

Joseph Patterson Thornton, Jr.

Sissonne, France

November 14, 1944 through December 16, 1944

The entire 508th PIR Regiment is based here for much needed R & R and reorganization.

Battle of the Bulge

On 16 December 1944, at 5:30 A.M., the Germans began the assault through the densely forested Ardennes mountain region of Wallonia in Belgium, and France and Luxembourg on the Western Front. Eisenhower and his principal commanders realized by 17 December that the fighting in the Ardennes was a major offensive and not a local counterattack, and they ordered vast reinforcements to the area. Within a week 250,000 troops had been sent. Gen. Gavin of the 82nd Airborne Division arrived on the scene first and ordered the 101st to hold Bastogne while the 82nd would take the more difficult task of facing the SS Panzer Divisions.

Joe Thornton said he had just returned to Camp Sissonne from leave in England when he got the news they were leaving for Belgium. He was still in his dress uniform, and had to quickly change into combat gear before boarding a truck for the trip north.

The 82nd was trucked several miles north of Bastogne to Werbomont, Belgium from which the 508th moved to the Their-du-Mont ridgeline south of Goronne. This was the high ground overlooking the Salm River near the bridges at Salmchateau and Vielsalm.

By 21 December the Germans had surrounded Bastogne, which was defended by the 101st Airborne Division and Combat Command B of the 10th Armored Division. Conditions inside the perimeter were tough—most of the medical supplies and medical personnel had been captured. Food was scarce, and by 22 December artillery ammunition was restricted to 10 rounds per gun per day. The weather cleared the next day, however, and supplies (primarily ammunition) were dropped over four of the next five days.

Despite determined German attacks, however, the perimeter held. The German commander, Lt. Gen. Heinrich Freiherr von Lüttwitz, requested Bastogne's surrender. When Brig. Gen. Anthony McAuliffe, acting commander of the 101st, was told of the Nazi demand to surrender, in frustration he responded, "Nuts!" After turning to other pressing issues, his staff reminded him that they should reply to the German demand. One officer, Lt. Col. Harry Kinnard, noted that McAuliffe's initial reply would be "tough to beat." Thus McAuliffe wrote on the paper, which was typed up and delivered to the Germans, the line he made famous and a morale booster to his troops: "NUTS!" That reply had to be explained, both to the Germans and to non-American Allies.

In the south Patton's Third Army was battling to relieve Bastogne. At 16:50 on 26 December, the lead element, Company D, 37th Tank Battalion of the 4th Armored Division, reached Bastogne, ending the siege.

Most people's knowledge of the Battle of the Bulge is limited to the 101st Airborne being trapped in the town of Bastogne, and Patton's 3rd army rushing to their rescue. Joe said they (the 82nd) were originally slated to stay in Bastogne. However, the 101st commanding General, Maxwell Taylor, was in the USA, and Corps Commander, Mathew Ridgeway, was in England, when the battle began. So Gavin was temporarily in charge of both divisions. Joe said Gavin felt he knew his 82nd troops better than those of the 101st. He, therefore, left the 101st in Bastogne and sent the 82nd beyond Bastogne to intercept the Germans. The 101st got surrounded in Bastogne, but the 82nd did a lot more heavy fighting than did the 101st. Just a footnote to history as told by Joe Thornton who was there at the time.

The following comes from General Gavin's official report of the battle.

December 19, 1944. The 508th Parachute Infantry sent one company to the crossroads one mile east of Bra. The regiment, less one company, occupied the high ground in the vicinity of Chevron.

December 20, 1944. At Corps Headquarters I received information that they were advancing to the southeast and establishing an active defense along the line Vielsalm – Hebronval – La Roche: that this division, 82nd Airborne, would establish a defensive line from contact with the 30th Division, in the vicinity of La Gleize, to Cheneux – Trois-Ponts – Grand-Halleux – Vielsalm – Salmchateau – Hebronval. Contact was to be immediately established with units reportedly cut off in the area of Vielsalm – St. Vith. The 3rd Armored Division was on our right and was to hold the sector from Hebronval west.

Orders to accomplish this were issued at the divisions CP at Habimont shortly before dark, December 20. Units moved promptly and by daylight were on their objectives, well organized and prepared to defend. Regiments were in the line in the order, left to right: 504, 505, 508, 325. One battalion of the 325th Glider was held in division reserve in the vicinity of La Vaulx. The division forward CP was established in the town of Lierneux at the railroad crossing on the northern edge of the town.

On the south, the 508th Regiment and 325th Glider had no contact with the enemy. The Division Reconnaissance Platoon was pushed south. Information available indicated that the Germans were moving in great strength to the west, having passed Houffalize, and were moving towards the Meuse River. The Third Armored Division, which was supposed to be on the division's right, could not be contacted. I believe that on this date a reconnaissance party may have established contact.

December 21, 1944. The 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment on the Vielsalm – Salmchateau front (Their-du-Mont ridgeline) was without enemy contact except for patrols. The 325th Glider Infantry, aided by the Division Reconnaissance Platoon, had established contact with enemy forces several miles south of their front lines.

December 24, 1944. However, since the situation was so critical on the right, and the German attack had apparently been beaten off on the left, no other course of action appeared practicable at the moment. The 505th Regiment appeared to have all it could do to continue to hold the Trois-Ponts – Grand-Halleux line and the 508th Regiment was becoming heavily engaged on the Vielsalm – Salmchateau – Joubieval line.

In accordance with the warning order given me by the Corps Commander (British Field Marshal Montgomery), similar warning orders were given to unit commanders to be prepared to withdraw if necessary to the Trois-Ponts – Erria – Manhay line.

I was greatly concerned with the attitude of the troops toward the withdrawal, the Division having never made a withdrawal in its combat history. The German was using every artifice conceivable to create doubt and confusion in the minds of American fighting units. He was using our arms, equipment and vehicles, frequently leaving their own abandoned and disabled at bottlenecks on the roads. False messages were being used and Germans in American officers' uniforms were known to be in the rear areas. One trooper, who later was recaptured, was captured by Germans in American uniforms in the vicinity of Tri le Cheslaing. All of these factors made the prospects of a withdrawal most unpleasant. On the 24th I published a memorandum to be read to the troops, emphasizing the dangers in the operation with which we were confronted, and I spent from early evening until after midnight visiting the troops of all battalions.

(Joe Thornton remembers Gavin's visit to his unit. Joe said he was as cold as he had ever been in his life. They had dug in and had proceeded to build fires for warmth. Almost immediately, the Company Commander sent an order to douse the fires lest they give away their position to the Germans. Joe said they all began to throw snow on the fires, when, much to their surprise, appeared Gavin with an M-1 rifle slung across his shoulder. Joe said Gavin asked them what they were doing. They told Gavin that the Company Commander had ordered them to extinguish the fires lest the Germans become aware of their position. Joe said Gavin told them "Aw hell boys, the Germans know we're here. Light the fires and get warm". They immediately thanked the General and re-lit the fires. Joe said that Gavin did not travel with a host of body guards and support people as did most others of his rank. Gavin was accompanied only by a couple of body guards.)

Christmas Eve was a very cold, bright moonlight night. The enemy was closely engaged with us on the entire front from Trois-Ponts to Malempre, but there was in no locality any feeling of unusual pressure being exerted against us. All unit Commanders, down to Platoon Leaders I believe, felt that they had the situation well under control. The rear area, except for some medium artillery which had been abandoned in fields off the main roads, was completely cleared of the St Vith pocket forces. (These were the elements of the 7th Armored, 106th Infantry Division, and 28th Infantry Division being pursued by the attacking German 9th SS Panzer Division.) Any elements which could reach the Salm River would be evacuated to the rear through the escape channel for regrouping.

(It was here that Pvt. Lou Slama of Company F was severely wounded in his left shoulder.)

The withdrawal started shortly after dark. Covering shells were to be withdrawn at four A.M. The 307th Airborne Engineer Battalion supported the withdrawal by blowing bridge over the Salm River, laying minefields and the establishing roadblocks. This worked very well on the right with the 504th and the 325th Glider. The 508th Regiment was attacked in great force and had some close and intense fighting at the bridges over the Salm River before it finally withdrew. Its shell on Their-du-Mont was apparently cut off, but finally made its way back under the command of Major Taylor without the loss of a single man. All the troops, except for the shell, were in the valley in the vicinity of Goronne where I saw them about 2200 hours, and everything was going smoothly.

(Lt. Hoyt Goodale was awarded the Silver Star Medal for his action blowing a Salm River bridge during the activity described by Gen. Gavin in the above paragraph. The following is the citation authorizing the medal.)

(CITATION: GO 35, 18 March 1945 (page 3) - Posthumous Award)

(HOYT T. GOODALE, O-1290934, First Lieutenant, 508th Parachute Infantry. For gallantry in action on 25 December, 1944, near ***, BELGIUM. When a platoon of his company assigned to demolish a bridge, came under enemy attack, First Lieutenant GOODALE proceeded to the point of attack and assumed personal control. In the face of enemy armored vehicles reinforced by infantry and with complete disregard for his own safety, First Lieutenant GOODALE set up a machine gun in a commanding position. Although exposed to intense enemy fire he retaliated so heavily and accurately that the Germans were forced to retreat. Gathering a few men, First Lieutenant GOODALE then cleared the area temporarily of enemy troops and coolly blew the bridge. His courage, aggressiveness and initiative prevented a serious penetration of our lines. First Lieutenant GOODALE's conduct was in keeping with the highest traditions of the Airborne Forces. Entered military service from SPARTANBURG, SOUTH CAROLINA.)

At daylight, December 25th, all regiments were on their positions, mining and wiring were under way and all troops were dug in. Communications were being laid under great difficulty because of the mountainous terrain, particularly in the 504th and 508th sectors. At daylight I joined Major Gerard, commanding a battalion of the 325th Glider, in the town of Tri le Cheslaing on our right flank. Its occupation, in which contact was established with infantry of the 7th Armored Division on our right, finally buttoned up our defense. Contact was already established with the 30th Division on our flank.

Two days after occupying this position (December 27) an attack was made by the 62nd Volksgrenadier Division on our left and the 9th SS Panzer Division on our center. The 62nd Volksgrenadier Division in all of its operations proved to be a very poor quality and not well trained. They consistently lost patrols by having them destroyed by our outposts and they appeared to be vulnerable to our own patrols.

The 9th SS Panzer Division appeared to be much better equipped and better trained. They launched an attack up the main axis from Lierneux to Habiemont, hitting the 508th and 504th in a coordinated effort that was characterized by great dash and courage. The 3rd Battalion of the 508th Regiment was completely overrun. The men remained, however, manning their positions in the houses and foxholes. The battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Mendez, obtained the use of the reserve company of the

2nd Battalion of the 508th Regiment on his left, counter-attacked with great gallantry and determination, and drove the 9th SS Panzer from his positions, restoring his MLR. (Company F and Joe Thornton were heavily involved in this action). The Storm Troopers' losses were extremely heavy. From one field alone 62 bodies were later removed.

(Joe Thornton said he was commanding a mortar squad when they were overrun by the 9th SS Panzers. He said the mortars were kept behind the lines to fire on targets requested by the riflemen. On this occasion his squad had depleted their ammunition, so they grabbed their M-1's and went into the line to help repel the oncoming Germans. He said his feet somehow got wet during the action. He began to lose feeling in his feet and realized he probably had frostbite. He knew frostbite was a ticket home. He said, "I looked at my feet and thought, 'This is gonna get me out of this mess'. They took me to the Company aid station, which was a tent. The doctor there looked at my foot and said 'Yep, it's pretty bad. We're sending you to the Battalion aid station'. They sent me back there, and it was in a house heated by wood burning stoves. The doctor opened the door of one of the stoves, and had me thaw out my foot by the open door. He then put some kind of ointment on it and asked if that helped. I told him it did. He then gave me a pair of larger, insulated boots, and asked if I could get them on. I got them on, and he asked if I could walk O.K. I could, so he sent me back to my unit to continue the fight. So much for my ticket home. Until this day I still have tingling in my toes from that frostbite.")

On interrogation some of the Storm Troopers stated that they had been accustomed to attacking with such dash and élan, yelling and firing their weapons, and the usual reaction at the enemy was to break and run as the Storm Troopers closed with them. They were frankly surprised to find troops who would man their positions after being overrun. The unit of the 9th SS attacking the 504th after overrunning the outpost of the 2nd Battalion of that regiment, were stopped and driven back. They told an identical story of their attack technique.

This ended all offensive efforts of the German forces in the Battle of the Bulge. About a week later (January 3, 1945) the division attacked, completely overrunning the 62nd Volksgrenadier Division and the 9th SS Panzer Division, and capturing 2,500 prisoners, including 5 battalion commanders. It regained its former positions. (508th on the Their-du-Mont heights - January 7, 1945).

From here the Division withdrew to a rest area (January 11 -20, 1945) from which it was later committed to the attack east of St Vith, (January 26) attacking through deep snow over thickly wooded mountains and overrunning a considerable group of German defensive forces in a constant day and night attack lasting for six days. Ultimately they drove into the Siegfried Line to seize Udenbreth and the ridge extending south.

(A brief interruption from Gen. Gavin's report to give more detail about the 508th from departing the rest area through the attack east of St. Vith. The following paragraphs come from "History of the 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment" by William G. Lord II, and "Put Us Down in Hell" by Phil Nordyke.)

Prior to the attack east of St. Vith, the 508th was trucked from the rest area at Chevron on January 21, 1945 to Diedenbergl to relieve other parts of the army in a defensive position there.

It was here that 1st Lt. Lloyd Polette was mortally wounded on January 22, 1945. The following is an eye witness account given by Lt. George Miles.

Company E, commanded by Lieutenant Lloyd Polette, was positioned on the 2nd Battalion's left, northwest of Amel, Belgium. Lieutenant George Miles was the executive officer of Company E and his best friend. "Polette left to inspect defensive positions. Word came he had been hit by shell fragments. I ran to see him loaded on a jeep. We exchanged greetings, he looked green. I took over as CO of Company E. I never saw him again."

Tragically, Lieutenant Polette, a recipient of the Distinguished Service Cross for Extraordinary heroism during the capture of Bridge Number 10 in Holland, one of the Regiment's most courageous officers, and a superb leader, succumbed to his wounds later that day. It was a blow to everyone who knew him.

The 508th stayed in the defensive position near Dienenberg for three days. It was relieved of this position on January 24 during an intense enemy artillery barrage and placed in Corps reserve for two days. On January 26 the 508th again moved to the front, this time in the vicinity of St. Vith, the first town of any size to be seized by the enemy at the onset of the Battle of the Bulge on December 17, 1945.

The entire 82nd jumped off for an attack east of St. Vith on January 28 with the 508th in Division reserve. The morning of January 29 the 508th was removed from Division Reserve and the 2nd Battalion was ordered to attack the town of Medendorf.

It was in this action that 1st Lieutenant Hoyt Goodale lost his life. The following is an eye witness account.

Private First Class Norb Studelska, with Company D, was an acting squad leader in his platoon. "My squad was way up front, ahead of the rest of the 2nd Platoon. We didn't know where we were, except we were in the middle of a forest, alone. We stopped to wait for orders to get up to us. While waiting in the snow covered dense forest, two figures approached the area. I didn't see them, but I heard one say 'Cap-i-tan' in a foreign accent. A new replacement, Private Ernest Semrad, spotted them close up, and let them have it with his M-1.

This was among the saddest days of the entire war for me. We lost (killed) our very fine company commander, Lieutenant Hoyt Goodale, and his Hispanic runner. He was the best company commander a company could have."

Lieutenant Goodale was the CO of Company D when he was killed. Joe Thornton was with Company F at the time, but in the same general area. Joe said they were told that Goodale was killed while attempting to rescue some of his men from the Germans. The Company D men were rescued, and the Germans responsible for killing Goodale were beaten to death.

(Now, back to General Gavin's report.)

This attack was the most arduous in the division's history and, probably the most bitterly fought, but the Division once again entered Germany and the seizure of Udenbreth placed the First U. S. Army in a position to attack down ridge lines all the way to Bonn.

From here the Division moved to the Hurtgen sector where, as a member of XVIII Corps (Airborne) and later III Corps, it participated in the advance to the Roer River. Except for extensive minefields, extremely difficult road conditions and hostile artillery fire, the operation was not too difficult. The Division arrived on the Roer River and had completed detailed plans for a river crossing and the seizure of Nideggen east of the river when it was withdrawn on February 17th and returned to the Sissonne-Suippes, France area.

Sissonne France

The 508th was placed in reserve at a camp near Sissonne, France. Here they trained and awaited orders for further action.

On April 3, 1945 the 508th moved to an airfield near Chartres, France and were scheduled for jumps to rescue Americans at German POW camps. But, General Patton's 3rd Army overran their target each time before the drop could be made. Joe said he and other members of Company F never loved Patton so much as during this period of time.

Joe accumulated the points necessary for discharge during his stay at Chartres. He was discharged there and returned to the United States.

In addition to numerous other medals, Joe was awarded the French "Legion d'Honneur" Medal on February 10, 2011. Joe was presented this honor by Pascal Le Deunff, the French General Consul for the Southeastern U.S., in a ceremony at the Lennox Building in Atlanta, Georgia. Joe said, "It's about time!" He was almost 89 years old. We called him "Sir Joe" after that date.

[account written by Mike Mitchell, son-in-law of Joe Thornton]