Virginians at War
WWII: Battle of the Bulge
Transcript

NARRATOR: Virginians have always stood at the crossroads of the fight for freedom. It is a battle in which we all reap the benefits.

WORLD WAR II 1939-1945

NARRATOR: World War II was the defining event of the 20th Century. It involved 60 countries. Over 57 million people were killed. The nuclear age was launched, and the United States emerged as the world's most powerful nation.

World War II was fought in two major theaters of operation: the Asiatic-Pacific theater, and to the far west, the North African, Mid-Eastern, and European Theater.

BATTLE OF THE BULGE
DECEMBER 16, 1944

NARRATOR: It appeared that World War II in Europe was finally coming to a close. As Allied troops rested in Belgium near the German border, Nazi troops planned a massive counter-attack through the dense Ardennes forest. Hitler's goals were to split the Allied forces, advance to the English Channel, and capture the port of Antwerp. On December 16th, 1944, American forces were caught off guard and fell back, creating a huge bulge in the U.S.-held lines, thus affecting the name "Battle of the Bulge."

The winter weather was brutal, intelligence faulty, and communications inadequate, creating alarm and confusion. Stories spread of Germans shooting unarmed soldiers at Malmedy, and of English-speaking Germans behind U.S. lines spreading turmoil. But our soldiers stubbornly held their ground. Vital crossroads and towns

were doggedly defended. General Patton's 3rd U.S. Army raced from the south to relieve Bastogne. German gasoline shortages, and increased Allied air and U.S. ground attacks reversed the Nazi advances.

The losses on both sides were heavy. Americans bore the brunt of the attack, and incurred their highest casualties of the war. The Battle of the Bulge was costly, but the American victory strengthened Allied resolve to win the war in Europe. That win would come in less than six months.

COMING FURY

HENZE: Unbeknownst to anybody on the Allied side, the Germans, under the orders of Hitler, were preparing, all during this period, a major counter-offensive. They were bringing in military units very, very quietly, setting them up to begin a major push which, for the part of Führer Hitler, was supposed to go all the way back to the English Channel and push everybody out. This became the famous "Battle of the Bulge." And that cut loose in the middle of December, 1944.

GREGG: The weather was atrocious. We couldn't fly any aerial missions to look, to see what was happening over behind the German lines. And I suppose that was the main reason we did not know that they had assembled 240,000 troops with, I don't know how many, tanks and artillery.

JONES, A: We had heard movements of tanks for the two nights previous. We knew something was going to happen. So it came as a surprise, but not a shock. Skies were dull and overcast. There was no air reconnaissance. They had planned – the Germans had planned it this way. When you can't see what's going on, all you can do is guess. Well, we had reported this back. We were told that it was unlikely that there would be a major attack. We could expect a small one. This one was a major one.

SEATON: Patton's comment was, "They can't come through here because of the forest – the Ardennes – and the weather and the snow. But I think that's exactly what they're gonna do."

COUNTER ATTACK

GREGG: Well the 16th of December, 1944, when they launched that attack, it caught our divisions out along the front, well, flat-footed. Not only that: they were strung out.

FLIPPIN: Fighting was at a low. Nothing going on. And I also tell people that, from what I know about it, when our division went through the hedgerows of Normandy, we were scattered out on about a 2,000 yard front. And when the Germans broke through in December, we were on about a 28-mile front. And there were great holes in it, in the line, and the Germans broke through before we knew what was going on.

RAINES: We went on line the 12th, and the bullets started on the 16th. From a quiet sector, it turned out to be hell on earth.

CHALKLEY: The whole division moved, overnight, 75 miles in blackout conditions. Bitterly cold. The worst conditions you can possibly imagine. Nobody knew where they were. You didn't know what… there were no battle plans, it was just try to stop the tremendous push that they put on. But the "Bulge" was utter confusion.
PERKINSON: A soldier, all he knows is where he's at in his surroundings, and somebody 50 feet away would have a different idea, a different version. But we knew one thing: that the Germans had 88 guns and tanks, and we had a few 76, mostly 75's. And when our guns would hit one of their tanks, it didn't hit a sprocket. It was a wasted shot. But that German – when that 88 hit, it would penetrate.

WILLIAMS: Majority of the Germans were equipped in American uniforms, American vehicles, fluent-speaking Germans. And it really created a lot of chaos. Then at every – we had to set up – MP had to set up road blocks and stops, and you'd have to interrogate them to the nth degree to find out whether they were Americans or Germans. It really made for a very ticklish situation.

FLIPPIN: There's so many casualties up in there. The Americans and the Germans called a truce for 24 hours to pick up the day in, and I said, "Well, if we can stop for 24 hours, why can't we stop?" You know? Please.

JONES, A: On the third day, orders were received to turn around and attack to the rear. On the 19th, late afternoon, with so few, with so little ammunition, and so many casualties that my regimental commander felt that he had to surrender the regiment, which he did. And that's when I became a prisoner of war.

PERKINSON: As we were going, they were retreating. As we were going forward, they were… we'd have to pull over for the retreating to come back. They'd have wounded. There were racks built on the Jeeps with, I don't know how many, stretchers that had a tie on it. They were telling us how bad it was. The snow was so bad and I had read that it was 40 below zero. But I do know that we were not supposed to touch anything with our hands without gloves, because if you did, your hand would stick to any metal.

COLLINS: Going up to Bastogne, the forces that were retreating – they say they were withdrawing, they were retreating – those guys were coming back scared to hell, I'm telling you. Then the guys on the side of the road were saying, "Man, you guys are crazy! You know, you're retreating, the Germans…" blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. That was scary.

MALMEDY MASSACRE

JONES, L: We had been in Luxembourg for about a week, and we came back up out of Luxembourg. The other battery from our battalion went down to Luxembourg. But on the way, the Battle of the Bulge actually began, and that battery was caught at a place called, "The Three Corners," which is called "Malmedy" now, but it's where that battery was caught and slaughtered at Malmedy. It's the one that was line up in the field and shot down.

SCARBROUGH: They passed through Malmedy, and they got up to the little village of Baugnez, and that's where they collided with this Kraut armored unit, under the

commander Peiper. You've read about him. And there occurred the most dastardly atrocity ever committed in human warfare. They herded my men in a field, a machine gun, and killed 85 of them. Known as the Malmedy Massacre.

DEADERICK: After leaving the little town of Malmedy, we went around a big, sweeping curve in the road and then we could hear, it was infantry. It was rifle fire that we were hearing. Now, we thought we were 20 miles from the Germans. You could see a big tank on the left side of the road, and on the right side of the road was a line of what looked like 15 or 20 American trucks. And people from the trucks were down in the ditch at the side of the road. My driver and I pulled up at the end of this line of trucks, and we jumped out and dived in the ditch, just like everybody else was. Pretty soon, very shortly, we realized that these people were trying to surrender. My driver says, "Lieutenant, why don't we just make a run for it?" I said, "If you get in the Jeep and turn it around, I'll come and get in with you." So that's what he did, and he was a brave guy. So we both took off in the opposite direction as fast as the car would go. Far as I know, we never drew a single round. I was expecting that we would get fired on. And incidentally, two weeks later, we learned from an article in *Stars and Stripes* that those people in the ditch had been rounded up and they had all been assassinated.

SEIGE AT BASTOGNE

SEATON: The objective for the defense was changed from Werbomont to Bastogne. Bastogne was across critical communications, crossroads, and so forth. Germans had their target on getting Bastogne. It was a thorn in their side, I'm sure.

FLIPPIN: About 9 o'clock that night, we went in and everything, movie is starting, Captain White, who was also there in charge of the preparation, he stepped out on the stage and he said, "We've got information the Germans have broken through." And we had been at that area for a while, and there was a hospital. He said, "There's one road out of Wiltz away from our store and I want all of y'all to try to get the nurses out."

PURYEAR: And we got to Bastogne in October, and we had so few patients coming in, we figured the war must have been almost over. But we were very wrong. The 16th of December, we were told in the middle of the night to put on our warmest clothes and we could not take one thing with us. We left the hospital, we left everything except 350 patients. We took all the patients with us. We went back 100 miles, and went into an old, bombed-out castle.

GREGG: We got the word to move in. In our case, the 101st Airborne got the word to move to the town of Bastogne in Belgium. We went in on the 19th, and it was surrounded in about 24 hours. The 101st Airborne held that town for… until Patton finally broke in. I think it was the day after Christmas, I believe, he broke into Bastogne. We were fortunate in that we got into Bastogne just before the Germans got there, because I mean we made it by the skin of our teeth.

SEATON: On the 20th, the last road into the encircled city was cut, which meant that Bastogne was totally surrounded. That was on the 20th. On the 21st, General McAuliffe, as I understand, received the instructions to defend Bastogne at all costs. That's exactly what they did. At the end of the day on the 22nd, we had nine rounds of HE ammunition left.

GREGG: The Germans sent their envoy in. It was a German Colonel who came in on a white flag, who asked for surrender. That was when General McAuliffe, when he got the note saying, "You are surrounded. There's no hope of escape, etc. etc." And, "Only more people will die." And he asked for our surrender. And General McAuliffe looked at it. He said, "Nuts." That's how that came about. That's the note they sent back by one of our Colonels. And he had to explain what that meant.

WILLIAMS: We were somewhat surrounded, so they informed us at a breakfast meeting. I spent my 21st birthday in a foxhole in the Battle of the Bulge, thinking I was supposed to be in Paris.

SEATON: Of course, Patton had to move about 120 miles to get up to where we were. And we knew, we did know he was on the way.

COLLINS: He volunteered in a huge meeting of officers, he volunteered to put his army on the move and get to us. And he said he could get there within 24 hours. Nobody in the group believed him, that he could do it. But we heard that he was coming

WEBB: Patton was really moving up through France. It took a lot of effort to keep him supplied. That was the height of the Battle of the Bulge. And it was Christmas Day. That was my Christmas present.

PURYEAR: And we got there on Christmas Eve. And we were cold, we were hungry, we were miserable. But the next morning, there was a flagpole on that ground, and when that American flag went up that pole, it was the best Christmas gift we could have ever asked for. Because we had almost been captured three times.

GREGG: I think it was Christmas Day that the sky opened up somewhat, and they flew in a bunch of C-47's with ammunition and with medical supplies – that was what we really needed. It was quite a sight to see those 47's come in and dropping those parachute bundles.

DEPANCIS: When we were with Patton, we really flew across France to get to Bastogne. After we got in Bastogne, the 101st was really happy to see us.

HARD FOUGHT VICTORY

JONES, L: It worked its way out by a slugging match that took us back to where we had started when the Battle of the Bulge began. There was a great uplift of spirit, because once we had thrown the people back there, we sort of realized what was taking place, that we were winning.

CREWS: There was a young German Lieutenant, he was probably my age, I guess. And he was lying cold, in the ice and snow. And I looked down at that guy and I said, "Well, you know, that could be me." And I said, "And here he is; he's got a mother, he's got a father, he's got brothers, he's got somebody that cares about him." And,

"Why should we be into something like this?" You know? It makes you question those things, but of course, you know, we had a job to do and we had to do it.

JONES, L: Suddenly came up on an infantry Captain, with about three soldiers. And he stopped our Jeep, and said, "Get out. Help me defend this area. We're gonna be attacked any minute." And we looked down this road, and you could see the Germans coming at us, in long lines in each side of the road, in a ditch. But these people were trying to surrender. There must have been 150 of those people. But the war was over, for them. There were very few of us, maybe six or seven.

CLATTERBUCK: From the 16th of December until about the latter part of January, I didn't have my clothes off. We were moving, it was bitter cold, it was… you know, you just were gonna be dirty. And I don't remember the town anymore, but somewhere, our commanding officer, Captain, acquired – and I use that term loosely, because I don't know how he acquired it – a truckload of fuel. I don't know, whether coal or charcoal briquettes or what, but he went to a convent and talked to the Mother Superior, and made a deal with her to give her this load of fuel. And the sisters left the convent, and they made their showers available to us. And we went in for a hot shower. We had one minute of hot water, two minutes to soap up, and two minutes to rinse off. And you can't imagine how good that felt.

JONES, L: Well, I think you kept your spirits up, because you were sort of looking after the guy next to you. I think that was the comradeship and the friendship of the people that you were with, was the thing that kept you going.

RAINES: Yeah, if you get through it, no doubt you're blessed some way or another. Whether you call it luck or what, but it's good to be back home again. That was the dream of all the boys, was to come home. Thousands and thousands never got to. I hope not, I hope they're not forgotten.

SEATON: Was it worth it? It wasn't a question of whether it was worth it. It would have been a major tragedy if they had gotten through and taken Antwerp. It was a successful operation, as tragic as it was, and as surprised as we were. They thought they had it when they attacked in force.

PERKINSON: You really believed that you were fighting to protect back home, and your family. And that was the most important thing.

"... Undoubtedly the greatest American battle of the war and will, I believe, be regarded as an ever-famous American victory."
British Prime Minister Winston Churchill

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