

Bastogne & "The Bulge"

by Earl P. Holt III

By mid-December of 1944, the *Allied Expeditionary Force* (AEF) that landed at Normandy on *D-Day* was concentrated in Eastern Belgium and Luxembourg, poised to cross the Rhine River and invade Nazi Germany from the West. In response, Hitler's Generals devised a brilliant but desperate counter-offensive that punched through the AEF's thinly-defended northern forces near the *Ardennes Forest*, in what historians have termed "*The Battle of the Bulge.*"

In response to this German counter-offensive of 26 *Panzer* and *Tiger* Divisions, Eisenhower hastily ordered the 101st and 82nd *Airborne Divisions* -- and fragments of other artillery units -- to be trucked to the quaint but critical Belgian town of Bastogne to defend it. Both sides recognized Bastogne was the "*key*" to the *Battle of the Bulge*, because it was the intersection of seven roads and a railroad in a rural area where few roads existed.



The ultimate goal of Hitler's Generals was to occupy the port city of Antwerp, Belgium -- a mere 100 miles to the Northwest -- through which flowed the fuel, ammo, food and reserve forces that supplied the AEF. If the Germans could take Bastogne, they had a clear and unimpeded path to Antwerp, a vantage point from which they would disrupt Allied supply lines and leave the AEF stranded and vulnerable in Eastern Belgium and Luxembourg.

For a week, the *101st and 82nd Airborne* fought heroically with those artillery units to hold off every advance the Germans made in what became the greatest land battle of the European Theater. The 82nd and 101st were two of America's most highly decorated combat units in W.W. II, and they showed why by ferociously repulsing repeated German attempts to enter and seize Bastogne. Their orders from Eisenhower were to defend Bastogne **"AT ALL COSTS,"** and they immortalized themselves by fighting as tenaciously as the defenders of the Alamo or the Spartans at Thermopylae.

On December 22nd, 1944, a small contingent of German officers approached Bastogne under a white flag of truce and submitted a **"Surrender or Die"** ultimatum from the German Commander, General Heinrich von Luttwitz, which read as follows (abbreviated):

"To the U.S.A. Commander of the encircled town of Bastogne:

...There is only one possibility to save the encircled U.S.A. troops from total annihilation: that is the honorable surrender of the encircled town...

The German Commander."

The reply came from the acting Commanding Officer of the 101st Airborne Division, **Brigadier General Anthony McAuliffe**: when first told of the German *surrender-or-die* ultimatum, he replied ***"nuts."*** His staff eventually concluded that was as good a response as any.

The German Major who received McAuliffe's reply asked the American Colonel who handed it to him what was meant by this idiomatic expression, "nuts"? In reply, the American Colonel stated: ***"In plain English? Go to hell, Major!"***



Patton Medaling Brig. Gen. Anthony McAuliffe

Eventually, Bastogne was relieved by three Divisions from General George Patton's Third Army in one of the most brilliant and heroic examples of military leadership ever executed. Although Third Army was

positioned farther from Bastogne than any other command in the AEF, Patton skillfully withdrew *three Divisions* from winter combat "***on the line,***" rotated them 90 degrees and moved them 100 miles north in just over 48 hours to relieve Bastogne, and he was able to do so despite narrow, icy roads and Europe's worst winter in 38 years. This spelled the end of Germany's conquest of Western Europe.



Eastern Belgium in December of 1944

Martin Blumenson, a military historian attached to Third Army in Europe claims it was the "***sublime moment***" of Patton's career, and the moment for which he had trained his entire life. Indeed, echoing Patton's belief in predestination, another military historian has argued that "***...it was as if destiny had groomed him for this single defining instant...***" (Carlo D'Este. *Patton: A Genius for War*. HarperCollins, NY.)

At a time when most Republicans in Congress reflexively throw up their hands in surrender before the first shot is fired -- or collaborate with our mortal enemies as Mitch McConnell routinely did -- it may be difficult for many to recall what it's like to be led by men of honor and courage.

While we're sitting down to Christmas Dinner on December 25th, warm and cozy in our heated homes, perhaps it would be useful to recall 80 years ago, when kids in their 20s were struggling to keep from freezing to death while fighting for their lives against 26 ferocious German *Panzer* and *Tiger* Tank Divisions near Bastogne, Belgium.

REAL Americans -- those who understand and appreciate the rights and freedoms we enjoy -- owe a great deal to the many who came before us, especially those who put their lives on the line to defend those rights and freedoms enshrined in such icons as the *American Flag* and our *National Anthem*. The great British author G. K. Chesterton called this principle "*The Democracy of the Dead*."

The battle in which we find ourselves currently engaged is fought just as much to honor and preserve their sacrifices, as it is to defend our civilization for the benefit of future generations.