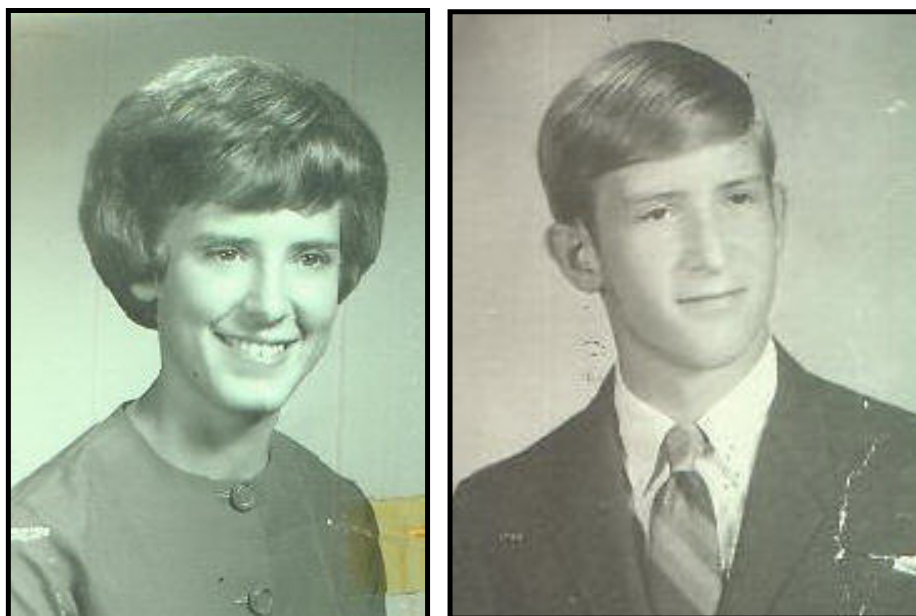
DUTY IN SAN FRANCISCO

May 1945 - November 1945

Ken went back to Florida for rest and then he was sent to Texas. "While I was there I was a chauffeur for this Captain." Ken said. "One day he told me he had a deal I might be interested in. they needed a chauffeur in Chicago. If I wanted it he could get it for me in three days. I had a sister in Chicago and it was pretty close to home so I told him I would take it. Three days later I had my orders only it wasn't in Chicago it was San Francisco. My wife was pregnant and the doctors advised her not to go. So I went. I was one of only three men there that had been overseas and I was treated like royalty. I would go pick up a new car and report to the Admiral's office. If he had some place to go he told me, if not he dismissed me for the rest of the day. I didn't go back to the motor pool, I toured San Francisco. It was great. On November 25. 1945 I was discharged and went home."

LIFE AFTER THE ARMY. . ,KEN'S STORY

I went to work here in the oil fields in Mt. Carmel. Worked hard and tried to get ahead. Mentally all screwed up. I drank way to much and made life miserable for myself and my wife. It seemed like every-thing that I did was a failure. Everything went back to be-ing a POW. People around me didn't help. I had corn- I ments about how I was a coward and gave up without a fight. It really hurt. It still does today, not as much but it still does. Even my own family made comments. They didn't know the circumstances. You couldn't hardly get away from it.



Ken and Mary's children, Pamela and Mark



We were both working and we really didn't know what we wanted to do. So In April 1951 we had saved up \$400.00. There was an oil field booming in Wyoming and I knew some guys that went out there. One day I came home from work and I told her we arc going to Wyoming and start over. We hooked that big old trailer we had to that little car and five days later we made it. I wouldn't do that today for anything.

I never discussed the war or that I was in it. We worked and moved a few times. Then I went to work for a construction company. In two years I was the superintendent. I worked there for seven years and made good money. I finally became a whole distributor for Chevron Oil Company. In 1982, I retired and came back to my hometown Mt. Carmel. Illinois.

FIFTY YEARS LATER

Ken didn't attend an Association meeting until 1988. He had a great time and alter that became more active in veterans' associa-tions. Then an amazing thing happened. Some Ger-man soldiers who fought in the Battle of the Bulge con-tacted the editor of the 106th Association magazine. They wanted to have a reunion with some of the soldiers from the 106th division. In September 1995. 16 veterans and their wives returned to the battlefields in Belgium. Ken was one of those veter-ans. "We had a great time. I got rid of a lot of ghosts. Ken said. "We were going down the road and wasn't sure where we were. I looked up and I said I have been in that house. One of the guys looked up and said you got to be crazy. I said no and he stopped. It was the house we had gone in 5t) years ago. I went to the house and a young lady answered the door. I went in and it was just like it was that day we had been in ii. I couldn't believe it.



I took a photo at the point where I was beaten by a German soldier. We walked the route and reminisced with the soldiers that were once our enemy. The war was history and the fact that we were once enemies was history also. By the end of the reunion there was a bond among us. No one said it, but we could all see it in each others faces.

BATTLE OF THE BULGE FACTS

- 1. During the Battle from December 16, 1944 to January 25, 1945 the weather was the coldest and snowiest "within memory" in the Ardennes Forest area.**
- 2. The 106th Infantry Division alone suffered 416 killed in action, 1,246 wounded and 7,001 missing in action at the end of the offensive. Most of these casualties occurred within the first three days of battle, when two of the division's three regiments were forced to surrender.**
- 3. The surrendering of 7,001 men of the 106th Infantry Division was the largest single recapitulation since Bataan.**
- 4. At Malmedy 86 American prisoners were lined up in a field and murdered by SS troops. The Malmedy**

Massacre was the worst atrocity committed against American troops during the course of the war in Europe.

- 5. In its entirety, the Battle of the Bulge was one of the worst baffles in terms of losses to the American Forces in WWII.**

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