

# **"The Greatest of the Greatest Generation"**

## **ARDENNES**

### **December 17, 1944 to February 17, 1945**

#### **"The Battle of the Bulge"**

**A**t dawn, December 16, 1944, due to a battlefield intelligence failure, three German armies, over 500,000 men, suddenly appeared out of the blinding mists and heavy snows of the densely forested Ardennes.

This was Hitler's last desperate gamble to destroy the allied forces, and save the Third Reich. Six hundred thousand American soldiers fought in what was called the "Battle of the Bulge." One of the most decisive battles fought in Europe during WW II. Some historians believe that it was the greatest battle ever fought by the U.S. Army.

In December 1944, the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR attached to the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division was in Sissonne, France preparing quarters (more beautification of the area) for a comfortable winter. Passes to Paris had started in late November and it looked like everyone would get to the city before Christmas.

The general feeling was that it would be some time before the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR was assigned another combat mission. That was not to be!

About 7:00 P.M. on December 17, 1944, about thirty-six hours after Hitler had launched his desperation attack, the XVIII Airborne Corps was alerted to join the battle.

Ironically, not many XVIII Airborne Corps senior officers were available to lead the corps into battle.

- ?? The Corps Commander, General Ridgway, was in England at XVIII Airborne Corps rear headquarters.
- ?? The CG, 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division, Major General Taylor, was in Washington trying to persuade the War Department to increase the strength of airborne divisions.
- ?? The ADC 101<sup>st</sup>, Brigadier General Higgins, and five 101<sup>st</sup> senior commanders were in England conducting a critique of Market (airborne assault on Holland).
- ?? Major General Gavin, CG of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne was the senior officer available to lead the XVIII Airborne Corps. Gavin assumed command of the XVIII Airborne Corps in addition to the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division, and designated McAuliffe, CG 101<sup>st</sup> Artillery, temporary CG of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division.

Late on December 17, the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR was alerted to move into Belgium to blunt the German attack. By 0900 December 18, the regiment loaded on large open trucks, had joined the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division convoy headed for Werbomont - a town in Belgium.

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After a long, freezing cold, miserable ride, lacking winter clothing and equipment, the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR men unloaded in Werbomont and established an all-around defensive position.

The 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division following closely behind the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division convoy was halted by approaching German forces, and made its famous stand at Bastogne.

After several moves, by foot and truck to block the Germans, the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR established a defensive position along the Their-du-mont ridgeline west of the Salm River. On 21 December heavy snow began falling on the Their-du-Mont, Garrone, Vielsalm area,



**In Need of a Parka, Boots, Gloves and a Hot Meal**

The 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division and the 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division were among the many units overrun by the initial German assault. The 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division was ordered to provide a safe passage to sanctuaries in the rear of the allied lines for the survivors of the two divisions.

The 508<sup>th</sup> PIR was assigned the task. It organized an eight-mile salient from the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division area east to the Salm River at Vielsalm. It offered a corridor in which to safely evacuate any survivors of the two divisions that managed to reach the Salm River.

The 508<sup>th</sup> PIR's Company A with Hq1 light machinegun sections and 81m mortar observers manned the corridor portal - overlooking the Salm River Bridge at Vielsalm. In the next hours hundreds of men and countless vehicles (trucks, tanks, towed artillery) from the badly mauled divisions moved through the corridor.

One of the largest groups to transit the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR corridor to safety was Task Force Jones, more than 400 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division men with equipment.

By late afternoon December 24, as the division engineers and 508<sup>th</sup> PIR men had destroyed most of the bridges over the Salm River, no large-scale attacks had developed in the regimental area. Nevertheless, many artillery-supported skirmishes occurred as the Germans tried frantically to find ways to ford the ice-cold river.

Kenneth "Rock" Merritt recalls. "I was the Hq1 Light Machine Gun Platoon Sergeant. On December 24, Lt. Epps, the Assistant Platoon Leader, and I were visiting our machinegun positions overlooking the Salm River Bridge at Vielsalm. When an America P-51 fighter dropped a bomb on our position. Lt. Epps was buried. We thought he was dead but dug him out and had him evacuated. Epps survived."

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Concurrently, on December 24, two Hq1 81mm Mortar Platoon observers, Lt. E. McNerney and Lt. W. Young were wounded and evacuated. The 81mm mortar section leaders, S/Sgt. W. Goudy and S/Sgt G. Sommerville replaced the lieutenants. These noncoms served admirably as forward observers throughout the Battle of the Bulge, until late in February when they were severely wounded and evacuated – which unfortunately ended their careers in the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR and in the U.S. Army.

During late afternoon that busy Christmas Eve, the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR received orders to break contact with the Germans and withdraw from its present positions - intelligence estimates predicted an imminent large scale German attack against the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division area. Therefore, it was prudent to straighten out the line in order to repulse the threatened attack.

The withdrawal order was a shock to everyone. The 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division always prided itself on its record "no ground gained ever relinquished," was moving back! However, the division and especially the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR were in a precarious position.

At 9:00 PM, Christmas Eve the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR started withdrawing -- a covering force of a platoon per company with skeleton crews manning Command Posts was left behind to shield the regiment's movement.

As the withdrawal started, the Germans launched a series of deep encircling attacks attempting to isolate the salient and destroy the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR men at the tip. German infantry infiltrated the regimental area and made frequent attacks against the flanks of the withdrawing main body of the regiment. These penetrating German flank attacks slowed but did not stop the withdrawal.

Many Hq1 men will recall that at midnight, December 24, on the top of a moonlit snow covered ridge, T/Sgt Adam Koziol, (81mm mortar platoon) halted the nearby men and suggested they kneel a few moments in prayer - as it was now Christmas Day A memorable tableau ensued, considering the Germans were aggressively trying to destroy the men kneeling in the snow.

With the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR covering force of one platoon per company, it was a different story. These platoons were deployed in heavily wooded, snow-covered terrain, where even when the whole regiment was available, it was difficult to maintain contact with adjacent units.

Now with less than one-third of the regiment holding the same terrain, it was nearly impossible to maintain contact. The German patrols easily infiltrated throughout the area.

The most critical area for the First Battalion covering force centered on the Salm River bridge site in Vielsalm. The only site where the Germans could cross tanks and vehicles without constructing a bridge. In the early evening of December 24, activity was heard near the bridge site. The Germans were attempting to repair and reinforce the remnants of a demolished bridge for projected crossings.

The artillery that started falling on the First Battalion area earlier in the evening increased in intensity causing several more casualties. Shortly after the German artillery

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barrage reached its fullest intensity, the range was shortened, and smoke was substituted for high explosive shells.

With the river and both banks shielded in smoke, the Germans crossed the river in large numbers.

The 508<sup>th</sup> PIR covering force platoons were forced to withdraw under pressure, fighting, running battles with German infantry. Many historians say that the delaying actions by the covering force were among the best fighting in the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR's history.

Christmas Day, 1944, the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR was organizing a defensive position along the Basse Bodeux-Erria-Villettes line overlooking the highway to Leige. Christmas Day was neither a day of rest nor joy for the regiment. No presents, [not] even mail. Morale was at its lowest, but one thing was certain - no German would pass the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR line. There would be no more withdrawals; no more overrunning American units. The German's attack would be blunted, bent, and broken from this position.

Christmas night the Germans launched an attack against the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR boundary between the First and Second Battalions. After a furious battle, the Germans withdrew leaving behind many dead and much equipment.

On December 28, the Germans again launched a strong attack against the regiment, in the third battalion area. Fortunately, a battalion of 155 howitzers had been attached to the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR the morning of December 27. The battalion's forward observer, in the third battalion area, directed the 155 howitzer's 100-pound shells on the attacking Germans with accuracy. The attacking Germans withdrew leaving behind almost a hundred dead German soldiers. General Gavin later surmised that this was the German's final supreme effort to attack down the Leige road.

The First US Army launched an army-wide attack on January 3, 1945, to destroy the "Bulge." The 508<sup>th</sup> PIR was held in reserve until January 7 when it was ordered to seize the Their-du-Mont ridge from which it had withdrawn on Christmas Eve. The regiment attacked in a column of battalions across deeply snow-covered open terrain, with each battalion pushing through to its own objective.

The Germans with camouflaged 88mm rifles (high-velocity anti-aircraft guns) shrewdly held their fire until the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR men were within five hundred yards of the guns, and then they methodically destroyed them.

Aware that to stop meant massacre, the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR men pushed on sustaining heavy casualties. General Gavin said "That's the finest job I've ever had done for me."



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Snipers and cold weather aggravated life on Their-du-Mont ridge. The snipers were deadly. It was bitter cold and digging into the deep snow covered frozen ground was impossible. The 508<sup>th</sup> PIR men still lacked winter clothing and cold weather casualties increased.

On January 10, the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR was relieved by elements of the 75th Infantry Division. Newly arrived in the theatre, the men of the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR envied the 75th Division soldiers with their overcoats, galoshes, winter caps and gloves, truck mounted kitchens and hot meals.

The 508<sup>th</sup> PIR moved to a rest area near Chevron, Belgium to regroup and lick its wounds.

In less than a month, 900 men and officers were casualties; more than 40% were victims of the bitter cold weather rather than the Germans.

Most of the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR men had not been in any shelter or had a warm meal since December 18, 1944 when they left Sissonne, France.

During the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR's short rest period the tide of battle had changed. The Germans, reeling from the allied counterattacks were holding a line with Waffen-SS troops, allowing the Volksgrenadier and first-line Panzer-Grenadier Divisions to withdraw to comparative safety.

On January 21, the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR returned to the line for three days in Deidenberg until relieved by the 424th Infantry, the sole remaining regiment of the badly battered 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division.

On the January 28, the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division, in an attack formation, headed east toward the heart of Germany with the Siegfried Line fortifications as the immediate objectives. The next days were memorable, not for the German resistance, but for the extreme cold, snow and fatigue. In addition to the physical strain of plowing through knee-deep snow, carrying weapons, ammunition and the blankets necessary to keep from freezing, was the constant knowledge that anyone wounded in the thick snow-bound forests would probably die from exposure before he could be evacuated.



The Germans were ready and waiting behind their defenses, confident that the terrain to their front was virtually inaccessible. They were misled by the certainty that no one could keep supply lines open in such weather, using the miserable forest ruts that served as roads. The Germans overlooked the fact that the WWII U.S. airborne divisions were

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comprised of fighting regiments and battalions, unencumbered by huge supply trains, kitchen trucks, tanks heavy and light artillery and large medical facilities.

The airborne battalions were essentially lean, self-dependent fighting units. They had two or three jeeps per battalion, light machineguns, and mortars for organic artillery. Moreover, all of their equipment and ammunition was manhandled by the paratroopers, who usually traveled by foot.

Medical evacuation was initially by stretcher to a collecting point where stretcher-equipped jeeps transported the wounded to an austere aid station.

Each day the snow got deeper, the temperatures lower, the fog and mist thicker, the chill winds more penetrating -- yet the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR troopers advanced. All day long, troopers struggled in long twisting columns -- warmed by rapid movement through deep snow under heavy loads and then freezing whenever the columns halted, confronted by German patrols or for a brief rest.

Warren Brown, a PFC in the Hq1 81mm mortar platoon says. "I wore a burlap potato sack like a shawl for warmth. Whenever our column halted, I shared the sack with my Lieutenant. We would put our feet in the sack, pulled it up as high as possible, wrap our arms about each other and fall over in the nearest snow bank.

We napped that way until the column started moving again. Neither of us suffered frozen feet throughout the campaign."

By late afternoon, January 28, the regiment assembled in division reserve around the small Belgium hamlet of Wallerode. A group of Germans, that we had apparently by-passed earlier in the day, wandered into the assembly area. In the ensuing firefight, some casualties were sustained but all the Germans were killed.

That night the regiment moved to a forward assembly area in preparation for continuing the attack eastward. Orders were issued for the First Battalion to attack the village of Holzheim about two miles east, and the Second Battalion to attack Medendorf -- south of Holzheim.

At 0400, the First Battalion, in a column of companies, started toward Holzheim with the men carrying weapons, ammunition, food and blankets on their backs. The roads were open to only light tracked vehicles like Weasels, and only a few of these were available. Therefore, objectives had to be taken quickly, roads opened, and supplies had to be brought up as soon as possible to support the men as they continued the attack.

In the early afternoon, the First Battalion arrived at Holzheim where a pitched battle was fought for the town. Two companies, B and C, supported by Hq1 light machineguns and 81mm mortars entered the town by two different routes.

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Company B easily advanced against light opposition. Company C ran into several German light tracked vehicles mounting 20mm guns. These weapons were destroyed and the company moved into Holzheim.

Approximately ninety Germans were captured during the assault and were held in the town square. In a failed escape attempt, about half of the Germans were killed. None escaped. 1<sup>st</sup> Sgt. Leonard Funk (Co C) thwarted the escape attempt, saving countless American lives. Sgt. Funk was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.

The regiment continued to attack seizing the town of Lanzerath - three miles east of Holzheim. The heavy snows continued to make walking with a heavy load almost impossible and trailbreakers had to be changed frequently to keep them from dropping with fatigue. The men labored up steep mountainsides, slipped down icy trails, and sloshed through half-frozen streams.

Lanzareth fell after slight resistance. The regiment was now deep into the Siegfried Line, as evidenced by the heavily defended fortifications and artillery fires encountered.

On February 4, the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR moved into old barracks near the Rench-eux-Vielsalm complex from which the regiment had withdrawn on Christmas Eve.

On the night of February 7, the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR moved from the rest area in Rencheux to the Aachen area. The regiment was now in a section of Germany where civilians were still living, so troops were warned that fraternization was VERBOTEN!

The fraternization edict was soon forgotten as the regiment moved to Bergstein, about three miles west of the Roer River, the last obstacle west of the Rhine River.

On February 9, The 508<sup>th</sup> PIR was ordered to seize and hold the West shore of the Roer River. By midmorning, the entire regiment was in position overlooking the approaches to the Roer River. Upstream, the famous Schwammenauel Dam was partially demolished by the Germans before its capture. As a result, the Roer River area was partially flooded and the projected river crossing was delayed.

On February 17, word was passed that the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division was returning to Sissonne and going into reserve. The next day, the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR marched to Schmidt and loaded on boxcars. It arrived in Sissonne on February 20.

In the period December 17, 1944 to February 17, 1945, the 508<sup>th</sup> PIR's battle casualties included 101 men killed in action, 33 died of wounds and 398 men were wounded in action. Two hundred seventy three men were injured and 23 men were reported missing in action.

Although no one suspected it at the time, the fighting days of the 508<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment were over.

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Following is a quotation from the Belgian Minister of National Defense Decree Number 1034, awarding the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division and the 508<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry the Belgian Foregoer of 1940.

## Citation

"At the proposal of the Minister of National Defense, we have decreed and we order:

Article 1: The 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division with the 508<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry attached is cited twice in the Order of the Day for the Belgian Army and is herewith given the fourragere of 1940, for:

This elite Division which has gone with great élan through the campaigns of Tunisia, Sicily, Holland and France, has distinguished itself particularly in the Battle of the Ardennes from December 17 to December 31, 1944. Called upon as reinforcement by the Allied High Command in the evening of 17 December, at a time when the Division was near Reims, the Division was able to take up combat positions in the region of Werbomont only 24 hours later and this under very severe climatic conditions. Progressing toward Ambleve and the Salm, the Division opened and maintained a corridor for the elements of four American divisions, which were surrounded in the vicinity of St. Vith, thus giving new courage to the engaged units. The Division had prevented the enemy from piercing the north flank of the pocket [Bulge] created by the offensive of von Rundstedt and thus succeeded in saving the city of Liege and its surroundings from a second occupation by the Germans.

2. After having excelled in defensive warfare at the banks of the Salm and the Ambleve and after having repelled successfully the repeated attacks of the best German shock troops, the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division with the 508<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry attached, in spite of extreme cold and excessively deep snow, went on the offensive themselves, capturing 2500 German prisoners, including 5 battalion commanders. This fighting was extremely valorous as the organic composition of the division handicapped the unit considerably, not having at their disposal as any other infantry division would have, heavy weapons to support their attack. During 23 days, under the most painful and adverse conditions, the veterans of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division did not cease to give a wonderful example of courage and heroism, exemplifying their fighting spirit by several remarkably brilliant actions. By its valor, the Division wrote



Belgian Fourragere



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another page in heroic annals of Allied Airborne troops and rendered an important service to Belgium and to the Allied cause by establishing the necessary basis for the new pursuit of the enemy towards the Rhine River.

Article 2: The Minister of National Defense is herewith ordered to execute the decree. For the Regent: [signed] The Minister of National Defense L.Mundeleer."