

Christmas season always brings back wartime memories for Battle of the Bulge survivor

For many of us, the recent Christmas holidays have already faded into a distant memory, but for On Top of the World resident Matthew (Matt) Midura, there is one Christmas Day in particular that will never be forgotten for as long as he draws breath.

Matt was a 22-year-old member of the Tenth US Infantry Regiment on Christmas Eve, 1943. He was hunkered down in a foxhole in the Ardennes Forest area of Belgium. He and his comrades were on the verge of annihilation at the hands of the German war machine and had been that way for weeks. Thousands of them were already dead. The survivors were cold, they were dirty and they were scared. Many prayed for divine intervention.

Their battle, the legendary Battle of the Bulge, was named to describe the distortion on wartime news maps as Hitler attempted to break through the Allied Front using 200,000 troops and nearly 1,000 tanks. It was Hitler's last major offensive.

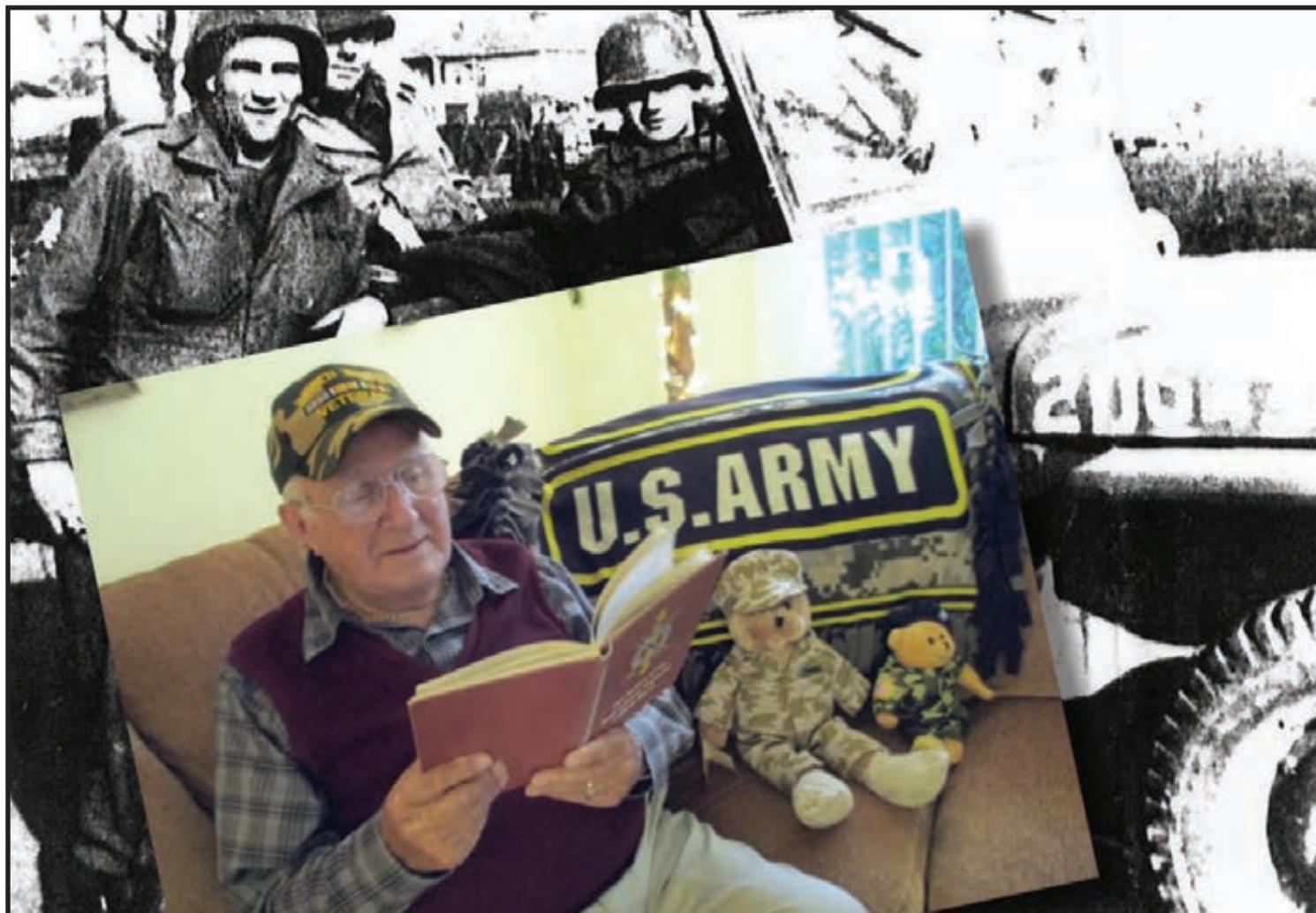
British Prime Minister Winston Churchill called the battle, "... undoubtedly the greatest American battle of the (Second World) war."

Just when things looked most dismal for The Tenth, the prayers of desperation were answered on Christmas morning when the cold gray clouds parted and the sun warmed their filthy faces. They looked to the skies where squadrons of US bombers droned overhead enroute to German supply depots.

The faulty intelligence reports had been corrected and the momentum of the battle swung in favor of the Americans. The German war machine faltered and ultimately failed in May of the new year.

Three and one-half years earlier, Matt had been the teenaged drummer for Pete Midura's High Hat Orchestra and loving it, but Uncle Sam had other plans. Matt was drafted and wound up in basic training in Biloxi, Miss. He was then shipped off to Ireland where he met his commanding officer, General George Patton, who took him to Normandy to follow up the D-Day Invasion 48 hours after the initial landing.

When asked if Patton was really as "colorful" as he is portrayed in print and on film, Matt gave a mischievous smile and nodded. Patton desperately wanted that illusive fifth star for his collar, but his reckless mouth, and Five Star General Eisenhower, held him back.



Matt Midura at the wheel of a US army Jeep in the background and remembering the history of the Tenth in the foreground

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A monthly feature about the people in your
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by John Koning

Most of us can only imagine how dark and disturbing life was as a WWII soldier, but Matt prefers to tell lighter stories. He was once punished with kitchen patrol (KP) when he drove off in a command Jeep instead of waiting two hours in the cold for a superior officer.

During his tour of KP punishment, he was asked to guard two German prisoners. Matt decided to give them each a knife to help him peel the potatoes. When a "Full Bird" Colonel saw what he had done, he chastised him again. The Colonel obviously didn't share Matt's self confidence.

Matt also smiles when he recalls their surge through Europe. As each house was captured, it was customary to search it. While other soldiers might be on the lookout for gold and silver, Matt was looking for a clean place to go pee and tissues to blow his nose.

He had no idea how much he would miss his hankies.

Matt made it through the entire war without major injury, but peacetime was not as kind to him. Following the German surrender in 1944, while transferring two soldiers in a Jeep, their vehicle was broad-sided by a German woman in a truck. Matt's two passengers were ejected and killed. He suffered six broken ribs and spinal contusions. As Matt lay on the ground, unable to breathe, two Polish deposed persons reassured him, supported him and called for medical aid. He spent the next seven months hospitalized.

Now, at 90 years old, Matt Midura has seen many Christmas Days, but his Christmas in the foxhole was one he will never forget.

You can almost feel his gratitude as his eyes sparkle and the past comes alive again.

Battle of the Bulge Fact Box

From Wikipedia

Locations: Belgium, Luxembourg, and Nazi Germany.

Result: Decisive Allied victory, German operational failure.

Belligerents: United States, United Kingdom, France, Canada, Belgium, Luxembourgish resistance, Germany.

The Battle of the Bulge began Dec. 16, 1944 as Hitler planned an offensive with the primary goal to recapture the important harbor of Antwerp. The battle severely depleted Germany's armored forces on the western front which Germany was largely unable to replace. German personnel and Luftwaffe aircraft also sustained heavy losses.

The phrase "Battle of the Bulge" was coined by contemporary press to describe the way the Allied front line bulged inward on wartime news maps and became the best known name for the battle.