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MEMORIES: C.D. Foster stands on the porch of his home in Missouri Valley, Iowa, looking at a scrapbook with photographs of his fellow soldiers in the Nebraska National Guard's 134th Infantry Regiment during World War II. Foster and the 134th fought in the Ardennes region of Europe during the Battle of the Bulge, which is considered a turning point of the war.

Veterans Remember Cold, Fury Of America's Bloodiest Battle

BY JASON GERTZEN
WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

Missouri Valley, Iowa — The sight of a foot of newly fallen snow earlier this month pulled C.D. Foster's thoughts back to the days he spent in Europe 50 years ago chasing German soldiers through the forest.

"We knew we had them on the run," Foster said.

Foster, 76, was a soldier with the Nebraska National Guard's 134th Infantry Regiment during the Battle of the Bulge, the most massive and bloody battle ever fought by American forces.

Adolf Hitler, ignoring the advice of his top generals, gambled wildly when he sent 250,000 German troops in a push against the Allied forces in the mountainous and heavily forested Ardennes region of eastern Belgium and northern Luxembourg.

Hitler hoped the surprise offensive that began Dec. 16, 1944, would capture the port city of Antwerp, split

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—William Boyd

Battle of the Bulge veteran

the Allied supply system and leave the British and U.S. armies divided and ready to talk about a truce.

At first, it appeared as if Hitler would succeed.

The Germans created a bulge in the Allied lines when they made a push 50 miles deep along a 70-mile front.

The Allied troops recovered, however, and made the battle a turning point of World War II. They fought with

such tenacity that the Germans were left without the soldiers and tanks and other equipment needed to mount a solid defense of their homeland against the advancing Allied armies. The war in Europe ended the following spring.

"When the battle began the Americans were outnumbered, out-gunned and out-tanked by the enemy," said William Boyd, a Battle of the Bulge veteran who has researched and written a book about the battle called "The Gentle Infantryman."

"Just individual soldiers fighting alone sometimes decided the outcome," Boyd said in a telephone interview. "The American foot soldier just outfought the enemy and ended up winning the biggest battle ever fought by any American army."

More than a million men were eventually involved in the battle as reinforcements from both sides streamed to the region to shore up the

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front-line forces.

A total of 500,000 Germans, 600,000 U.S. soldiers and 55,000 British troops eventually were involved in the battle, which stretched from Dec. 16, 1944, to Jan. 25, 1945.

The Americans suffered 81,000 casualties and the British 1,400. But the Germans lost more than 100,000.

The 134th Infantry Regiment, a Nebraska National Guard unit that began the war about a month after the D-Day invasion on June 6, 1944, suffered 1,449 casualties and 140 deaths during the Battle of the Bulge, according to the guard's historian.

Bud Sklenar, 71, who lives in Pacific Heights near 168th and Pacific Streets, was a mess sergeant in Belgium with the 4th Armored Division when the battle began.

"We were a fairly grim outfit," said Sklenar, who grew up in Wilber, Neb. "We were supposed to get used to combat there. There really was nothing going on."

Sklenar quickly had to drop his pots and pans and grab his rifle when the German troops came crashing through.

"They overrun my battery," Sklenar said. "They killed and captured quite a few."

Sklenar survived that night and the rest of the battle. Although his hands sustained frostbite from the severe cold, Sklenar made it through the fighting without a scratch.

"I was so lucky it was unbelievable," Sklenar said. "For a while after the war I had a guilty feeling about why I made it and some didn't."

Sklenar had volunteered soon after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941.

He was rejected by the Marines because he was color blind and could not pass the exam needed to fly U.S. warplanes. He was drafted a month later by the Army.

Sklenar said he plans to take his youngest son to Europe this spring to show him some of the places where he fought and struggled to survive 50 years ago.

Sklenar said he experienced many bleak moments during the battle and often thought he would not make it home.

"In the last 20 years I have thought a lot about it," Sklenar said. "One thing it taught me is to never give up."

Foster, who started with the 134th in Normandy as a first sergeant, said the Battle of the Bulge was some of the fiercest fighting he saw during the war.

"You go in with a full complement of about 180 men and six officers," said Foster, who began the war with the 134th's B company out of Falls City, Neb. "You come out with a dozen men and one officer. There was some fighting going on, you could say."



FIFTY YEARS AGO: C.D. Foster found a blanket-lined spot and his overalls, which helped keep him warm during the Battle of the Bulge in December 1944.

The Battle of the Bulge

Some facts about the Battle of the Bulge:

■ **WHO:** More than one million soldiers, including 600,000 Americans (about three times the combined Union and Confederate forces at Gettysburg); 55,000 British, Canadian and French troops; and 500,000 Germans.

■ **WHAT:** The final German offensive of World War II, designed to split the Allies in the west by driving to Antwerp. The Germans advanced 60 miles but stalled 65 miles short of Antwerp without crossing the Meuse River.

■ **WHERE:** The forested Ardennes region of eastern Belgium and northern Luxembourg on the border with Germany.

■ **WHEN:** Dec. 16, 1944, to Jan. 25, 1945.

■ **CASUALTIES:** 81,000 Americans, including 18,000 killed, with the remainder wounded, missing or captured; 1,400 British, including 200 killed; and 100,000 to 200,000 Germans. The Germans also lost 600 tanks, about the same as the Allies, and 1,000 aircraft.

Foster received a battlefield commission and two battlefield promotions during the war. He left Europe as a captain after he was evacuated from wounds he received in March 1945.

As a commander, Foster said, he spent a lot of his time wondering how he was going to get ammunition, food, dry socks and other supplies through

the knee-deep snow to his men huddled in fox holes scattered throughout the forest.

"You spent some time thinking about the cold," Foster said. "You spent a lot of time thinking about your men in their fox holes. But at the time (the battle) was going on, you had only one thing to think of and that was survival."