

The Ardennes Night

In Frozen Foxholes, Yanks Try to Sleep for Another Day of Battle



The line of traffic—half-tracks, trucks, and jeeps—had just started south from the jammed intersection when the first black puffs of smoke appeared on the little snow-clad hill. Every soldier leaped out of his vehicle and flopped. I jumped from the front seat of a jeep into a ditch filled with rushing icy water.

The man lying next to me, a corporal who had been riding behind me in the jeep, shouted: "I'm hit." Blood gushed from his shattered nose and streamed over my canvas map case. One after another, whistling through the air, the big shells came down with thunderous bursts. We belly-crawled up a stream, lined with hedgerows, behind a line of wriggling GI's. A few yards up on the left we hid behind a small stone shed.

Down the road, 5 yards from where our jeep had stopped, a soldier lay with his left leg blown completely off at the thigh. Somebody used his belt to improvise a tourniquet for the bloody stump. Men lay flattened in the snow, bleeding from fragmentation wounds. At the bottom of the hill two artillerymen were killed and a half dozen were wounded. It was all over in five minutes. The Germans had given us a dose of about 36 shells from 105-millimeter guns.

That was the welcome I got at the ghostly crossroads village on the frozen front northeast of Houffalize. We had started down that road toward the woods to seek out front-line GI's who had been fighting for weeks in ghastly conditions of ice, snow, and merciless cold. Half an hour after the shelling a GI said: "There's not a vehicle on that road now." We decided to make it after dark.

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Frozen Foxholes

The Frozen Guns: From the door of a cottage I looked at the whitened landscape—a shallow valley draped on the far side with a snow-blanketed spruce forest. A quarter of a mile away a self-propelled 105-millimeter gun was burning. Suddenly its gas tank blew up, and the explosion hurled smoke wreaths, like giant cigar rings half a mile wide, sending them a thousand yards up into the air.

I walked along the village street past the shelled intersection into an aid station on the ground floor of a shattered house. There Maj. John T. Mauldin, a blue-eyed, sandy-haired surgeon from Atlanta, told me about the troops fighting in the near-zero cold. Morphine, he said, froze in its syrettes and medics had to carry the tubes under their armpit to keep them warm. Distilled water for plasma solution froze solid in its bottles, confining the use of plasma to warm places such as stove-heated houses. Weather casualties had been severe. Frozen feet—often frozen by a man's own sweat after he battles in the snow and lies down for a rest—had knocked out hundreds. Some lost their feet when gangrene set in. Colds, sore throats, and bronchitis felled scores more.

Other officers filled in the story. Men slept on their rifles to keep them from freezing. On bitter mornings they urinated down the barrels of automatic weapons to thaw them out. After fording streams, the wheels of jeeps froze solid in a few minutes; GI's loosened them with a blowtorch in one hand and a fire extinguisher in the other. Wet zippers on hooded, blanket-lined sleeping bags froze tight, so that the men could not slip out of them quickly when attacked. Some Yanks cut holes for arms and feet in their sleeping bags, wearing them underneath their overcoats and knee-length snow capes while sleeping and fighting.

Dusk fell. A quarter moon hung low in the sky. Guns flashed all around. We bumped over the snow-piled, narrow road in the woods, bogged down in the ditch, and had to be hauled out. We met three shadowy Sherman tanks rumbling in the opposite direction and slid with cat's-eye lights past eerie open spaces. After 2 miles or so a dark figure stepped out on the trail. We had arrived at a forward battalion deep in the woods.

The Frozen Men: A young officer, Lt. Richard Dickson of Toledo, Ohio, whose face was so dark under his helmet I could not see it, told us in a low voice we could not go any farther. The forward companies on the far edge of the woods were still three-quarters of a mile away, but under the intermittent mortar fire the trail was practically impassable for any vehicle in the dark.

Dickson pointed to foxholes all around us. In the darkness they looked like

Frozen Foxholes

mounds of snow and sticks. I flashed a light on the ground. Instantly somebody snapped: "Put that light out!" Even matches may not be struck in the woods when the enemy may be near—you light a cigarette from the next man's butt. Dickson told me how the Yanks build their foxholes: First break the frozen ground, sometimes with dynamite; then dig a hole 2 feet deep, 4 feet wide, and 6 feet long—big enough to take two men; cover the top with tree branches; pile excavated soil on the branches; then put on more branches to make a shrapnel-proof roof. Sometimes, working on the official review of the Ardennes fighting between Dec. 16 and Jan. 11. Supreme Headquarters revealed that the United States forces had sustained 55,421 casualties—37,005 killed and wounded, and 18,416 prisoners of war. Four days previously, Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson disclosed that from Dec. 15 to Jan. 7 the total casualties of the American First, Third, Seventh, and Ninth Armies were 52,594.

The Germans, SHAEF announced, had suffered far heavier losses—approximately 80,000 killed and severely wounded and 40,000 captured. Correspondents seemed to think, however, that this comparison of American and Nazi losses concealed the extent of the damage inflicted by the Rundstedt offensive. The estimate of Nazi casualties was presumably based on the tables of experience set forth in the United States Army Officers Field Manual. Constantly revised and checked against American losses, they show that out of every 100 casualties 17.3 are killed, 62.7 are wounded, 15.6 are captured, and 4.4 are missing. The percentage of German prisoners taken in the Ardennes was roughly double the normal expectability. ¶ Prime Minister Churchill, extolling the courage and fighting skill of the Americans, told the House of Commons they suffered 60 to 80 casualties for every British casualty in the Ardennes. Previously, Churchill had announced British Empire casualties from Sept. 3, 1939, to Dec. 1, 1944, as 1,043,554, of whom 282,162 were killed. His figures did not include civilians and merchant mariners.



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