Newsweek

January 8, 1945: p.22

"Nuts!" to the Nazis

General McAuliffe: Nuts from the U.S.A.

Three days before Christmas, on the third morning of the siege, the shelling stopped; an unnatural silence fell on battered, surrounded Bastogne in Eastern Belgium. Up the road from the south, bearing a white sheet as a token of truce, came a Nazi major and a captain. They carried an ultimatum from the German commander to the Americans in the town. By sticking to their guns in the face of tremendous odds, the Yanks were holding up the development of the southern part of Marshal Karl von Rundstedt's great break-through offensive.

"There is only one possibility to save the U.S.A. troops from total annihilation, and that is honorable surrender," the demand read. "In order to think it over a two-hour period is granted. If rejected, one German artillery corps and six heavy battalions of ack-ack are ready to annihilate U.S.A. troops in and near Bastogne." Furthermore, it said, the consequent killing of civilians would not be in line with the "well-known American humanity."

It was an exaggerated, but not an idle, threat. However, Brig. Gen. Anthony Clement McAuliffe, commanding the American 101st Airborne Division and elements of the Ninth and Tenth Armored Divisions caught in the trap, was a man with the rawhide toughness to take it in his stride. A West Pointer and a native of Washington, D. C., the slender 46-year-old officer parachuted to Normandy with his division on D Day and rode a glider down in the invasion of Holland. The popular general is known to his friends as "Tony"; his men call him "General Mac" and "The Old Crock."

"Nuts!" McAuliffe snorted to his staff when he read the German demand—and that was the answer that went to the Germans. One of McAuliffe's colonels presented a piece of paper carrying the word, double underlined and followed by an exclamation point, to one of the Nazi officers. The German thanked him. "Do you know what 'Nuts' means?" the colonel asked. "Well, it means the same as 'Go to hell'." The Nazi reddened and went

OldMagazineArticles.com

back to the enemy lines. News of McAuliffe's reply quickly spread through the American ranks and became the rallying cry for one of the finest actions in American military history.

The Cognac Treatment: On the afternoon of Dec. 18, while the southern spearheads of the Nazi counteroffensive were punching through Luxembourg, the 101st Airborne (Screaming Eagle) Division had begun moving into Bastogne, a key communications center from which good roads lead north, west, and south. Joining other units in the town, troops of the 101st, veterans of D Day and the invasion of Holland, forthwith plunged into the toughest fight of their career. McAuliffe commanded in the absence of Maj. Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, who was in Washington.

Sending a task force to meet the Germans coming from the east, the Americans established a perimeter defense of Bastogne. The task force was ripped to pieces by the Nazis, who were in great strength. Swiftly the attackers exploited their advantage. While some hit frontally from the east, others swung around the town and captured the defenders' hospital unit and quartermaster and ordnance outfits stationed to the west. The loss of the hospital multiplied the hardships of the Americans. Short of medicines, they dosed the wounded liberally with cognac. For four days the only treatment casualties had was given by three young general practitioners and two Belgian nurses.

At least eight German armored and infantry divisions—never less than three at a time—tried to take Bastogne from the stubborn Americans. Outnumbered some four to one, so short of gasoline they didn't start their tank-destroyers until the German Panthers and Tigers were close in, the Yanks turned back repeated day and night assaults. They ran low on ammunition and rationed it, while the Nazis whipped in artillery and mortar projectiles by the hundreds. The town was pocked with shell holes and strewn with rubble. Fires blazed and smoldered in the rain and snow.

Merry Christmas: But neither the Yanks inside nor the Yanks outside regarded Bastogne as hopeless. Surgeons reached the town in Piper Cubs and gliders. Despite fog and low clouds, gliders and reliable old Douglas C-47s began supplying the beleaguered Americans with food, ammunition, medical equipment, and even candy and cigarettes on Dec. 23. About 1,500 tons of supplies reached the Yanks. They came in good time.

At 3 o'clock on Christmas morning, just after the setting of the moon, the Germans reached the climax of their attack on Bastogne. Against the 14-mile perimeter defense they threw four divisions. The Yanks took them on with bazookas, artillery, mortars, machine guns, grenades, and rifles. Sheets of flame and the rolling thunder of explosives cut the pre-dawn blackness. Losing heavily in tanks and other vehicles, the Germans withdrew to reform. Then, as before, they failed to get any infantry

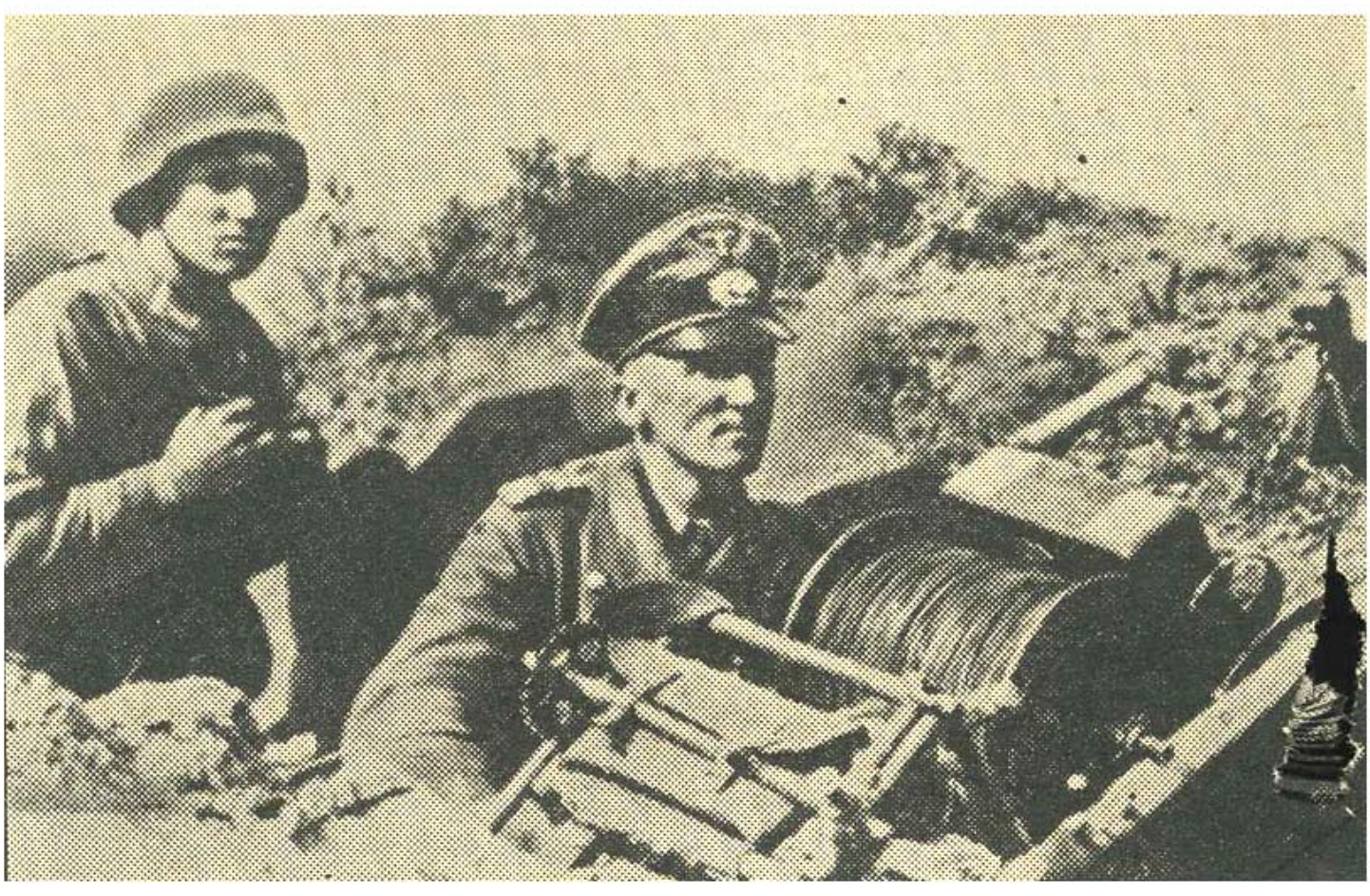
OldMagazineArticles.com

into the town. And, in a serious setback to Rundstedt's counteroffensive, they lost their last chance to take Bastogne. The countryside was littered with the wreckage of nearly 200 German tanks and many other vehicles.

Men in White: The Yanks were buoyed by their own confidence and the knowledge that three of Patton's divisions—the Fourth Armored and 80th and 26th Infantry—were driving northward from around Arlon to relieve them. On the afternoon of Dec. 26 an armored unit crashed through to Bastogne. A patrol of 80th Division infantry, wrapped in discarded white parachutes for camouflage, also made its way to the city. And General Taylor, who had flown from Washington on Christmas Eve to be with his 101st Division, bounced into the town in a jeep. The next day the rest of the relief force lifted the siege of Bastogne and the Germans withdrew hastily.

But the Americans paid heavily for their victory. The casualties ran to nearly 10 per cent, and they lost much equipment Nevertheless, the Screaming Eagle Division was all for pursuing the Germans. Justly proud of the magnificent showing of his soldiers, a colonel said: "These men of ours sure are going to be insufferable from now on!"

The panzers of General Dietrich (far left)



and General von Manteuffel made the greatest gains in Belgium

Reunion in Bastogne: Vehicles of the rescuing American Fourth Armored Division mingle with those of the Tenth after the Nazi siege is lifted

OldMagazineArticles.com