

Subscribe
Today

The Free Lance-Star

Inside the Battle of the Bulge

Former Fredericksburg City Manager John Nolan dodges bullets during pivotal World War II campaign. By Arch Di Peppe



Date published: 1/29/2005

THIS MONTH marks the 60th anniversary of the World War II Battle of the Bulge. Former Fredericksburg City Manager John Nolan, a retired Army colonel, remembers it well.

Nolan was the platoon sergeant of the 1st Platoon, Company G, 119th Infantry, 30th Infantry Division. He was an Ohio boy from Bowerston--population 447--who enlisted in December 1942. In September, he joined his unit in Belgium as an infantry replacement and was a corporal placed in charge of eight men. All were new replacements who would soon be in ground combat.

One of the first things the Army did was tell him to drop his duffle bag, cut off his haversack, and get into a truck heading for the front lines.

"When the trucks ran out of gas, we got out and walked the last 65 miles in three days," Nolan remembers. "I knew it was serious when people kept trying to kill me in Holland. It was the first time I came under small-arms fire. You never forget that sound."

By Dec. 17, the 119th Regiment was deployed in the Malmedy-Stavelot sector of the Ardennes to block any further

Featured Advertiser

ROSNER
STAFFORD TOYOTA

10 Minutes * 10 Grand

Rosner Toyota of Stafford
95 Garrisonville Rd
Stafford, VA 22556

[View Complete Ad](#)



advances of the German Panzer units. The German movement was spearheaded by one of Germany's most feared and elite units, the 1st SS Panzer Division. This unit was at full strength with veteran troops. Nolan's 30th Division had been nicknamed "Roosevelt's SS" by the Germans because of the fighting reputation it had earned in France.

"There was dense fog, no air cover, and it was very cold. We were fighting up and down the mountainous terrain," Nolan recalls.

Several days later, G Company helped surround the 1st SS Panzer Division at La Gleize. The Germans retreated, leaving 25 tiger tanks, 13 panther tanks, 44 trucks, 46 half-tracks and six 150 mm howitzers. They were trapped and they ran out of fuel. It was Christmas Eve.



On Christmas Day, Nolan's platoon thought they were going to get a break, but they were wrong. They had set up in an old house in the town. Someone had "liberated" two chickens. They had been eating K-rations forever, and the men were looking forward to a real Christmas dinner. The kitchen was in the basement, and there was a table with a real crystal chandelier overhead. The chickens were put on the table and, just then, the position was attacked by Army Air Corps P-38 fighter planes who mistook the American tank outside for a German one. The pilots dropped 500-pound bombs that missed the tank but landed close enough to shake the whole house.

"Everyone jumped for cover under the furniture. When the dust settled, we stood up to find that the blast's concussion had shattered the chandelier and filled our Christmas chickens with glass shards. We held hard feelings against the Air Corps for some time. We just knew they were heading back to their base for a big Christmas dinner. We ended up eating K-rations," said Nolan.

By Jan. 13, 1945, Nolan's unit was helping to push the German bulge back to its original lines.

"It was the worst day of my life," says Nolan. "It was unbelievably cold. I wore two pair of long johns, wool shirt and pants, scarf, field jacket, wool trench coat, two pairs of socks, combat boots, four-buckle galoshes, wool gloves with leather covers, wool stocking cap and a helmet with a white camouflage cover.

"In addition, I carried a gas mask, haversack, mess kit, canteen, K-rations, sleeping bag, entrenching tool, M-1 rifle, 100 rounds of ammunition, bayonet, 9 mm German Luger pistol with a 10-inch barrel and a sheath knife held around my neck by a string. I weighed 150 pounds and my gear must have weighed another 75."

G Company was ordered up to lead the platoon's attack to capture Bellevaux, a small town astride a high ridge.

"We were told to leave our sleeping bags behind and that they would be brought up later. I decided to put my gas mask in my haversack instead of under my arm. I used the gas-mask carrier to

store personal items like letters from home, writing material and shaving gear. I also carried an old coal miner's carbide tin full of tea bags," said Nolan.

Nolan and his company climbed up the steep slope. There was a foot of snow. As they approached the ridge, the lead scout saw German soldiers in foxholes about 30 yards ahead. One American soldier spoke German and called out to the soldiers to surrender.

"All hell broke loose," Nolan recalls. "A German MG42 machine gun opened fire, pinning us down. The first burst hit four of us before we could find cover. I was knocked down and my back was hurting. I rolled over and took off my pack to see what had happened. To my surprise, I found a machine-gun bullet lying in a hole in my pack. It was still warm. It had passed through my pack, my gas-mask container, my gas mask, nicked my shaving brush, and stopped on the surface of my coat. It gave me a hell of a thump on my back that was sore for a few days. This was the only day in combat that I had ever carried my gas mask in my pack, and it saved my life.

"We were pinned down and kept from advancing. We had to get the wounded out. We brought up a door from a nearby house to evacuate those that couldn't move on their own. Then the Germans began dropping mortar rounds on our position. Then they shot rockets that we called 'screaming meemies' at us. They weren't as accurate as the mortars, but the high-pitched screeching was terrifying," said Nolan.

Nolan's company started taking casualties from the mortar rounds. "We couldn't move up, but we weren't going to retreat," he said. "We shot a German soldier that was trying to move on our flank. Two light tanks that were moved up and supported by the 3rd Platoon took out the machine gun.

"The attack of the 3rd Platoon was a sight to behold, with a deafening crescendo of small-arms fire and cannon bursts. They surged through the enemy lines, and those Germans that survived the attack immediately surrendered," he says.

G Company was ordered to set up a defensive position, and night soon fell. The ground was frozen. Some of the men had been issued TNT and blasting caps, and used it to break up the frozen surface so they could dig foxholes. Nolan and his men did not have any explosives, so they spent a long, cold night huddled together in spoon position on a Belgian mountainside. The sleeping bags never made it up to the front lines that night.

The next morning, G Company was ordered to move forward. The 3rd Platoon led the way, with the 2nd Platoon in support. Nolan's 1st Platoon, having been badly mangled, brought up the rear. Nolan's company had suffered a 41 percent casualty rate.

"It was a dark, cold morning as the remaining members of our platoon reluctantly shouldered packs and rifles and prepared themselves for another day of combat against a determined enemy," remembers Nolan.

From June of 1944 (D-Day plus four) until the end of the war in Europe in May of 1945, more than 1,400 men served in G Company alone. A full company was 196 men. In less than one year, the company's roster turned over more than six full times.

Nolan returned home after the war, stayed in the Army and retired in 1972 as a full colonel. He served as Fredericksburg's city manager

twice, from 1978 to 1981 and then again from 1985 to '86. He served on the Orange County Board of Supervisors from 1991 until 1995. Today, he lives in Spotsylvania County with his wife of 56 years, Rosemary. He has three sons and three grandchildren. He is currently the veterans liaison to the city for the Fredericksburg Area War Memorial.

ARCH DI PEPPE is an antiques appraiser and freelance writer living in Stafford County.

Date published: 1/29/2005