

Last Christmas In Belgian Bulge Still Vivid In Minds Of Mike Scarlatella, Thrice Hit, And Robert Stewart, Captured That Day

The Battle of the Belgian Bulge may be compared with Valley Forge in future American histories as a point when the torch of liberty flickered but was kept burning by the will and tenacity of 19-year-old boys like Mike Scarlatella and of mature men like Robert Stewart.

To these and others lucky enough to return, Christmas, 1944, is remembered only as a desperate struggle for life.

As he gazes at the good Italian wine and the Christmas ham that he has asked for today, Mike Scarlatella may think only fleetingly of the dead and dying that were all about him a year ago. His parents, Mr. and Mrs. Tony Scarlatella, his sister, Rosemary, and his grandparents, Mr. and Mrs. Tony Solimine, will be close by to talk of the happy present. Dinner will be at the grandparents' home at 2317 Highland Ave., Mt. Auburn.

But what memories Mike may have had when he knelt at Christmas Midnight Mass at St. Matthew Church in Norwood, only Mike knows. It is safe to surmise that he recalled all too vividly those terrible 24 hours when his comrades fell dead and dying all around him, and that his prayers were for these boys who, like the boys at Valley Forge, kept that flickering torch alive.

"Mike himself was wounded three times in his unit's suicidal attempt to push back the German pincers near St. Vith. Here's his own story:

"We had retreated about 40 miles since the Von Rundstedt offensive began—the middle of the month. Our supplies had been cut off, and, besides being short on ammunition, we had had no food for two days. Then on Christmas Eve the order—that we had been waiting for came—attack!

"Our first objective, a small village about 60 or 70 miles from St. Vith, fell without too much trouble, and it looked as though we might get a hot meal. The chow trucks pulled up and a few doughboys had collected their steaming plates and cups. Then the Germans, hidden in the forest ahead of us, began dropping artillery shells on us. These chow trucks pulled out in a hurry, leaving us only tantalizing whiffs and gnawing stomachs.

"We weren't to rest yet. Headquarters knew a Panzer group was hidden in the woods on the hill ahead of us. Our company was ordered to make the first attack. Two other companies were to follow us up if we failed. Just outside the village was a small streambed footing the bare slope stretching to the top of the hill. In ankle-deep icy water, our company gathered to await the signal. There was some grumbling and murmuring of ironic 'Merry Christmases.' As the temperature dropped down to zero, we became more impatient to get it over with. The Germans had a pretty good idea where we were

because their shells were dropping just in back of us.

"We attacked at dawn. Our squad was to wipe out two guns that were sweeping the field. The rest were to seek out the Germans in the woods. It took up three hours to make the 500 yards uphill to the edge of the woods. We carried only small arms, two hand grenades apiece and we were very low on ammunition. Three of us worked our way to a shell hole near one of the guns and succeeded in knocking it out. Then my two buddies were hit—pretty badly.

"That's when I got excited. I got up to go after the other gun. About 15 feet away I raised my arm to throw a grenade. But he got me—in the arm and chest. I stumbled back into the shell hole where the other fellows were lying.

"We lay there a long time. After a while the artillery quieted down. Wounded and dying were lying all around us. We could talk to each other. Our whole company was wiped out, they said. There was much kidding around to keep from going to pieces. Talk about this being a fine way to spend Christmas and about how nice it would be to get back to a warm hospital.

"We asked each other if we were afraid to die. Then we would start kidding again. Most of the fellows were out of their heads with pain and the cold. One guy picked up a machine gun and roared that he was going to get one of those—Germans. He didn't last long. Not far from us a Buck Sergeant lay bleeding from a big hole in his stomach. He was very cheerful. Then when our artillery started up again, he was hit by fragments from one of our own shells. Just before he died he wished us a 'Merry Christmas.'

"Once, two Germans came out of hiding and machine-gunned the wounded. I thought I was going to die and I remembered home, and other Christmases. Just the remembering made me determined to get out some way. The other two fellows with me had been hit four times each and couldn't walk. My legs were O. K. and I determined to take my chances and make a run for it. We had been lying there almost nine hours.

"Clutching a hand grenade, I began to half-run and half-stagger back to the edge of the hill. Just then our supporting companies began their attack and I was caught between their fire and the Germans'. Half way down the hill I was hit again. There was a big hole in my hip. I knew I couldn't lay there for I would bleed to death. I met some of our men near the creek, but my face and hands were so badly cut and scratched from barbed wire barricades that they didn't recognize me—not until my face was washed. They thought I was a German in an American uniform and almost shot me.

"Nothing mattered any more but that that attack be successful. The men heard my story and I later learned that the Germans were cleared out of the woods. Two months later I met my shell hole alive."

buddies in an English hospital. The last thing I remember of Christmas, 1944, was hearing a priest murmuring something as I was going under the ether at midnight on an operating table in the main hospital.

Discharged from a hospital in July, Mike now is an apprentice mechanic at the Heskin Can Co. Cincinnati men died in Belgium a year ago. Some still are listed as missing and their families await with dread a final War Department message. Others, like Robert Stewart, 566 Summit Rd., Roselawn, also thought they were going to die, but instead passed Christmas behind enemy lines.

Stewart was with an engineer company attached to the late Gen. George Patton's Third Army near Nancy, France. With other Third Army units, the company had answered the desperate call for help from the First Army, which was being pushed back into the Ardennes.

"On Christmas Eve," Stewart remembers, "we were about 15 miles from a town near Bastogne that was supposedly just behind our forward lines. I don't remember its name because the country was new to me. It was a snowy night. We were ordered to set up security (machine guns, outposts, mine fields) in this town.

"At 6:30 p. m. we started in open vehicles. About 200 yards from the town we halted. Everything was very quiet. The company commander took 25 men into town. Three of us remained with the vehicle until signaled to follow. The first hint that something was awry came with the burst of a German burp gun. The main column of vehicles was back down the road a quarter of a mile. Then it came at us from all directions. We hit the ditches, two of us on one side and one on the other. They had us pinned down. We had only automatic rifles and we managed to hold them off until they worked around to the road. Then, when they worked in close enough, they could throw grenades down on us. A fragment went through the helmet of the guy across the road from us and he decided he had had enough. It's no use, Stewart, he called out; we're outnumbered."

"The surrendering wasn't so bad when I realized that a few minutes before I hadn't expected to come out of the skirmish alive. The Germans put us to work carrying the Germans we had wounded back through a narrow hill path to an ambulance. Altogether that night we must have walked 15 miles. Christmas dinner the next day consisted of thin chicken-noodle broth, dry pieces of bread, and some green apples we found in the house where we were held. Then our own artillery began pounding—the German outpost, making it so hot that the Germans pulled out.

"And so we marched. Through the better part of Christmas Day we marched, and on until 6 o'clock that night. Snow was six inches deep, and we didn't know what fortunes lay ahead of us, but we were 'alive.'"