

Hitler launches surprise attack in Ardennes



A Nazi soldier, heavily armed, carries ammunition boxes forward with a companion in territory taken by their counter-offensive. A scene from a captured German film. Belgium, December 1944.

Operation 'Watch on the Rhine' was the deliberately misleading German name for Hitler's new offensive, suggesting a defensive plan on the western border of Germany. Instead Hitler was making one last throw of the dice to launch an attack through the same heavily wooded mountainous terrain that had surprised France in 1940.

This time it was the US Army that was surprised. The Ardennes, on the border of Belgium and Germany, had been a quiet sector of the front line which in many places was only thinly manned by US troops.

The 106th Infantry Division, freshly arrived in Europe and without combat experience, had just taken over a large section of the line on the 11th December. They took over a front 26 miles long, at a time when the US Army manual recommended that a Division was capable of holding a 5 mile front at most.

At dawn on the 16th December the men of the of the 424th Regiment awoke in their bunkers on the front line to the cries of a soldier shouting "The Germans are coming. The Germans are coming. We will all be killed". Harry F. Martin Jr dived into his foxhole with his friend Bill Williams:

As soon as we got into our foxhole, Bill announced he was going to use a rifle grenade. Seconds later I could see hundreds of shadowy heads bobbing up and down, coming over the crest of the hill just before dawn. They acted like they were drunk or on drugs, screaming, shrieking. I was absolutely terrified. They had already outflanked our company and now they were coming to finish us off.

With nothing on our left and out of sight of our platoon on the right, it felt almost like we were against the entire German Army. I was horror-stricken. There was no thought of running away or surrendering. I had

an absolute conviction to fight to the death, while being certain we would be killed.

Just about then, Bill tugged on my leg. I was vaguely aware he asked me to let him know when the Germans were close enough. Neither of us had ever fired a rifle grenade before and we did not have the slightest idea of the effective range.

There were so many of them storming down the hill coming right for us. There was no way of stopping all of them. I had a feeling of utter hopelessness; I was panic-stricken. I felt my entire life force had left my body. I was already dead and was fighting like a zombie. Sheer panic caused me to fire without thinking or aiming. I was unaware of my body, just terror, firing as fast as my finger could pull the trigger.

They kept coming as though immune to death. Apparently I was not hitting a thing. I was so transfixed with fear and terror, my eyes did not focus on the individual enemy. I was firing blindly, without thinking or looking through the sights.

In my terror-stricken seizure I continued to fire in the general direction of the swarming sea of terror, the huge mass of bodies charging toward me. It was as though the entire hillside was alive, moving with huge tentacles to devour me.

Bill tugged on my leg again and yelled, 'Are they close enough?' I can remember telling him no, but my brain didn't register distance. I could not even think about what he was saying. He must have tugged my leg half a dozen times during the battle and I kept telling him no.

In the middle of this terrifying battle I heard a very confident, calm voice inside my head say, "Squeeze the trigger." I calmed down instantly, took careful aim at one of the charging Germans through my gunsight and squeezed the trigger. He flung his arms up over his head and fell down dead, shot through the head. I felt a sensation surge through my whole

body. I was no longer a zombie. My life force had come surging back. I was alive and for the first time I felt that I had a chance to come out of this battle.

At this very moment I was a veteran combat soldier. I continued to shoot the attacking Germans until they finally stopped coming. The battle was over. After such intense fighting it was very strange how suddenly the battle ended. How quiet everything had become. A feeling of disbelief it was over. At the time it seemed as if it would never end.

This account is one of many to be found in [Gerald Astor \(Ed\) A Blood-Dimmed Tide: The Battle of the Bulge by the Men Who Fought It](#)



German Grenadiers in Luxembourg during the Ardenne Offensive.

Editor / December 16, / 1944 / infantry

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