

TWELVE

AT 0530 HOURS on December 16, 1944, the frozen earth erupted: hell appeared like a ghost in the forest.

In an instant, pine trees exploded into deadly wooden spikes. The frigid air turned fiery red. Blood and bone mingled with chunks of thawing debris.

Roddie clung to the shaking icy ground, desperately trying to crawl into his helmet. Terrain and weather were no longer his greatest enemies. His enemies were the relentless concussions and deadly shrapnel from the murderous 88s.

The German artillery rained down with pinpoint accuracy from what seemed like every direction. No one was safe. There was nowhere to run or hide—just across the valley were thousands of enemy troops, with thundering panzers and heavy artillery.

Fear was also Roddie's enemy. Fear that he would be blown to pieces in an instant. Fear for the lives of his boys—Lester, Frankie,

Skip—and what they were experiencing. Fear that he might not make it home, might never see his family again.

This was a terror Roddie never could have imagined. He knew panic was lethal to an infantryman, but it gripped him with a sickening embrace. His body shivered as he shook off thoughts of his own death.

The treetop calibration tactic perfected in the Hürtgen Forest was being put to devastating effect now in the Ardennes. Every tree seemed to have been simultaneously blasted from its roots.

Even with all the live-fire training back at Fort Jackson and Camp Atterbury, there was no way Roddie, or anyone, could have prepared for the horrific reality of battle—especially *this* battle. Roddie fought an overwhelming urge to run. All around him wounded men were screaming. It was suddenly hellfire in their “quiet” sector of the Ardennes, and Roddie realized that the image of a triumphant march through Berlin by Christmastime had been ludicrous.

Though fiery shrapnel continued to rain down, Roddie overcame the urge to panic and crawled toward the safety of the sandbags enclosing the communications station for Headquarters Company of the 422nd Regiment. There, Roddie reached for his radio. Dazed, he called Regimental Command at Schlausenbach to relay the intensity of the attack, the frightening accuracy of those Nazi 88s.

Roddie’s commanding officers downplayed the incoming reports as an overreaction since, unlike the 28th, which had fought through the hell of Hürtgen, the 106th had yet to see serious combat.

His dugout was claustrophobic. During a momentary break in the shelling, he emerged for a breath of fresh air only to hear a whistle—a bullet fired from an unseen Maschinengewehr 08,

flashing inches above his head. In his diary he described the near-fatal moment:

Boy, I was thankful the Lord was on my side. And I didn't hesitate to tell him either. I prayed hot and heavy and was convinced of that old saying—that there are no atheists in a foxhole.

In the furious chaos of artillery fire all around, some GIs were saying that it felt like the end of the world had come.

“Our little village of Schlausenbach was hit time and time again,” Lester recalled. “The houses no longer looked secure, and we were digging ourselves into the foundations and into the ground.” GIs who had been trained as regimental headquarters personnel now became riflemen to repulse attack after attack. “I can still see Butch, our Headquarters Company cook, dashing around in the jeep and firing his machine gun like mad,” Lester wrote. “None of us knew how serious the situation had become.”

The dreaded 88 mm shells “bored through the darkness at half a mile per second, as if hugging the Ardennes hills,” and the Nebelwerfer rockets—veteran GIs had dubbed them “Screaming Meemies”—resounded “in the hollows where wide-eyed GIs crouched. Then enemy machine guns added their racket to the din, and rounds with the heft of railroad spikes splintered tree limbs and soldiers’ bones alike.”

Then Roddie and the infantrymen heard the low, almost primal groan of panzers and creaking armored vehicles as the thrust of Hitler’s last gamble burst forward through the forest. The German infantrymen appeared camouflaged in white snow-

suits, some in Wehrmacht greatcoats, screaming like banshees. The Nazi artillery gunners seemed to know the American positions down to the millimeter—the GIs were, after all, fighting from the Germans' own defensive bunkers.

"Strange lights lit up the sky," recalled Sergeant John Morse. "German searchlights aimed at the low clouds reflected down to the ground."

In the predawn hours, two GIs were "idly chatting in front of an abandoned Siegfried Line bunker." The men were smoking cigarettes, talking about their families back in the States, "complaining about the bitter cold and having to pull lookout duty at such an ungodly hour of the morning."

One of the GIs was stunned by the sight of the massive searchlights eerily "piercing the misty gloom illuminating heavy clouds above their heads. 'What the hell is that?' he asked. Suddenly there was a whizzing sound, followed by a blinding flash of light as he exploded into thousands of pieces. A mortar shell had impacted his body and in a split second reduced it to unidentifiable flying chunks of bloody flesh that slapped down on the cold hard snow like fresh meat on a butcher's block. The other GI dived for cover, pressing one hand on his helmet and muttering inanely as he burrowed frantically, shells bursting around him."

Roddie soon found that the Nazis were jamming all radio frequencies and had severed telephone wires, making transmissions impossible. Later he would grimly note in his diary that the Germans had done "a pretty complete job" destroying the communications.

The unrelenting artillery and mortar fire continued to rain down on the GIs—and on positions to their rear—for close to an hour. Then the German soldiers advanced across the open fields in a column of what appeared to be platoons in line, with some elements working their way up to the wooded ridges. US riflemen

and machine gunners opened fire. Mortar fire was called for, too, and was aimed at the ridges. By midmorning, the main thrust of the German attack was stopped, though isolated patrols of Germans were still infiltrating through B Company's lines. One of the patrols well camouflaged in white snowsuits succeeded in getting within approximately a hundred yards of the command post before they were either killed or taken prisoner.

The German prisoners were immediately sent to Battalion Headquarters for interrogation. One captured POW was a Wehrmacht officer who had on him a written copy of the attack order. A corporal in Battalion Headquarters, fluent in German, quickly translated the order, and the officers were stunned to learn that this was no minor patrol activity but indeed part of a massive German counteroffensive. The regimental headquarters in Saint Vith was immediately notified by special motor messenger.

DESPITE THE DOGGED resistance of the 422nd and 423rd, the two forward regiments of the 106th Division, Manteuffel's Fifth Panzer Army came down "like wolves on a sheepfold, falling on an American regiment at an unnerving ratio of ten wolves for each sheep." Meanwhile, the Waffen-SS exploited the overstretched US defensive positions, opening up a six-mile-wide gap between the 106th and 99th Divisions. In fact, powerful spearheads of tanks and infantry, to both the left and the right, were in the process of trying to envelop the men of the 106th in a pincer move around the main ridge of the Schnee Eifel.

"On no segment of the Western Front were GIs more outnumbered, yet sharp firefights that morning imperiled the German timetable," according to historian Rick Atkinson.

To Roddie, all the infantrymen under his command were putting up heroic resistance; the former college students, the ASTPers, may have been green, but now, in the fury of the con-

flict, they were transformed from teenagers into men, battling the Germans with brains as well as brawn. Roddie was proud of all of his boys; they were brave in the face of death.

Much like Major General Jones's 106th Division, Major General Norman Cota's 28th Infantry Division was tasked with holding an impossibly wide front—some twenty-five miles—along the Our River, with its three infantry regiments on the line. Instead of facing two German divisions across the river, as army intelligence had reported, Cota's men found themselves fighting five full divisions, plus heavy enemy reinforcements.

The German artillerymen had excellent intelligence on the US troops. They knew the GIs preferred to sleep in the homes of villagers, rather than in foxholes, so many of the initial artillery bursts fell on civilian houses.

Sonny Fox found that out firsthand. He was with Cota's 28th Division, bunking in farmhouses and barns. When the German fusillades started on the morning of December 16, 1944, Sonny was awakened at 0520 by artillery screeching over the farmhouse. He ran to a foxhole a few yards from the building and jumped in to find his sentries.

"How long has this been going on?"

"About twenty minutes," the sentries said.

Sonny started back to the house to get the rest of his squad out. "As I got close to the door," he recalled, "I heard an incoming and dove under the butcher block alongside the entrance. The shell passed over and I started to extricate myself but could not get free. The battle was beginning, and I was stuck under a butcher block! I started to giggle. All hell was breaking loose and I was going to end my life stuck under a butcher block. I finally broke loose and dashed into the house to find my mighty band of warriors cowering in the potato cellar. I shouted them out of there and into our prepared positions on both sides of the farmhouse. Unfortunately, that meant I

was out of contact with those on the far side of the building. I was with two of my squad; the others were scattered about.”

And then, as suddenly as it had begun, the artillery barrage stopped. Eerie green signal lights arched into the sky against the thick cloud cover.

Sonny recalled that “at one point, I heard some Germans walking down the road just on the other side of the hedge that separated us from that road. As they approached our position, I pulled the pin from a grenade. I rose up enough to catch a glimpse of three soldiers chatting as they walked, as though they were on a stroll down the Unter den Linden [a boulevard in central Berlin]. I tossed the grenade and watched long enough to register their startled reaction. Then I slid back into the foxhole to avoid the explosion. There is a pause of 4.5 seconds before the grenade explodes. It’s amazing what I was able to see in those seconds. One of the men was wearing a Red Cross armband. I did not know this before I threw the grenade.”

All three Germans were extremely young—Sonny estimated they were around his age, eighteen or nineteen years old. The soldier with the Red Cross armband had on dark-rimmed glasses. Sonny would forever remember the terror in the young men’s eyes, just before all three Germans were blown to pieces.

By the afternoon of that day, Sonny heard tanks coming down the road. He was not sure if they were German or American. “They turned out to be ours, and I thought we had beaten them off, but the captain said no, the Germans were behind us and the fighting was going on well behind our lines.”

Indeed, huge numbers of German troops and tanks were well to the rear of the Allied lines; some were also masquerading as US soldiers behind the front. Otto Skorzeny’s disguised commandos of Operation Greif were wreaking havoc with Allied communications. The brigade, dressed in their authentic US infantry

uniforms, driving captured jeeps and Sherman tanks, toting American weapons, had managed to penetrate the Allied lines during the early hours of the Ardennes counteroffensive and were carrying out their planned disruptions. One commando team persuaded a US Army unit to withdraw from the Belgian town of Poeteau, northwest of Saint Vith, and by switching around road signs, another team sent an entire US regiment in the wrong direction.

But word soon got out that German commandos, speaking good English and dressed in American uniforms, were behind the lines, and the US Army hastily set up checkpoints. GIs began grilling everyone—even high-ranking officers—on facts they felt only real Americans would know: minute details about baseball, US geography, and Dick Tracy's villains. "What team is known as Dem Bums?" "Where does Li'l Abner live?" "Who's Flattop? Pruneface? The Mole?"

While they succeeded in capturing a few of the German commandos, the roadblocks often failed miserably. American soldiers shot out the tires on British Field Marshal Montgomery's jeep after he refused to stop at a bridge checkpoint. Brigadier General Bruce Clarke was also detained at gunpoint for five hours after he incorrectly told military policemen the Chicago Cubs played in the American League.

"But I'm General Bruce Clarke!" he shouted.

"Like hell!" an MP snapped back. "You're one of Skorzeny's men. We were told to watch out for a Kraut posing as a one-star general."

Even Clarke's commander, General Omar Bradley, was repeatedly stopped at checkpoints. "Three times I was ordered to prove my identity by cautious GIs," Bradley recalled. "The first time by identifying Springfield as the capital of Illinois (my questioner held out for Chicago); the second time by locating the guard between the center and tackle on a line of scrimmage; the third time by naming the then current spouse of a blonde named Betty Gra-

ble. Grable stopped me, but the sentry did not. Pleased at having stumped me, he nevertheless passed me on.”

Paranoia spread quickly. All over the Ardennes US soldiers attempted to persuade suspicious guards and MPs that they were genuine GIs. One infantry captain was held because he was observed to be wearing German boots.

Most of Skorzeny’s fake Americans were apprehended in the dragnet, but so great was the confusion caused by Operation Greif that the US Army began to see spies, saboteurs, and assassins everywhere. “A half million GIs played cat and mouse with each other each time they met on the road,” Bradley remembered. “Neither rank nor credentials spared the traveler an inquisition at each intersection he passed.” Two US soldiers were even reported to have been shot by a trigger-happy US MP who was convinced they were Skorzeny’s SS men in disguise.

The captured commandos offered up clever disinformation under questioning. One claimed that Operation Greif’s actual mission was to have Skorzeny—who was still at large, dressed as an American officer, somewhere behind the lines—assassinate General Eisenhower. Another said Ike and his entire staff were going to be kidnapped by Skorzeny and held as negotiating hostages. Far-fetched stories—but they did result in Eisenhower being confined to SHAEF headquarters, under close guard, for his own safety.*

EVERYWHERE BEHIND THE front lines, confusion reigned. By midday on the sixteenth, Major General Jones, commander of the 106th, had thrown virtually all the divisional reserves into combat.

The intelligence from frontline reports coming into Jones

* Eisenhower was unamused by having to spend Christmas 1944 isolated and under close guard in the Trianon Palace Hotel in Versailles for his own protection. After several days of confinement, Ike left his office, angrily declaring he had to get out and that he didn’t care if anyone tried to kill him.

was limited, due to the disruption in communication lines, but he knew the Nazis had flooded through the Losheim Gap and were attempting to encircle his entire division on the Schnee Eifel. What he didn't yet know is that the 14th Cavalry Group, assigned to protect the northern flank of the 106th Division, had been nearly decimated, in retreat, and the Germans were marking Saint Vith itself as the next day's main objective.

Without a full understanding of the military calamity unfolding, Jones scrambled for a strategy. Should he order the 106th's three regiments, dug in along the twenty-eight-mile front, to pull back? Or should he wait? From a command post located in an old schoolhouse in Saint Vith, Jones, lacking combat experience, decided to ask advice from the VIII Corps commander, Major General Troy Middleton.

"You know how things are up there better than I do," Middleton said in a crackling phone call from his own headquarters in Bastogne. "But I agree it would be wise to withdraw them."

A brief disruption in the telephone line seems to have affected the entire course of the battle. Jones never heard the second sentence. He hung up, telling his staff in Saint Vith, "Middleton says we should leave them in."

At that same moment, General Middleton told his subordinate officer in Bastogne, "I just talked to Jones. I told him to pull his regiments off the Schnee Eifel."

That misunderstood communication would decide the fates of the 422nd and 423rd Regiments. Roddie and soldiers of the Golden Lions would hold their ground, despite the howling enemy swarming past them on both flanks.

It was a catastrophic strategic mistake; some military historians have argued that, in his defense, Jones was under the impression that thousands of reinforcements were on the way—mere hours away.