

WORLD WAR II CLOSE UP

THEY BATTLED IN BLIZZARDS



BY DEBORAH HOPKINSON

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For Pamela
and in loving memory of Connor



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Title (previous) page: American soldiers from the 75th Infantry Division's 290th
Infantry Regiment battled bitterly cold conditions during the winter of 1944–1945
at the Battle of the Bulge.

THE YOUNG LIEUTENANT

IN THE EARLY morning darkness of December 16, explosions shattered the wintry silence on Lanzerath ridge, waking any I&R platoon member who might have been able to sleep in a freezing-cold foxhole.

“All of a sudden everything broke loose,” said Corporal Samuel Jenkins.

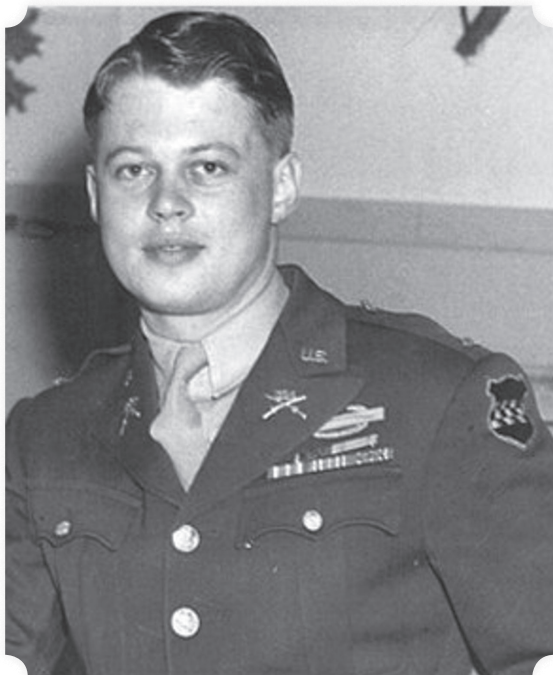
Over the next hour or more, as shells burst and metal flew, First Lieutenant Lyle Bouck, Jr., had reason to feel good about the improvements they’d made to the foxholes.

“When I look back at it that was probably the luckiest and wisest thing we did,” he said. During the shelling, the men were protected. “We had no casualties. We had a lot of trees burst. A lot of shrapnel fell, but we were protected.”

It wasn’t that Lyle had a premonition or any advance warning of an attack. In part, he said later, the hillside just looked vulnerable to him. Then, too, Lyle was a thorough, meticulous soldier who took his leadership responsibilities seriously.

Although Lyle was the second-youngest member of the

platoon, Major Robert L. Kriz had hand-picked him to lead it. A twenty-year-old might seem an odd choice, but Lyle wasn't your typical soldier. His military career had begun in 1938, when he was only fourteen, at a time when the Great Depression hit families hard. Signing up for a National Guard camp—and getting paid for it—was a way to help his family.



Lyle Bouck, Jr., commander of the I&R platoon at Lanzerath ridge. Decades later the unit became the most decorated platoon of World War II.

“Well, I had a brother five years older than I and my father suggested that we join the National Guard and go to [a two-week-long] camp,” Lyle told an interviewer years later. “We

[each] got a dollar a day for that, and the family could use the \$28.00 that the two of us could bring home.”

Later, when his unit was activated for duty, Lyle stayed in the National Guard, putting high school on hold. He served in Alaska after the United States entered World War II in December 1941, then spent two years at Officer Candidate School.

In the spring of 1944, Lyle was sent to Texas to train with the 394th Infantry Regiment, one of three regiments in the 99th Infantry Division. The division, newly formed in 1942, totaled 14,200 soldiers. That’s where Lyle came to the attention of Major Kriz, who asked Lyle to help put together a new I&R platoon for the regiment.

Kriz knew they’d be heading for the front lines soon; he wanted bright, capable soldiers for his intelligence and scouting platoon. He decided to tap young men who’d been in ASTP, the Army Specialized Training Program. (We’ll meet several ASTP soldiers in this book.) ASTP allowed some draftees to attend college before being sent overseas. But by early 1944, what the army really needed was replacements. ASTP was cut and thousands of young men were assigned to army units to be trained for combat.

Kriz thought the new ASTP soldiers in his regiment had potential—and that Lyle could lead them. “He had the mental and physical capabilities to command this group of extremely intelligent, healthy, athletic individuals.”

Lyle was young, but his military training gave him

confidence. And though the platoon members hailed from all over the country, they worked well together.

“We learned during training not only to get along with each other, but also to respect one another,” said Private First Class Carlos A. Fernandez, who became a doctor after the war. “We knew someday our lives would depend on each other.”

As it turned out, that’s exactly what happened.

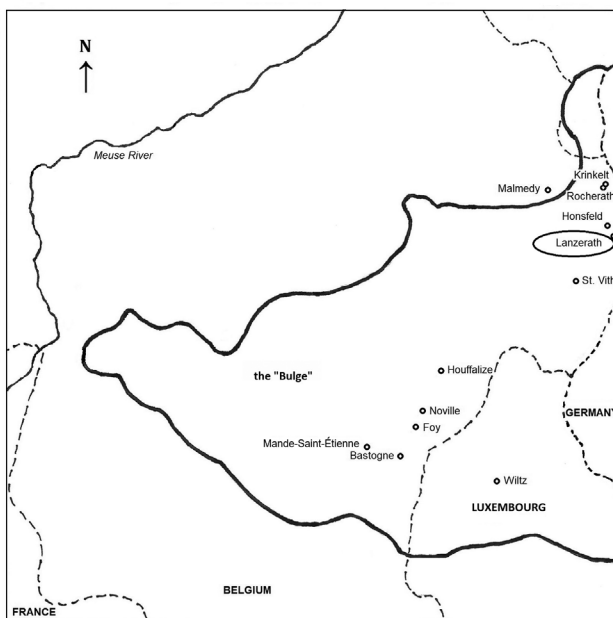


Armed soldiers keep watch at an American roadblock. Lyle Bouck and the I&R platoon had time to improve their foxholes. That wasn't always easy or even possible in the midst of combat, especially when the ground was frozen.

In the fall of 1944, the “Battle Babies” of the 99th Division headed across the Atlantic. On board the troop transport ship, Lyle discovered sea travel wasn’t for him.

“About the third day out, I was supposed to teach a class in prime map reading and I got up and realized I didn’t feel too

good, and before the day was over, I was as ill as you can be and still be alive,” said Lyle. He was deathly sick for three days.



This map shows the various villages and towns in the Ardennes.
Lanzerath is on the upper right, on the border of Germany.

After a few weeks in England, the division crossed the English Channel to France. By November, the soldiers reached the front lines in eastern Belgium. And that's exactly where they were in December, when, as Sam Jenkins said, everything broke loose.

Friday, December 15. While most of the platoon members were now on guard in their foxholes day and night, Carlos Fernandez was summoned to regiment headquarters in

Hünningen on Friday to draw some patrol maps.

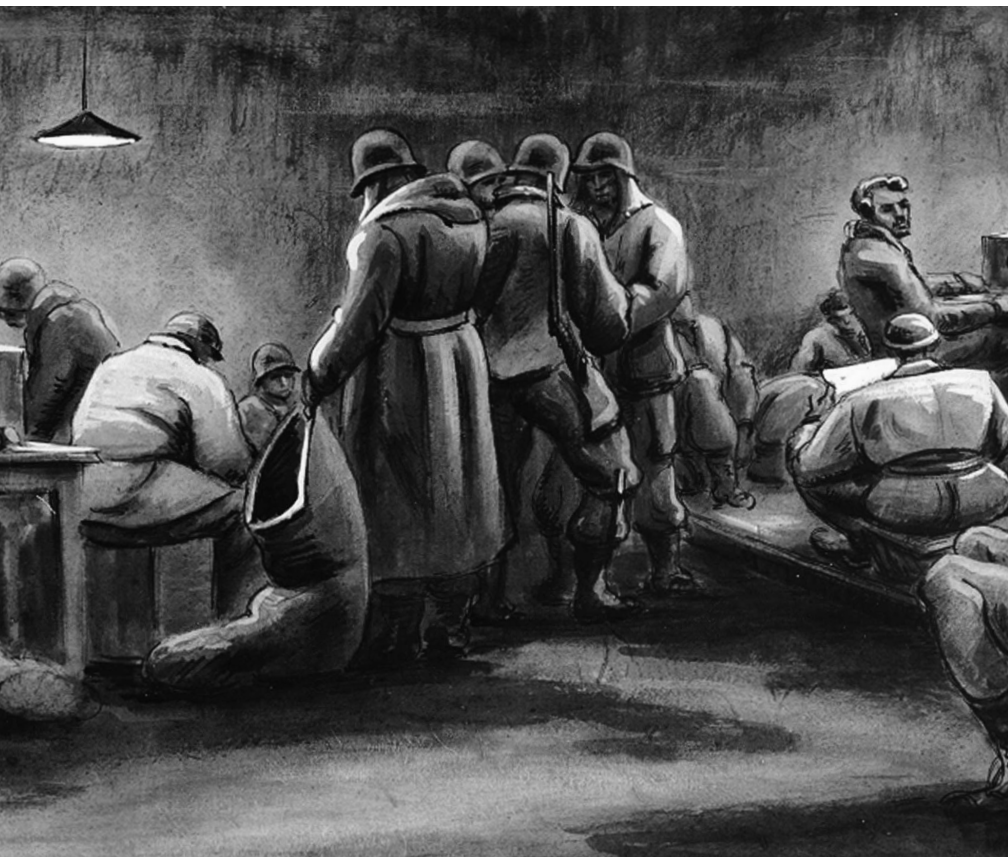
Carlos spent the night in the schoolhouse that served as the command post. Early Saturday morning, he was startled awake by fierce shelling. Even so, Carlos and jeep driver Sam Oakley set out at about six a.m. with breakfast for their buddies in Lanzerath.

They didn't get far. American GIs keeping watch along the road shouted a warning: They'd spotted enemy soldiers.

"Oakley turned the jeep about, spilled most of the food, and got us back to regimental headquarters," said Carlos. "We reported to Colonel [Donald] Riley what had happened. He was very much surprised, as we were, that enemy troops had infiltrated to that point.

"This could mean that if the enemy came in large forces, then our platoon was surrounded. We hoped this enemy was only a patrol action. I feared very much for my buddies near Lanzerath."

Carlos was right to worry. The I&R platoon was about to make an alarming discovery.



Message Center, 101st Airborne Division by Olin Dows. Dows was one of the official army artists appointed to make a record of the European Theater of Operations. He also saw action at the Battle of the Bulge.