

Part 4 of 5: Belgium – Ardennes, Battle Of The Bulge

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Belgium - The Ardennes The Battle Of The Bulge

John: So, you were on R&R at Rheims.

Bill: Yeah. We were supposed to get re-supplied with replacements and equipment. But there wasn't enough time because we were alerted December 17th (*Edit. Note: About twelve Divisions of the German Army attacked en masse and pushed through the Ardennes at dawn on the 16th of December. The 508th Regiment was alerted at 2000 hours on the 17th*). Before that we were talking about jumping up there. That was before the 17th. But, looking at the maps, they said it was too rough. We couldn't jump in those mountains. We would accomplish nothing. So we went in by truck. It was December the 18th when we went in. We went in near St. Vith. (*Edit. Note: The Regiment actually deployed to Werbomont and from there to a ridge, Their-du-Mont, just a little west of Vielsalm. This is about 10 miles west of St. Vith.*) They didn't give us many maps. Only what we needed right in our immediate area. We didn't get the maps that Regiment or Division had.

We went immediately into combat. And we weren't equipped good enough for it. We were under strength.

John: Did you have a mortar there?

Bill: No. I had an M-1. But by finding guys who were dead I had a Tommy gun, a Browning automatic, things like that. I fired a lot of lead. I had ammo bearers after that and I got my mortar and had it set up on high ground. Boy, we saw the German troops coming. Man! They were coming. The machines guns! Boy, they would knock the limbs off the trees! We had to withdraw. We did. We went eight miles back. It was Christmas Eve of 1944. They were really on us. I don't know what happened, but it happened.

Bastogne is what they were after. But if they looked at their maps, we were in the same line with Antwerp as Bastogne was. They stopped, put a dummy line out and went back for Bastogne.

Bastogne was relieved by Patton on December 26th. I read a story about Patton giving hell to Eisenhower, "Give me the gasoline and my tanks and I'll go up there and relieve those fellows in four days." And he did. Patton saved their asses up there in the Battle of the Bulge. I sure liked that man. He was the best General I ever saw. And those pistols he had weren't just for show. He used those things.

Anyway, the Germans drove us out of our positions. They drove us back on Christmas Eve of 1944. Eight miles. The 101st wouldn't budge from where they were. We didn't have that much support. There was another outfit or Division with them.

John: So you were pushed back about eight miles and then you dug in and waited.

Bill: Yeah. Nothing happened. Very little firing. So we sent patrols out and there was a dummy line. What they did was they pulled the main body out and back over toward Bastogne. Bastogne had the 99th and the 101st. They had artillery and tanks which the airborne doesn't have. They had it then.

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John: How far were you from Bastogne?

Bill: About fifteen or twenty miles. We were north of Bastogne.

John: It's must be confusing at times as you're trying to think back some 60 years or so.

Bill: Yeah. A compass. Half the time I couldn't use my compass because I didn't know where it was. I loved the compass. I am losing my memory. I am too old for all of this stuff. *(Edit. Note: Bill celebrated his 79th birthday on September 5, 2001.)*

John: You say they had a dummy line.

Bill: They just pulled the main force out. It wasn't really a dummy line. They just left enough there to fight. But it wasn't a full force of their Army. But the 82nd was a little bit too strong for them. They went after Bastogne. But Bastogne wouldn't give.

John: When you sent patrols out and found that the main force wasn't there. What did you do?

Bill: We went back to Regiment. We told Regiment what was up. Then they took it to Division and they made up their mind what they were going to do. We counterattacked on January 7 and took it back plus a little bit more. We didn't lose very many men.

I would run, fall, and shoot. That was when I had the Browning automatic. I had to use three ammo bearers. They gave me the clips. We would run, fall, and shoot at them. And, boy, we had them going, too. We really had them going.

We hit a lot of snow in Belgium. It snowed and it snowed and it snowed. Knee high to a tall ass Indian. I never saw so much snow. And it was cold. They said, "Dig in." I said, "Dig in to what?" You couldn't dig in. Just push the snow away. And that's the way it was all the while we were in the Battle of the Bulge. We weren't dressed for it, either. We brought up some white sheets later so that we would blend in with the snow. We would put them on. There was a slit in them. They were made up. Everything was white. The Germans had them, too. I felt warm. I told our Company Commander that we weren't ready for that. They were going to jump us up there. But when they looked at the maps they decided it was too mountainous and would have too many troopers injured. We would lose too many. They did jump some troopers after February for one of those bridges. That was after we left. That snow was waist high. You can't walk in. You jump like a damn kangaroo. When the snow was that deep the only time you did any fighting was when the tanks came. The infantry was right behind them following the path of the tank.

I remember my guys didn't like the little packets of Nescafe. I told them all if they didn't want them to give them to me. When we weren't fighting they told us to dig in. We just pulled the snow out of the way because it was so deep. I had a gob of the Nescafe packets. I would take my canteen cup and sit in my foxhole and put the Nescafe in the cup and then I sat there with nitro-starch. Any other time they would explode if you put a fuse in it. I'd just take a piece of it and light it with my cigarette lighter and heat that stuff. I'd drink it to get heat. I'd drink it black. I'd melt snow but it was too slow.

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My feet started getting warm. There wasn't any battle happening because there was so much snow. I took my boots off. My socks were frozen to my feet. I took them off and I started rubbing my feet. And the medic, Dick, I forget what his last name was. Anyway, he said, "Hey Sock, what are you doing there?"

I said, "Well, my socks were frozen to my feet. They're getting warm now."

He said, "You're getting frostbite. We'll go back to the aide station."

I said, "Hell no. It's too far to go back there."

He said, "No. No. We'll get a jeep and go back there."

We went back there and this nurse got a big pan of water and it felt so good. I was there for about an hour. Then she came in with a big old white towel and dried my feet and gave me four pairs of socks. I put three pair on. I got my boots. She said, "Where're you going?"

I said, "I got some men up there."

She said, "You can't go."

I said, "The hell I can't. I'm gonna get in that jeep and go back up there where we were." And I'm paying for it now. At night my feet are so cold. They feel like they're cold but they aren't. I told Dr. Dunkle about it and he said myopathy. They feel like they're cold. And I can't sleep at night. And now it feels like they're cold from here down (*Edit. Note: Bill pointed to his knee.*) I have a hard time trying to get them warm. I even turn the furnace on. I hope I don't have what Bud had. When I was up there when Bud died I felt his feet and they were cold all the way up to his hip. He was in a coma.

John: You mentioned once that you had a guy next to you got hit with an artillery shell?

Bill: I don't know what it was but it blew him all to hell. He didn't know what hit him. And I got some of that stuff blown on me and one of the Medics, Vic, came up and said, "Where you hit, Sarge?"

I said "I'm not hit."

He said, "The hell you ain't".

I said, "I don't know who he is but there he is, right there."

He was a good medic.

The medics were good. We had one from Hamilton. He was a good one too. Dominic Spinelli. I think he was in the 99th Division. He worked in Milillo's bakery with us before the war. Medics weren't armed. They just had that big cross on their helmet. After the Battle of the Bulge I got a letter from his folks wanting to know what happened so I had to get information for his mother. They never talked to me after that. When I came home, they wouldn't even talk to me. During the Battle of the Bulge he was out there bandaging up a guy and a sniper shot him right through the head. I told her. Then there was Leonard, our 300 radio operator. He kept getting us artillery support and that kind of stuff. His wife sent me three letters. She just wanted to know what happened. I took it to the Chaplain and said, "What am I supposed to do?" He said, "Tell them what they want to know. I told her just what happened. Those guys with the radios, man, they killed those guys. Leonard got hit with a shell. (*Edit. Note: This was the man's last name.*)

John: How long did it take to push the Germans back?

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Bill: About two days. They didn't have the support that they had to begin with.

John: So how would you describe the Battle of the Bulge.

Bill: It was the deciding point of the war. It decided who was going to win the war. But, during that period, the 508th and the 82nd lost a lot of men.

John: So you pushed them back, Bastogne was relieved, and you are back to the original lines. What did you do next? Did you have your mortar back by then?

Bill: Yeah. I got my 60 mm mortar back after Christmas. After we got back to our original line we got replacements and everything.

(Edit. Note: On January 28th, another attack occurred but the 508th was in reserve. That didn't last long, though, and they joined the fighting on January 29th. This is when they entered Germany.)

Then our troops went up in the mountains with 4.2's, the big stuff. The Germans either infiltrated our lines or were dropped by parachute. In any case, they knocked out three of our 4.2 batteries. And they sent down to the 82nd for mortarmen. So our Lieutenant Leedman sent me and two other guys with a Captain up in the mountains. I was up there for two or three weeks. We fired missions. Boy, we fired a lot up there.

Lt. Pollette was killed while I was up in the mountains. I didn't know it at the time. And I never did get the story on how he was killed. It tore the heart out of you when you lost a good man. We called him "tank killer." He was built good. He used to go out and destroy tanks. He knocked out three of the Tiger tanks. I didn't like that. I didn't like getting close to tanks. That was the only time we did that. It wasn't very nice.

I didn't like the 4.2. It was too noisy and too big. You should see the rifling in that bore. The 81's and the 60's were smooth bore. It fired shells that were about one and a half feet long. You were firing for a Division. We were firing for liaison up the line or airplanes. You got your firing orders from a Captain. He received them from an airplane or from their liaison on the front lines. We had a map and the Captains would watch that map and give the orders what guns and where they should fire. And then we'd get the orders and fire our missions. We didn't know what the hell was coming or who we were firing for.

John: The range was much longer on these I take it. Seven thousand yards or so. You couldn't see where your rounds were landing. Hell, I could barely see what my 60's were doing. I fired the 81 and I didn't like it. That was for Regimental Headquarters. I didn't like it because you can't see what you're doing. But the 60's you can almost see.

John: So then what happened?

Bill: I went back to my own outfit. They were in Germany. This was in February.

I remember one time in Germany we had a German machine gun surrounded and these guys, Aaron and them, they said, "Hey Sock, you speak German. Tell those sons of bitches to come on out."

I hollered, in German, "Come out with your hands up. Resistance is useless."

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A guy had a white flag. He started to come out and some G.I. over on my left shot at him. Aaron and those guys yelled, “Hey Sock, tell them again.”

I did about three or four times. Every damn time some damn G.I. would shoot at them. I didn't know who was shooting at them. I said, “Get a grenade.” All those guys got one and I said, “Throw them.” There were eight Germans in that machine gun nest. I think the troopers were getting screwy. They were crazy. I hollered at the men but when the Germans would come out they would start shooting at them. I yelled at them, “Don't shoot at them. They want to give up.” Every damn time, somebody would shoot at them. Well, hell, we had to move. So we took grenades and threw them. Boy, they didn't look very good. The machine gun didn't look good, either. Boy, I hated to do that. They were all dead.

We fought on in to Germany across whatever that damn river was. We fought and then they relieved us. Took us out on Feb. 18th. But they took us out for a purpose. The 82nd and the 101st. We went back to Camp Sissonne near Rheims, France. They were going to get us ready, prepared, to jump into Tokyo. I told my guys, “Kiss your ass goodbye because we'll never hit the ground.” That's wrong. Why the hell do we want to go over there and fight. I didn't want to go over there. I felt we had done our share of fighting. But we lost a lot of good men. That still hurts me today, that we lost them. Aaron just died not very long ago. Rottebush, I got a lot of pictures of him there some place. Dale and me. But then they dropped the atomic bomb. Hey! Whatever that was, we didn't give a damn. We didn't have to go. After that the 82nd occupied Frankfort, Germany.

Continued see Part 5: Occupation - Frankfort and Berlin