

BEFORE THE FURY

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The Hurtgen Forest was a horrible nightmare, but it was over now. For some it was over because they were dead. But for the living, Hurtgen was now just a bitter memory, albeit one that would never really fade. In the middle of November 1944, the 28th Infantry Division left the Hurtgen Forest and convoyed south to the Ardennes.

In just two weeks in the Hurtgen, the division had suffered over six thousand casualties. Now platoons were the size of squads. Companies were the size of platoons. Battalions were the size of companies. The unit had been fighting since July in Normandy and it badly needed rest and replacements. Veterans needed time to rebuild their shattered nerves, put the misery of the forest behind them, and maybe enjoy life again. New arrivals needed a chance to ease into their new assignments, make friends, feel a part of something, and learn how to survive in combat.

The Ardennes, everyone thought, was the ideal place for this rest. The Ardennes was quiet. This was the ghost sector, a place where the war was taking a holiday. The soldiers of the 28th Division, nicknamed the Bloody Bucket for its distinctive divisional symbol, fanned out all over the Bastogne corridor in Luxembourg. They settled into towns, manned outposts, and did some training. More than anything, though, they rested. The Germans seemed to be doing the same.

Thanksgiving came on November 23 that year. For survivors and replacements alike, there was much to be thankful for—security, warmth, and some wonderful food. The cooks prepared turkey, gravy, potatoes, cranberry sauce, and everything else that goes with a traditional Thanksgiving dinner. There was more food than even these hungry men could eat.

One company in the 112th Infantry received “four hundred pounds of turkey complete with trimmings. That day we all could say we had something to be thankful for,” a soldier recalled.

Some GIs even had Thanksgiving dinner with Luxembourgers. Sergeant Herman “Ham” Kramer ate dinner in Colmar-Berg at the home of a local tavern keeper: “He had squirreled away some wine from the Germans. He brought out that wine.” With a flourish, the tavern keeper first poured a small bit of wine in his glass and then larger portions into the glasses of the Americans. Somebody asked him why he did that. “It’s a local tradition,” he replied. “If there’s any impurity or cork, I will take that in my glass.” Kramer and his friends were impressed: “The people there in Luxembourg were just great. They admired us and were so grateful to us.”¹

Indeed they were, and the admiration cut both ways. The Germans had swallowed up the tiny, beautiful country in May 1940. The ensuing occupation was difficult for the rebellious and independence-minded Luxembourgers. The Germans impressed private citizens into work as laborers and conscripted young men for their army. Anyone who opposed the Germans risked being hauled away to a concentration camp. On September 10, 1944, the Americans had liberated Luxembourg, ending four years of tyranny and restoring freedom to a people who yearned for it. September 10 is to most Luxembourgers what July 14 is to the French or July 4 to the Americans: a day of liberty and celebration.

So it was only natural that the 28th Division soldiers quickly established strong, enduring ties of friendship with the Luxembourgers of the Ardennes. In Clervaux, Sergeant Bob Bradicich, a squad leader in E Company, 110th Infantry, found several surrogate families: “We could get some food from the ‘mess hall,’ and I gave it to the civilian families and sometimes would eat with them at their house. This went on for a couple of weeks.”

One night a young girl, in response to his kindness, gave him a card that had a soldier’s prayer written on it. Bradicich was touched. He had lived through the Hurtgen Forest, and he knew that a soldier needed every bit of help he could get—temporal or spiritual—to survive. He tucked the card away and resolved to carry it with him everywhere.

Just down the street from Bradicich, medics like Sergeant Andrew Puchany had plenty of time to treat local patients because of the absence of combat casualties. Puchany and his buddies had a couple of favorite patients, including a “sweet girl of eighteen who had ulcers on her legs” and a “bearded lady friend.” Sergeant Gene Fasig was a medic in D Company of the 103rd Medical Battalion, part of which was at Ettelbruck, far behind the frontline outposts. He and the twenty-one other medics, in

the course of their duties, met and befriended plenty of locals: "The civilian population was very good to us, and we will never forget the friends we made there. We planned to show our appreciation by giving a party for as many of the local children as we could cram into our living quarters. Candy and foodstuffs were donated by every man who received a package from home . . . a program of entertainment was being whipped into shape. Already we had a Christmas tree up in our OR [operating room] trimmed with anything and everything that had color." As the citizens of Ettelbruck strolled by, many of them donated ornaments for the tree.

The scene was much the same to the north in Wiltz, a picturesque river town of some four thousand people where General Cota had set up his division headquarters. Sergeant Paul Luther and another small group of D Company, 103rd Battalion medics, set up their hospital in a school building in the middle of town. He and six other men slept on the upper floor of a nearby bakery: "We slept on the floor on our own blankets and even had access to a toilet. Across the street was a pub operated by a very nice family. They always had pastry snacks and drinks available and were friendly to everyone." As in Ettelbruck, the Americans were planning a nice Christmas party with a tree and plenty of goodies for the kids.²

Even frontline soldiers like Private David Skelly, a machine gunner in D Company, 109th Infantry, got the chance to experience the festive atmosphere. The line companies of his regiment rotated back and forth from the front, affording soldiers like Skelly the opportunity to rest in Diekirch, a small town located four miles east of Ettelbruck: "We were sent to . . . quarters in a hotel, where I immediately made friends with several civilians. We were constantly surrounded by children who always asked us for chewing gum and chocolate. To my astonishment, there was among them a ten-year-old girl who understood a little English and even spoke it. I became especially fond of her and often brought her something to eat."

Two miles north of Wiltz, at Eschweiler, the soldiers of the 28th Division Mechanized Reconnaissance Troop grew especially close to the people. One of the recon troopers, Private George Mergenthaler, forged such deep friendships that he made a permanent impression on the town's history. Mergenthaler was a child of privilege, heir to a printing fortune, and a graduate of Princeton University. He had chosen to serve in combat as a private soldier. Urbane, witty, and kind, he spoke both German and French. Quick with a smile or a joke, he made friends rapidly. "He was helping us always," Michel Huberty, a resident of Eschweiler, remembered. "He was cutting wood and carrying the hay to the cattle. He was a fine lad."

Perhaps his best friend in town was Father Antoine Bodson, the local priest. Mergenthaler was a Catholic kid. He and Father Bodson enjoyed

conversing in both English and French. For a short time, Private Mergenthaler even lived in the rectory before moving to the home of a local family. Father Bodson enjoyed the companionship of this American: "He felt in my house like at home. He was treated like a brother and after a few days we were the best friends. Every night we sat together, listening to the broadcasting. Sometimes he dined . . . with me. Out of my library he got books . . . to read. Every morning he went with me to Holy Mass and Communion."

Mergenthaler and his buddies, like Private Cletus LaFond, often ate with the people of Eschweiler: "At mealtimes many times, the boys were invited to share the home cooking of their hosts, and reciprocated by bringing some of their GI food, chocolate and fruit juices to the kindly people." Private Mergenthaler spent much of his spare time helping the villagers with chores or dispensing care package items his wealthy family had sent him.³

Of course, most of the GIs were not as pure of heart as Mergenthaler. Plenty of them were on the make. In Wiltz, Clervaux, and several other places, American soldiers prowled the streets looking for willing women. There were dances and movies. Rest-center hotels in the larger towns teemed with GIs who were looking for a good time anywhere they could find it. There was also plenty of beer hall carousing. Sergeant Gene Fasig and several other medics drank most of their nights away with Ettelbruck women: "Our group took advantage of the recreation offered by this quiet Luxembourg town and almost immediately female connections were made and the beachheads of love were well established."

At Knaposcheid, a little burg half a mile north of Eschweiler, Private E. C. Wilson, a truck driver in the 630th Tank Destroyer Battalion, marveled at the skill with which his buddy Sam Christopher pursued women. The 630th had been in Europe since the previous summer, and everywhere women fell for Chris, as Wilson and the other soldiers called him. "I don't care where we went, what town, what nationality, the women took to him." Here at Knaposcheid they were billeted in the home of a farm family that had a teenage daughter. "She had already attracted Christopher. She was already making a play for him." The close proximity of the girl's parents kept the prospective lovers apart for the time being, but Wilson knew it was just a matter of time until Chris and the girl got together.

In frontline towns like Weiler, civilians had long since been evacuated to safer areas, but there were exceptions. Sometimes the Americans permitted local farmers to harvest their crops on quiet days. On one such day, Private First Class Thomas Myers of I Company, 110th Infantry, noticed two young women harvesting potatoes in a nearby field. He and an NCO buddy walked over to them and checked their passes to make

sure they were authorized to be in the area. "At close hand, we could see that under the bandannas, the heavy woolen sweaters, skirts, and stockings were two quite attractive young women." Myers and his sergeant were pressed for time, so they checked the passes, made some small talk, found out that the two were sisters, and moved on.

But the sergeant did not forget what he had seen. A few days later, the women were back. The sergeant said to PFC Myers, "Let's go check some civilian passes." The two soldiers walked toward the potato field. "Watch my style," the sergeant said. "I'm going to talk one of those gals into 'going for a walk' with me." Myers knew exactly what "going for a walk" meant. He was happily married with a two-year-old daughter at home, and he had no intention of "going for a walk."

The sergeant was his buddy, though, and Myers was curious to see how this would turn out: "The . . . Luxembourgers accepted our gifts of chewing gum and 'D' bars while my friend turned his charm on the younger of the two sisters. The language barrier . . . was great, but I am sure that she understood by his gestures that he wanted her to go for a walk with him." She refused to go anywhere.

PFC Myers was amazed to see the older sister start walking away, beckoning for him to follow. Curious, he followed her over a hill to the end of the field. She unpacked a homemade bacon sandwich and handed it to him. They sat down and began to eat. Myers was not sure what else to do: "It then became obvious that all she wanted was to hear about America and my family."

They had trouble communicating but spent a pleasant half hour doing their best to understand each other. When they finished eating, they got up and went back over the hill. The sergeant was still trying to make time with the kid sister, but with no more luck than before. Admitting defeat, he gave up and went back to Weiler with Myers. All the way there, he fumed while an amused Myers tried to keep from laughing: "[He] began cursing about his bad luck and my good luck. I never told him what we did but let him assume what happened."⁴

Movie star Marlene Dietrich and her USO troupe were making the rounds of the Ardennes that December, entertaining the troops. The German-born but fully Americanized actress could not have been very popular with the Nazis, so it was fairly courageous of her to entertain soldiers that close to the front.

Lieutenant William Pena attended a dinner on the evening of Saturday, December 9, 1944, in which Dietrich was the guest of honor. He and his unit, I Company, 109th Infantry, were fresh off the front lines, resting now in Diekirch: "Our men were grouped in unoccupied homes and buildings, and the officers roomed at the hotels." Pena was staying in the Hotel des Ardennes right in the middle of town. A native of Houston,

Texas, he was the executive officer of the company. He had been fighting since September, and he was ready for some fun.

That night he and the other battalion officers gathered at a smaller hotel just down the street for the dinner. Everyone wore dress uniforms and polished boots. Several female nurses from a nearby medical unit also attended. Lieutenant Pena sat at a table in the front of the room, right next to Dietrich's head table: "[She] looked a bit older than I remembered her in the movies, and she seemed tired from traveling, but then with us she was not onstage. Still, her glamour permeated the room." Every table was draped with long tablecloths that nearly touched the floor. Pena and his friends spent much of the dinner bemoaning the fact that they "couldn't see her beautiful legs."

After the dinner, Pena and the other officers went back to their hotel for a dance with the nurses, while Dietrich and her troupe went to a nearby recreation hall to entertain the enlisted men. The evening was a success. She planned to come back to Diekirch and perform for the officers in less than a week.

The next day, December 10, she was a few miles to the northwest visiting the 687th Field Artillery Battalion at the Hotel du Moulin near Bourscheid. Like Pena the night before, Lieutenant Les Eames, a young officer in the survey section of Headquarters Battery, was looking forward to seeing the movie star's legs (and much of the rest of her). He too was disappointed. Dietrich showed up for lunch in a loose-fitting paratrooper's uniform. To make matters worse, she was "impatient as the devil . . . sat down to eat w/o introductions or how-do-you-do, bitched, crabbed, took off zzzzip! Saw her show later in the PM, not good, but not too bad."⁵

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A few miles east of where Dietrich and her supporting cast were performing, the war was still going on. Quiet sector or not, the men at the front were dealing with all the usual privations of combat: exposure to the elements, fatigue, and constant danger. General Norman "Dutch" Cota's overwrought division was stretched along a thin line of outposts and strong points that paralleled either side of the Our River. The division's northern neighbor was initially the 2nd Infantry Division, but a few days before the German offensive, the brand-new, raw 106th Infantry Division replaced the 2nd. To the south, the 9th Armored Division bordered the 28th. The 28th had so much ground to defend that Cota was forced to keep all three of his regiments on the line.

In the north, the 112th Infantry held the smallest sector but was actually in the midst of the Siegfried Line, east of the Our, in Germany itself.

From Lutzkampen in the north through Harspelt in the center, to Sevnig in the south, the regiment covered a reasonable distance of three and a half miles. "Since my sector was closest to the enemy lines, in some cases not over 140 yards, it was the shortest of the division front," Colonel Gustin Nelson, the CO, later explained. He was a bald, energetic, courageous West Pointer. His class of 1921, with only seventeen graduates, had been the smallest in the history of the academy.

He and his officers made sure that the troops dug in well, set up interlocking fields of fire, and protected their holes against the possibility of tree bursts. Nelson even devised several contingency plans in the event of a German attack. He placed his command post at Ouren, a little town that hugged the western banks of the Our. The 112th was the only 28th Division regiment with a continuous, fully defended front.

To the south, Hurley Fuller's 110th Infantry was covering more than thirteen miles of Ardennes territory. So overstretched was the 110th that Fuller could place his companies only in strong points astride the strategically situated towns of Heinerscheid, Marnach, Hosingen, Holzthum, and Weiler. A paved, ridge-lined road, dubbed the Skyline Drive by the Americans, stretched from north to south, connecting many of the strong-point towns.

While the companies did have some support from an eclectic mix of tanks, tank destroyers, self-propelled artillery, and engineers, they could not hope to man an uninterrupted line. Small groups of soldiers would outpost the Our, a couple of miles to the east, during the day and return to their towns at night. Fuller's companies were constantly running contact patrols to stay in touch. One can scarcely imagine a more thinly held sector. The 110th was responsible for twice as much territory as any regiment could be expected to control, yet it had only two of its battalions at the front. Much to Fuller's chagrin, the other battalion was behind the lines, in division reserve, and he was miffed at Cota about that. "Very dangerous gaps in our lines existed," Fuller said. "This plan of defense, however, was what was ordered by . . . Norman D. Cota."

Farther to the south, the 109th Infantry was in a similar situation, patrolling more than ten miles of rolling country west of the Our. As with the 110th, there was no bona fide defensive line, only town- and cross-roads-centered strong points in the vicinity of Walsdorf, Fouhren, Longsdorf, Hoesdorf, and Reisdorf. Here, too, soldiers often outposted the Our during the day and pulled back at night.

The division after-action report described the area quite succinctly: "The terrain along the entire division front is extremely hilly, much of it covered with pine forests. Observation is difficult because of the many wooded draws. The road net is fair." Actually the roads were everything

in the Ardennes. The terrain was so hilly, so studded with woods and deep draws, that mechanized forces were often road-bound. The 110th and 112th Infantry Regiments held the most vital road routes of advance to Bastogne. This was the Bastogne corridor.⁶

For the combat soldiers of the 28th Division, life at the front in December was a series of routines. Private Charles Haug's B Company, 112th Infantry, was clustered in foxholes on a hillside overlooking Lutzkampen. The town was ghostly, its residents long gone. At any given time, the Germans or the Americans might be in the town, using the buildings for observation. Beyond Lutzkampen, Private Haug, a platoon runner, could just make out pillboxes and dragon's teeth on the Siegfried Line. The pillboxes were enormous concrete bunkers, bristling with machine guns or artillery pieces. They dotted the landscape seemingly in a haphazard fashion, but actually they were expertly set up to support one another. The dragon's teeth were foot-high lumps of concrete, laid out in tight, even rows, carpeting the countryside in hopes of impeding Allied tanks. Outside of a few shells flying back and forth, little was happening. "Our kitchen crew moved up . . . just behind our hill. We were fed two meals a day. One at about four o'clock in the morning and one about nine o'clock at night. We had to eat during the darkness because we couldn't take the chance of getting out of our holes and moving during the daylight."

Occasionally the men could get out of their holes and move around in the daytime. Lieutenant Charles Hogzett, a platoon leader, even allowed his soldiers to have a little fun: "We . . . let them go back down into the valley behind our defensive positions, where there was an open area about a hundred yards square, where they exercised by running and throwing a football around."

Private Alexander Hadden, a rifleman in B Company, was new to the world of combat. He was a bright nineteen-year-old who had once been enrolled in the Army Specialized Training Program, or ASTP. The program afforded young men who did well on aptitude tests the opportunity to go to college on the army's dime. Secretary of War Henry Stimson had designed the program in hopes of attracting intelligent youngsters to the army and ultimately protecting them from frontline combat. But the program did not survive the voracious needs of the war machine. By 1944 the army was in dire need of more combat troops, so the ASTP was disbanded. Hadden and thousands of others like him ended up in frontline infantry units.

Day by day, he adjusted to life on the front line: "Activity centered around standing guard at whichever of the company positions we happened to be occupying at the time. While there were a few sunny days—much relished of course—the skies hung low and were mostly gray, with rain or

snow from time to time. Endless time was devoted to keeping warm, fed, and dry, though very little could be done about keeping clean." Hadden and his buddies rotated "two hours in [a] covered foxhole sleeping and trying to keep warm, and two hours maintaining vigil towards the east and being cold. It was a mind-numbing routine of course." Sometimes at night a flare or a star shell would burst over the lines, illuminating the whole area for a few spooky minutes. Then things would get quiet again.

In no time, Private Hadden came down with a nasty diarrhea problem, a common malady for frontline troops. "Thus began a months-long intimacy with diarrhea, and its close and malevolent cousin, dysentery. I don't think I ever shook them altogether." When the urge came, Hadden crawled, crab-walked, or ran to a nearby slit trench that served as a latrine, and did his business.

By and large, the front was very quiet. Sergeant Murray Shapiro, a machine gunner, was holed up in a position near Sevenig, a mile south of Lutzkampen. He received "rations of beer or coke . . . tobacco . . . reading material consisting of daily issues of *Stars and Stripes* . . . *Yank*, and all kinds of paperback books . . . as well as occasional handouts of razors, pens etc." They also got plenty of mail from home, including Christmas care packages.⁷

At times, neither side seemed very interested in maintaining hostilities. Bedford Davis, the surgeon for 2nd Battalion, 109th Infantry, was visiting the front with General Cota one sunny day when he observed a humorous, and revealing, conversation between the general and a soldier: "Some of the men were lying on the ground outside their foxholes and slit trenches to absorb the welcome sunshine. German soldiers about two hundred yards away were doing the same."

As Dr. Davis watched, the general began talking to one of the sunbathing men: "Son, do you see that man over there wearing a gray uniform?"

"Yes sir," the soldier replied.

"Don't you know he is your enemy?"

"Yes sir."

"Why don't you shoot at him then?"

"Sir, he might shoot back!"

Everybody laughed, including General Cota. He wanted his troops to be aggressive, but he knew, in this quiet sector, the man was right. Why shoot at someone if he was not shooting at you?

Occasionally German patrols would slip across the Our River, look around for a bit, and quickly go back. Rarely was there much shooting. Troops from the 109th were amazed and amused to see what went on in some of the Siegfried Line fortifications across the Our. "Pillbox defense appeared to have its romantic moments," one regimental officer wrote,

“as female figures could occasionally be seen in the dusk entering the ‘boxes,’ and then leaving at dawn to return to the small villages in the rear.”

Several miles to the north, Private First Class Robert Probach witnessed the same kind of permissive environment. He had been wounded two and a half months before, and he was just now returning to his unit, F Company of the 110th Infantry: “We would drive about three miles to the high banks overlooking the Our River. We would wave to the Germans on the other side. Sometimes we would shout good morning and they would respond the same way.” At times, just to satisfy their superiors, the two sides would squeeze off a few playful, unaimed shots at one another. Naturally, no one ever got hurt.⁸

Of course, there was still plenty of danger, especially for those who participated in the ongoing routine of patrolling. Throughout the first couple of weeks of December, soldiers of the frontline companies spent much of their time on patrols, usually at night. Commanders constantly needed fresh information on the enemy’s whereabouts, his intentions, and his strength. Sometimes, since the American front was so thinly held, the brass simply wanted to maintain contact with friendly units on their flanks. Only patrols could gather this kind of information. “All we did was cut telephone lines, throw grenades, terrorize the German troops, then wade the river and return before we were discovered,” a rifleman explained.

But most patrols were more involved than that. Small groups of frightened men had to find their way through the frigid darkness, in places where the enemy might be, and still complete their missions. The whole thing took nerves of steel, patience, and more than anything else, awareness of one’s surroundings. The numerous new replacements in the 28th Division learned quickly or they did not live.

One of those replacements, Private Hadden, participated in several squad-sized forays into eerie Lutzkampen. “We would assemble in the CP . . . to plan the excursion. Someone—usually with a little experience—would be designated a ‘point man,’ and he would lead the group into the town, with the next men slinking into the village at intervals of five to ten yards on alternating sides of the street. A couple of others would be outriders, walking parallel in adjacent fields. We would try to be sure that only one man would move at a time so that the others could cover him in case of trouble. My heart would be in my throat the entire time. A barn door would creak in the wind and bang shut, and [my heart] would leap into my mouth.” Sometimes they rummaged through the houses in search of food, souvenirs, and maybe some intelligence on the Germans. “Nothing of any real value was ever found.”

The Germans were often out there, though, conducting patrols of their own. One night PFC Probach was with a ten-man patrol. As an ex-

perienced man, he was unnerved that the patrol included a new guy who was generally considered to be slow and unfit for frontline duty. The rookie was of Native American descent, and everyone simply called him the Indian.

The little group set out into the December pitch darkness. "The Indian had been placed at the front of the patrol to keep him from falling behind," Probach said. The men were spread out, making it difficult to talk to or see anyone else. Probach was near the rear of the patrol. After a short advance, the patrol stopped. Everyone took cover and waited by the side of the road. Probach had no idea why they were doing this. Several minutes passed until someone whispered an explanation to him. "The Indian insisted a German patrol . . . was near." Neither Probach nor anyone else had heard anything, so they were quite skeptical, especially in light of the new man's low status within the unit. "Reluctantly, we flattened ourselves on the ground and waited quietly. In less than ten minutes a German patrol passed by." The Americans waited, watched, and then went back to their company positions. The new man had won the respect of Probach and the other soldiers. "[He] had an uncanny sense of sight and sound at night." From then on, he was inevitably known as Chief and was always in great demand for night patrols.

The job of most patrols was to avoid contact with the enemy, gather information, and come back. But at times in December, American commanders ordered raids to destroy Siegfried Line pillboxes. Some of Cota's division was training for pillbox busting in anticipation of going on the attack sometime after Christmas. Thus the raids provided a dangerous sort of on-the-job training.

One crisp winter morning, three platoons from F Company, 112th Infantry, drew such a mission. Under cover of an artillery barrage, the platoon worked their way close enough to shoot at the targeted pillbox. "The BAR [Browning automatic rifle] men delivered a steady stream of bullets into the embrasure, forcing them to button up," one soldier recalled. "Sergeant Wendt, then a private, sneaked up in the back of the pillbox and caught some of the Germans in the doorway. With accurate BAR fire, he forced them to scatter and leave the door open. Then the engineers placed 600 pounds of TNT inside the opening and blew it to pieces." One man was killed and two more wounded in the process of destroying this pillbox. General Cota personally commended the survivors.⁹

Perhaps the most terrifying frontline chore that December was duty on an outpost or observation post (OP)—both terms were widely used—out there beyond the lines, in no-man's-land. The job of a soldier on OP was to watch, listen, and report. OP duty was a leap of faith. A man's entire survival depended on the hope (and expectation) that the enemy would never attack in strength. If they did, he was finished.

Depending on the terrain and tactical situation, the OP could be a foxhole dug into a prominent ridge, a house at the edge of a town or even, in the case of Private First Class Bill Alexander, a medieval castle. Alexander was a member of the Intelligence and Reconnaissance (I and R) section, 2nd Battalion, 109th Infantry. He spent days at a time in a castle that loomed over Vianden, a pretty medieval town nestled against the west bank of the Our River: "From the castle, we could look across the Our River on the side of the hill where there is a sanatorium, which turned out to be the Germans' observation post. They were watching us and we were watching them watching us. Usually there were two men in the castle for twenty-four hours and then they were relieved the following day." Most OP soldiers had phones or radios, but not Alexander. He had to communicate through a small detachment that was staying in Hotel Heintz in Vianden.

Artillery forward observers were constantly on OP duty. Sergeant Charles Johnson was part of a four-man observation team from B Battery, 109th Field Artillery. His unit was based in Reuler, supporting the 110th Infantry. Each day he and the three other soldiers on the team piled into a jeep and drove a mile north to Fischbach, a town that neither side really controlled. "It was unoccupied by soldiers or civilians." Johnson's team would get to the town and "search it carefully for enemy presence, and settle down to observing whatever enemy activity was going on." Johnson was certain that the Germans came into town at nightfall. One of the houses had a cellar containing a pile of potatoes. Johnson swore that the pile shrank each day. Sure enough, one morning they saw German soldiers "leaving one side of town as we came in on the other side. They were in small-arms range but we didn't fire on them because we wanted to protect our own mission."

North of where Sergeant Johnson was, the 3rd Battalion, 112th Infantry, maintained its OP in a two-story house at Sevenig, a tiny farm village adjacent to the Siegfried Line. Anyone wanting to go in there had to do so at night, for obvious reasons. Even in the dark, it was not hard for the Americans to find their way to the building because the path to it was littered with mattresses and chairs that had been pilfered by soldiers going back to their foxholes.

Lieutenant Ralph Larson's 2nd Platoon, K Company, moved into the OP after dark on December 10. Larson was a Minnesota native and thus accustomed to the kind of cold that was settling into the Ardennes, but it was nice to get some shelter for a change. "We had not had such comforts since our arrival from the States. We stayed in a German house—living quarters were upstairs and the barn below. We could sleep in regular beds when not on duty."

Lieutenant Larson spent much of his time in the attic, with a pair of binoculars, looking east out of a window. "We had an exceptional vantage point. Also we had direct telephone contact with the company CP." At times he could see a lone German soldier leave his pillbox for some fresh air, but other than that, not much seemed to be happening.

Private First Class Clarence Blakeslee was often in the attic, too. The thirty-year-old Michigan native was a mortar forward observer from M Company. Before coming up to the OP, he had just received a big batch of letters from his wife and family: "It was my first mail since leaving home in July." He read his letters by the light of a "wine bottle with gasoline with a sock for a wick." In the attic he found a good spot to do his job. "We observed through a ventilator in the roof. The enemy snipers knew we were using it and fired at it so often it was literally pulverized with bullets. We did not put our faces in the opening but stood on a box, back where they couldn't see us." Blakeslee heard that a few days earlier, an artillery captain had had his helmet shot off by a sniper. The captain did not have a scratch on him.

Blakeslee and Larson were lucky in that they could stay in the house all day and night. By contrast, each rifleman had to take his turn outside on listening-post duty. Every night Lieutenant Larson picked three of his men for this dangerous task. The job of a soldier on listening post was to leave the house, crawl a couple hundred yards closer to enemy lines, lie there, remain absolutely quiet, and just listen. If the enemy was coming, the man on listening post was supposed to warn his comrades in the house. Chances were good that he would die in the next instant. Listening-post duty usually lasted two or three hours. The fact that there was snow on the ground for much of December only added to the misery of being on listening post.

Private First Class Vernon "Buck" Bloomer, a twenty-one-year-old midwesterner from Rantoul, Kansas, never looked forward to leaving the comparative security of the house to lie in the snow for hours. "You'd just lay there quiet on the bare ground. It was pretty cold and miserable. If anybody even coughed, they couldn't go out on a listening post." As he lay there, he often heard the enemy somewhere out there in the winter night. "You could hear them having conversations. We were that close." Most likely, the Germans were not more than two or three hundred feet away.

Inevitably with antagonists this close together, somebody would get hurt from time to time. For several days, B Company of the 112th outposted Lutzkampen and saw nothing, but the Germans apparently were still interested in the town. One of Private Haug's best buddies, Private Bud Kunz, got lulled into a false sense of security. He went into the town

during daylight hours looking for souvenirs. "He was walking all by himself close to the edge of town. He ran smack into three Krauts . . . walking directly into our little town. He became terrified. He made no effort to shoot, but instead turned on his heel and ran as fast as he could for the basement where we had our dugout." The enemy soldiers opened up on him with their burp guns. "Bud dropped to the street right before our eyes. They . . . hit him about ten times in the neck and back, and a big pool of blood soon gathered around his body. He must have been dead before he hit the ground."

Haug and the other Americans opened fire on the Germans. "Two of them dropped to the street." One was killed, one was wounded with a broken leg, and the other one got away. The B Company soldiers captured the wounded German, gave him care, and interrogated him, but he would not say what he was doing there. They sent him to the rear in a jeep. Haug and another soldier drew the undesirable mission of retrieving Kunz's body. "[He] was still laying on the muddy street where he had fallen. I'll always remember the expression on his face. His head was laying in the mud, and there was a big pool of bloody water all around his body. His mouth and eyes were wide open and his face had the pale color of a wax dummy." As the two men carried their dead comrade, Haug tripped and the body fell right on top of him. His pants were covered with blood for the next two months.¹⁰

3

On the surface, the front seemed quiet enough, but for the combat soldiers who were there day and night, living near the enemy, watching his every move, something was strange. Gradually, as December unfolded, many of the frontline soldiers began to sense that the Germans were up to something. It was an ominous feeling, disquieting, troubling, slippery but distinct. There was a new and very serious danger brewing out there, and the perceptive 28th Division soldiers were sensing it.

The Germans, after all, were moving more than a quarter of a million soldiers and thousands of vehicles into position. It was hard to conceal that kind of movement for long. At Roder, a tiny village half a mile east of Marnach (itself a town of no more than three dozen buildings), Private Joe Norris and several of his buddies from B Company, 110th Infantry, were on patrol one day when they distinctly heard the sound of multiple vehicles from the direction of the German lines: "We heard this massive noise just like trucks in a depot that were getting ready to leave. You could hear the squeak of tank treads." On one foray near the Our, Private First Class Probach and his squad mates heard "the Germans moving heavy equipment and tanks up near the opposite bank of the river." Just east of

Fouhren, Private First Class Amos Meyers was on OP duty overlooking the Our one night when a wall of sound engulfed the German side: "Throughout the night we heard engines running and noisy equipment moving about, but all was hidden behind the hills." At Hosingen, Sergeant John Forsell and many other soldiers from K Company, 110th Infantry, heard "plenty of movement of vehicles and heavy equipment." Another K Company soldier, Private First Class Edwin Cornell, even saw the enemy preparing to cross the Our: "On patrol . . . we observed the enemy building a bridge across the Our River that separated the two sides."¹¹

Some of the combat patrols were returning with POWs who had interesting stories to tell. At Lutzkampen, a few nights before the German offensive, Lieutenant Hogzett's platoon captured several enemy soldiers. He took them back to the platoon CP, and Hogzett watched while his CO, Captain Stanley Dec, interrogated them: "They were obviously frightened and were extremely courteous and most anxious to cooperate. They stated that they had been on the Russian front for the past year and that they had been brought into the Siegfried Line approximately one month ago." They willingly told the Americans the name of their commander and, more important, that an offensive was in the offing. They themselves had seen "considerable movement of troops into the line in anticipation of an offensive thrust on the part of the Germans."

To the south, at Hosingen, Private First Class Edward Gasper, a K Company, 110th Infantry, rifleman, was sitting in a foxhole with his buddy, looking to the east when they saw movement: "Here comes this German soldier coming in. He was deserting from his outfit. We sat him down on a piece of ground, a stump or something, gave him a cigarette. He could talk good English. He said he was a schoolteacher. He was about twenty-five, thirty, years old. He had had enough. He said he was gonna get the hell out of it. He said there was gonna be a big push before Christmas. We sent him down to the company commander there [Captain Frederick Feiker]. I never saw him again. I hope to hell he got out."¹²

A few Luxembourgers even saw the German buildup firsthand, crossed the lines, and attempted to warn the Americans. Marguerite Lindenmeyer, her brother, and two other people were in their hometown of Bivels, outside of Vianden, when a German patrol picked them up one night. "Bivels is no-man's-land," the Germans said. "No civilians are allowed to stay here anymore." The Germans took them to their side of the river. For several days they interrogated them, politely but intensely. They wanted to know how many Americans were in Vianden and what kinds of weapons they had.

Eventually, after extracting as much information as possible, the German soldiers lost interest in them. The German-speaking Lindenmeyer managed to slip away and wander around in the Bitburg area for several

days, meeting and talking to a growing herd of German soldiers. She saw “a great assemblage of guns, plus towing tractors and tanks, in camouflaged positions along the streets. Something was going on—lots of German military everywhere in the streets, but not on the main roads. There were machine guns, tanks, trucks, cannons. You can’t name it all, but lots and lots of equipment.” And plenty of fresh German soldiers. One of them, “a fanatic young soldier,” told her, “By Christmas we’ll be in Paris again.”

Lindenmeyer was not under any scrutiny by the German soldiers, as they considered her one of their own. She left the town, forded the Our, and made contact with two Vianden resistance fighters. They put her in touch with the police, who in turn sent her to the Americans. Someone in the 109th Infantry interrogated her at Diekirch, but in her words, “Despite my honest eyewitness reports of troops and tanks gathered near the border, the Americans seemed very skeptical.”

Another Bivels woman had a similar experience, although the Americans did take her more seriously. A little more than a week before the German offensive, Elise Dele, a plain-faced, forty-one-year-old woman, risked an expedition into Bivels with her teenage son. The weather was getting colder, and they had left their warm clothes at home several weeks before, when they had been evacuated. As they approached their house, German soldiers appeared. Dele and her son tried to run away. The boy escaped, but not Elise. The Germans took her across the river and questioned her as they had Lindenmeyer. Like Lindenmeyer, Dele had only so much information, and limited supervision by the Germans. She slipped away and tried to get back across the Our. Along the way, she saw the massive German buildup. There were troops, tanks, trucks, guns, pontoon bridging equipment, and boats. During her odyssey, she dodged mines, evaded German patrols, made her way through barbed wire, and on December 14, crossed the Our by boat.

In Vianden, she told two resistance fighters what she had seen. Immediately they took her to the 109th Infantry Intelligence and Reconnaissance (I and R) soldiers at the Hotel Heintz. They gave her coffee and food. She told them what she had seen. These frontline soldiers were highly impressed. When she finished, she wanted to go find her son, but the soldiers, knowing the importance of what Dele had told them, would not allow that.

Instead, they put her in a jeep bound for Diekirch. In Diekirch, the regimental S2 officer interrogated her. He, too, was impressed, so much so that he sent her to division headquarters at Wiltz. From there, her story went up the chain of command to VIII Corps and then to First Army, whose G2 section added the comment that “large numbers of engineers with bridging equipment suggests preparation for offensive rather than

defensive operations.” In response to these reports, a few more patrols went out, but that was about it. Dele remained in Wiltz, still separated from her son.¹³

Among those who headed up American units in the Ardennes, there was a sort of bureaucratic inertia mixed with pervasive skepticism at such ominous intelligence reports. The prevailing mood was that the Germans were close to defeat and incapable of a major attack. It seemed that the farther up the chain of command, the less concern, or perhaps more accurately, the less action, there was in response to the evidence of a serious German offensive. The frontline troops were seeing the signs of an impending enemy attack right before their very eyes and ears. To them the coming assault was no secret; it was a matter of when, not if, it would happen. They passed this information up to their superiors, who in turn did the same. It was a sort of collective buck-passing: privates and sergeants expected their captains to do something, captains expected their colonels to do something; and colonels expected the same from their generals.

Nowhere was this more evident than in the 110th Infantry, the unit that would soon find itself squarely beneath the coming avalanche. At Marnach, Sergeant JJ Kuhn was convinced by December 12 that the Germans were coming. Kuhn was from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He had been in B Company of the 110th Infantry for several years now. The thirty-year-old senior NCO had taken a hunk of shrapnel in the hip a couple of months earlier and was just now returning to the outfit.

He and the other B Company men had been told that this was a quiet sector, but they didn't buy that: “[We] did not accept the idea the German Army was just going to sit still for the winter.” He worked closely with the company commander, Lieutenant Thomas “Kit” Carson, to set up good defensible positions. On the evening of December 12, Sergeant Kuhn and several other men sat in a farmhouse east of Marnach, watching German vehicle traffic move toward the Our River. This traffic, combined with numerous other sightings of large numbers of enemy troops moving for the river, could only mean that an attack was imminent. “We were sure the Germans weren't bringing all that machinery up just to sit for the winter.” Kuhn got on the phone and reported what he had seen to his battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Donald Paul. Paul told him to call Colonel Fuller, in Clervaux. Sergeant Kuhn did so and “talked to Colonel Fuller, who told me he needed positive evidence.”

Kuhn was a bit perturbed. He sensed that Fuller did not believe him. Plus, he did not like the colonel. A few days before, Fuller had chewed him out for not saluting him, in a combat zone no less. Kuhn wondered what it would take to stir this damned colonel into action. If Fuller needed positive evidence, then Kuhn was only too happy to provide it.

Before sunrise the next day, Sergeant Kuhn and another soldier went down to the river's edge. There were no Germans around, but there was irrefutable evidence that they had been there: "We found two turds and some German toilet paper. They used old paper cut into sheets about eight inches square. We picked up the two pieces of excrement and soiled paper and took it back to battalion."

They showed their messy evidence to Lieutenant Colonel Paul and Captain Wesley Rose, the battalion S1. Paul confirmed Kuhn's suspicion that Fuller did not believe his reports from the night before. Captain Rose, a good-humored officer who resembled the actor Cesar Romero, was no fan of Colonel Fuller. With a wry smirk, Rose typed up Kuhn's report and put it and the feces in a manila envelope and marked it "Exhibit 1."

Sergeant Kuhn took the envelope to Lieutenant Carson, his CO, and asked permission to take it to Fuller. "Hey, Kuhn, you're on your own," Carson replied.

The sergeant hitched a ride back to regimental headquarters at the Claravallis in Clervaux. "They let me in, but a major . . . told me I couldn't see the colonel. He took the manila envelope with my report and my 'evidence' into another room. I sat in the lobby and put my helmet on the bench beside me."

Kuhn sat for several minutes waiting. Finally he heard Fuller bellow, "Who's the son of a bitch that sent me this shit?!"

With anger surging within him, and fully prepared for a confrontation, Kuhn stood and started for the sound of Fuller's voice, but an officer stopped him: "You better not. The colonel would shoot you for sending him that exhibit of your findings." Kuhn said he wanted to tell the colonel about all the tanks and trucks he had seen, but the officer ushered him out with a wink. "We cannot do anything without the colonel's orders." Convinced that Fuller had no clue what was in the offing, Sergeant Kuhn returned to Marnach.

Elsewhere in Clervaux, another NCO, Staff Sergeant Frank Kusnir, was also sniffing trouble. The New Brighton, Pennsylvania, native was in the I and R section of the 110th. It was his job to gather reports from patrols, interrogate prisoners, and analyze the enemy's intentions. Kusnir, along with the rest of Headquarters Company, was stationed in a medieval castle that dominated the town of Clervaux. In the basement of the castle, he had a couple of POWs he was trying to interrogate through an interpreter: "They were very smug and very confident, so we sort of sensed something was in the air." The attitude of these Germans, combined with numerous reports of vehicle noise from the German lines, convinced Sergeant Kusnir that something was cooking. When he expressed

this concern to his boss, Major Robert Gaynor, the regimental S2, the major was not convinced: "Oh, they're only trying to keep you guys awake," he said dismissively.

Like Kuhn, Kusnir held a low opinion of Colonel Fuller and believed that the colonel did not understand or appreciate the gravity of the threat: "Fuller was a joke." One day in early December he had accompanied the colonel on an inspection of frontline positions. At one point, they paused to get their bearings: "We checked the map. He looked out and saw some flowers blooming along the road. So he said to the driver: 'Oh . . . I've got to get those flowers and send 'em to my wife 'cause she collects and dries 'em and puts 'em between the Bible.'" Kusnir and the driver exchanged puzzled glances. The sergeant thought to himself, "What kind of a guy is this?" Kusnir was the hardened son of Slovakian immigrants and a veteran army man who had joined the National Guard in 1936. Fair or not, he viewed the colonel's preoccupation with flowers as a sign of weakness, and he had little respect for him. Kusnir had no idea that Fuller had fought in World War I. To Kusnir, Fuller seemed like a desk soldier out of his element.

Sergeants like Kuhn and Kusnir were obviously right to be agitated about German intentions. They, and many others like them, did the best they could to sound the alarm to their superiors. They hoped that their commanders would call in air strikes on the German troop concentrations, beef up the front lines, or just do something constructive. When none of those things happened, they assumed that senior officers like Fuller were in a fog.¹⁴

But this was not necessarily fair. From the moment Fuller took command of the 110th, he was very concerned about the vulnerability of his regiment. That concern only deepened as December unfolded. For instance, on December 12, Fuller had lunch with his old friend General Troy Middleton, the commander of the VIII Corps. He spent much of the lunch haranguing Middleton, whose VIII Corps included the 28th Division, about the danger of his thinly held line: "I pointed out to him my concern about such an overextended front, and particularly to the fact that the main Dasburg-Bastogne road ran right through the middle of my sector. General Middleton did not seem at all concerned about it."

Nor was the colonel ignoring reports like Sergeant Kuhn's: "For five days prior to the German attack on December 16, our patrols and OPs had noted unusual activity across the Our River . . . and had constantly reported this to Division HQ. I personally discussed this with General Cota. He, however, displayed no particular interest in it and gave me the impression that he did not expect anything stronger than a raid, probably in battalion strength."

So Fuller was passing the buck to his immediate superiors, Cota and Middleton, both of whom disavowed any lack of concern. Cota later denied having received any disquieting reports from Fuller. He claimed that he had ordered Fuller to investigate German activities by sending patrols across the Our and that Fuller had not done this.

Then again, Cota also stated in his division's after-action report that "all available G-2 information pointed to the fact that Fortress Bn [Battalions] and reorganizing units were manning this sector of the Siegfried Line." This was patently untrue, so much so that the report contradicted itself a few pages later in mentioning Elise Dele's eyewitness account of German tanks, engineers, and assault infantry. What's more, another division report, prepared in the G2 section, acknowledged knowing about "motor movement along the East bank of the Our . . . heavier than heretofore. During the same period [the Germans] made a number of small, portable, wooden foot bridges. Activity was particularly heavy during the hours of darkness with much movement of bridging materials. New units were apparently on our front." In spite of the existence of this report from his own G2 people, Cota contended that the only indications of an enemy attack came from civilian reports like Dele's and certainly not "from any higher headquarters."

Thus, Cota placed the buck firmly into Middleton's palm. Middleton, of course, wanted no part of it. Major General Middleton's corps had been in this sector since October. Since then, he had constantly lobbied for more troops to bolster his dangerously thin Ardennes front. On several occasions he addressed the subject with his immediate superior, Lieutenant General Courtney Hodges, commander of the First Army and the next higher commander, General Omar Bradley, commander of the Twelfth Army Group. "Frankly, I was very concerned about the front," Middleton later said.

During a tour of the Ardennes with Bradley, Middleton communicated that concern. In response Bradley said, "Don't worry, Troy. They won't come through here."

"Maybe not, Brad, but they've come through this area several times before."

On another occasion, Middleton heard that two German deserters were predicting an imminent attack in the Ardennes. He went to the front and interrogated them himself. He also ordered more patrols.

On the other hand, Middleton did downplay the warning of another one of his division commanders who was jumpy about the increased German activity on his front. When this general anxiously called Middleton late at night to report the enemy buildup, Middleton told him to "go back to sleep . . . you've been having a bad dream." One of Middleton's intelligence officers, Major Malcolm Wilkey, believed that the general was not

all that concerned about an enemy offensive in his sector. Wilkey had the impression that "the staff were more concerned and had voiced their impressions to Middleton, and that Middleton had brushed them aside." One time Middleton even told Wilkey and the other G2 officers, "I have never based any decision on a G2 estimate yet." Wilkey was deeply insulted.

Basically, in the weeks leading up to the Battle of the Bulge, no one at Middleton's level or below wanted to take the risk of predicting a German offensive and demanding requisite action from the highest Allied commanders.¹⁵

In the 28th Division sector, then, there were plenty of indicators of the enemy offensive. That being the case, how did the Germans pull off such a surprise attack? There were three factors: bad weather, bad intelligence analysis, and a bad mind-set among American commanders.

From late November onward, foggy, rainy, snowy, drizzly weather concealed the German buildup from the prying eyes of Allied pilots. The weather was so bad that in the first two weeks of December, the Air Force flew a grand total of eight reconnaissance sorties in the entire VIII Corps sector. Half of those flights were aborted because of poor weather. The other four were hampered by fog and low clouds. These flights produced nothing of value, negating one of the best tools intelligence officers had in gathering information about the enemy.¹⁶

Nor were high-level intelligence officers doing much with the information they were getting. At the company and battalion levels, the troops were doing what they could. They were gathering good information on the enemy's suspicious activities and passing it up the chain. At the highest level, Ultra, the Allied system for cracking sensitive German codes, yielded more good indicators of German troop movements, albeit without specific evidence of German intentions. For any of this to be useful, intelligence officers at the corps, army, and army group level had to interpret the alarming troop reports correctly and inform their superiors so that they could take appropriate action. By and large, this did not happen.

To be sure, some of them voiced concerns, the most famous being the warnings of Colonel Benjamin "Monk" Dickson, G2, of Hodges's First Army. Several times in the fall, Dickson had anxiously trumpeted the evidence of the German buildup. In a staff meeting he once blurted, "It's the Ardennes." All of this made good latter-day copy for reporters and filmmakers, especially when the self-promoting Dickson claimed to be a prophet of sorts. But in reality, he never actually predicted a German offensive in the Ardennes (indeed, after claiming an attack would come somewhere in the West on November 11 and being proven wrong, he then said the Germans would attack in April for Hitler's birthday). Moreover, Dickson's supposed prophetic concern about a German offensive did not keep him, on the eve of the Bulge, from going to Paris on leave.

More than anything, Colonel Dickson was reacting to what he thought of as blandly optimistic reports coming from General Bradley's Twelfth Army Group G2, General Edwin Sibert. Dickson and Sibert did not get along. Dickson was bright but headstrong and volatile. He resented Sibert and wanted his job. Sibert thought Dickson was hard to work with and too secretive. By December 1944 these two men—arguably the two most important G2's in the army—were feuding to the point where they rarely spoke. This meant that coordination between the intelligence staffs of First Army and Twelfth Army was nonexistent. They were competitors, not partners.

Nor did the U.S. Army place enough emphasis on intelligence gathering. Up and coming officers became S3s (operations), not S2s. Most intelligence officers, whether at the battalion, regiment, division, corps, army, or army group level tended to be outsiders. Seldom were they slotted for command. "G2 people were not well thought of in the Army," General Sibert said, "Many people had a habit of saying, 'I wonder what is wrong with him that he is in G2.'" Considering the pervasiveness of this unfortunate attitude, it was not surprising that American intelligence would, at times, fail miserably (Pearl Harbor and the Bulge being the most notorious examples).

In the final analysis, the Americans did not know the Germans were coming in the Ardennes because they did not want to know. High-level commanders and intelligence officers could not imagine that the Germans had the capability or the audacity for a major offensive. Charles B. MacDonald, author of one of the best books ever written on the Bulge, summed the failures up perfectly: "In no way did the intelligence officers alert their commanders to a threat in the Ardennes serious enough or imminent enough to warrant any change in Eisenhower's . . . plans north and south of the region. Allied intelligence officers had committed the most grievous sin of which a G-2 is capable. They had looked in the mirror for the enemy and seen only the reflection of their own intentions."¹⁷

Bradley called the weak Ardennes sector a "calculated risk." He and Eisenhower knew that the Allies could not be strong everywhere. Some portions of the two-hundred-mile front had to be deemphasized, and the Ardennes seemed like the best place. This was not unreasonable. Hitler, as in 1940 during his invasion of France, chose the Ardennes because it did not seem to be a likely place for an offensive.

If somehow the Allies had figured out German designs, they could have redeployed troops to the Ardennes. In doing this, Bradley might well have ended the tragic, wasteful, foolish campaign he was fighting in the Hurtgen Forest. Regardless, the Allies would not have avoided a major battle in the Ardennes. They simply would have been better prepared.