

THE BITTER WOODS

Charles B. Doak, Jr.

Editor's note: In December 1944, toward the end of World War II, the Germans made a last ditch counterattack using 3 armies against a thinly defended area of Belgium near Bastogne in the Ardennes. The 101st Airborne Division was rushed to Bastogne where it held out for 5 days. By December 19 the German penetration reached a depth of 50 miles but failed to reach its destination, the Meuse River (see map).

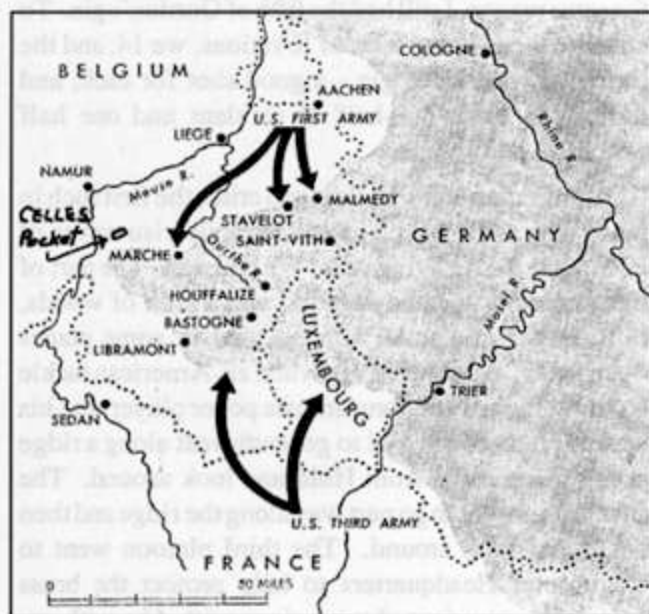
The First Army turned south to block the way to Liège. Montgomery sent troops to prevent a Meuse crossing, and six divisions of Patton's 3rd Army broke off their attack in the Saar region to the south, faced to the left, and in 6 days redeployed to contain the German offensive.

Classmate Chic Doak was a lieutenant with the 2nd Heavy Armored Division, which moved quickly in from the north to support the defensive forces just before Christmas. Chic tells his Christmas story.

The sun had not penetrated the rain, drizzle and fog for many days. During the night we moved down from assembly areas south of **Baesweiler**, west of the **Roer** valley. We passed through and around **Aachen** and by mid-morning were spread over many miles in the northern Ardennes. We were thousands of tanks, guns, half-tracks, vehicles of all kinds, all moving persistently south - blacked out, radio silence, feeling along narrow roads through rain and fog. Our spirits had been suffering from the despondent weather, but now there was action. It was December, 1944 and we were needed in the **Ardennes**. We were the only American heavy armored division, the Second, and that night march of 100 miles was one for the book.

My jeep ran into the half-track in front in the solid blackness near **Aachen** and cracked the radiator. Leaving it by the side of the road with the driver to await maintenance, I tossed my bedroll in the half-track, climbed in and hunkered down with the crew in the rain for the rest of the night.

The Reconnaissance Company of the 66th Armored Regiment assembled in a field at mid-morning. It was clearing. Capt. Jesse Heath said there were reports of Germans to our south and General Collier thought we would see some action.



The company moved south and spent the night in a field east of **Ciney**. Some Belgians told us a column of German vehicles had gone west through **Ciney** earlier in the day. We didn't know where they were, just out there some place, and we were behind them - or maybe between them.

In the morning we moved a few miles south through **Leignon**, a village with maybe 50 houses. We picked up a couple of infantry soldiers who had gotten away when their unit was overrun some days earlier. They helped us look over **Leignon** rather carefully, including a large convent there. The village was clear of Germans and pretty much of Belgians.

Darkness comes early on Christmas Eve in the **Ardennes**, and it was dark when we reached **Haid** a little hamlet and crossroads a few miles south of **Leignon**. The company was assigned to secure the place for the night and we had to outpost it 360°. I was assigned with two assault guns, a light tank and a jeep to the southern-most road junction. There was a little house there and a little man in it.

There we were, the point of the needle. The night was black. Not foggy - just black. And absolutely still. So still we could have heard reindeer prancing on the clouds a mile away, or the clack, clack, clack of tank

tracks moving on the hard black road. But there was no sound, no whisper. Only the thick black night.

In those days officers received a monthly allowance of a bottle of champagne and a bottle of booze. That night, for some reason, I still had the fifth of Gordon's gin. To enhance the evening feast of K-rations, we 14, and the little man, drank the gin - a good shot for each, and during the night one-half of us slept and one half watched - and listened.

Christmas morning was clear and crisp, the first such in many days. We looked up and mirabile visu waves of B-17s and B-24s flying east. We cheered. The part of the **Ardennes** we had come to was a mix of woods, hills, ridges and small villages, and in some places open fields. Abe Shires, erstwhile all-American tackle from Tennessee and consummate poker player, and his second platoon was told to go southwest along a ridge six or seven miles from **Haid** and look around. The first platoon was to go part way along the ridge and then south and look around. The third platoon went to Regimental Headquarters to help protect the brass from nasty surprises. I went along with Abe with my assault guns. Captain Heath came along too.

From the ridge we were looking down a valley surrounded by fields on the little village of **Verre** when two German armored personnel carriers wheeled into **Verre** from the other side. Sergeant Hatfield promptly gave them some well placed airbursts and the Germans hopped out and went into some houses. For a while we did nothing about them but kept the houses under observation. We really didn't want to mess up the Belgian houses, and probably some civilians, unless there was no other way.

Captain Heath sent me down the long road to the junction with some men and vehicles. We looked around the corner through the woods and right there was an American six wheeled truck, a Dodge. It was pointed in our direction but not moving. We approached cautiously. The engine was still warm, and there was a body in it, cold and stiff in the bed of the truck, German. We put the body in the woods beside the road and took the truck. I left a light tank by a small house east of the road bend and went back up the hill.

Shires and Heath had decided to try to get the Germans out of the houses so Lt. Cona went down with some men and fire-power and it worked. Out they came without a shot fired. Now we had some PWs to look after until we could get rid of them.

While this was going on we saw some Nebelwurfer fire

coming out of the woods about a mile away, beyond where I had left the light tank. It wasn't firing at us, however, but about 150° away toward the town of **Celles**. We looked in that direction with binoculars and made out a bunch of tanks in a fringe of woods. We knew our 67th Armored Regiment was to our west and north and that is where they were. Our assault gun with another fine bit of shooting put the Nebelwurfer out of action before its crew could turn attention to us.

About then Lt. Cona went through **Verre** to look around the corner whence had come the two German vehicles. There was another little village, **Custinne** behind the hill around that corner and we thought we'd better sneak a peek at it. After looking, Cona's jeep driver backed off the road to turn around and ran over a mine. The jeep was wrecked and Cona and his driver were pretty badly hurt and had to be evacuated.

Things turned quiet for a bit and we fraternized with some people in the village. They gave us food and drink and welcome. I finally got back to the house on the hill - our O.P. - and up to the third floor where a window faced northwest toward **Celles**. Through the glasses I noticed movement in the woods sloping in our direction about two miles away. As I looked an artillery spotter plane flew over and the movement stopped. When the plane had passed the movement started again. Although I could not make out the road, the glimpses of movement clearly indicated a column of vehicles moving our way. My map showed there was only one road there and that road was where I had found the Dodge truck and where we had four men in a light tank. Time to move. I dashed downstairs. Quickly put Heath and Shires in the picture. Told them to get an assault gun down the hill fast (Heath said "Do you think we need it?" I said "yes! now"). Then I rushed down the hill in a jeep to our tank by the little house. I told the crew to rev-up and get ready. I crept through the woods until I could see around the corner. About 75 yards away was a line of German vehicles as far as the eye could see. But no tanks in view! They had stopped and in the first vehicle was standing a man in a long gray coat and visored hat looking straight down the road with binoculars.

I slithered back through the woods. The assault gun had just arrived. I told the crews what we were going to do, told the light tank to go on our left flank through a field, hopped on the back of the assault gun and we barreled around the corner firing everything we had. The Germans were very upset, and dropped out of the vehicles like fall leaves in a big wind, disappearing into

the woods and back along the road. We banged away into and over the column trying to reach beyond where we could see, since the road curved downhill, trying to give the impression we were a big force and not just ten men. We hoped Captain Heath would get some more men and equipment down promptly. Then we went along the vehicles putting them out of action with grenades under the hoods or smashing the distributors. We arrived at a place down the road a bit where there was a big stone building, a kind of gatehouse to the Chateau Royal d'Ardennes, back in the woods. We burst in and found a couple of dozen Germans sitting around eating and drinking. We were considerably out-numbered right there, not even counting many hundred in the long column coming from Celles. But maybe they didn't know that, and we had little trouble persuading them to come with us after stripping their arms. So they were marched up the hill to join the other batch.

It was then artillery started bursting in the trees over our heads and I had no trouble deciding to get out of there while we were ahead. Halfway up the hill to the O.P. was a house just by the road. I stayed there with one assault gun for awhile to watch that bend in the road. Someone saw us, however, and we started getting some mortar fire, 120MM I think from the size of the holes. First on the right moving closer and closer, and then on the left. We were bracketed so we went back up the hill quite fast.

Further up, a little sunken lane ran down to Verre. I put the two assault guns in there, in good defilade, and we waited. (An assault gun was a 105 howitzer mounted in a medium tank. Ordinarily one gun is in each platoon. While we had been more or less in reserve in December the three guns had been organized into an

auxiliary artillery battery under my charge. That's how I happened to be nursing these guns through the Ardennes). Things were quiet for a while and dusk was coming on. Suddenly a motorcycle boiled around the corner. Evidently they had cleared away the wrecked vehicles. Then another. We banged away at it, and everything that sped around the corner, for quite a while. Then I was ordered to move back. It was almost dark. We had been ordered to pull back along the ridge to Mont Gauthier, three or four miles. We tried to get some Division artillery to interdict that road junction but apparently it was all busy elsewhere. It was too bad. If that place had been stoppered up the German 2nd Panzer Division or what was left of it would have had a hard time getting out - if at all.

That was the deepest penetration the Germans made in what came to be known as the Battle of the Bulge. It was called the Celles pocket.

So we pulled back along the ridge to Mont Gauthier leaving Sgt. Poole in the woods with jeep and radio to let us know should the Germans start along the ridge.

All in all it had been an unusual way to celebrate Christmas, and unlikely to become traditional.

Editor's note: We can't leave Chic in the middle of a war with an unfinished story.

After numerous encounters and skirmishes with the retreating Germans, the ARDENNES was eventually cleared and by January 25th the original front east of the ARDENNES had been reestablished. Then began the final drive into Germany.

The Germans had lost 250,000 men, 600 tanks and assault guns and 1600 aeroplanes. The attack cost the allies 60,000 casualties. Most of the resistance was over by the middle of April and on May 7 General Jodl signed the act of Germany's surrender.

At the end of the war, Chic left the service as a captain and was decorated with the Bronze Star and the Belgian Fourragère.

