

NUMBERS

BY MICHAEL STERN

At the Western Front (By Cable)

The battle of Bastogne has been called the key of the bulge in which the last German hope for victory was shattered. It has been claimed that the triumph of the 101st Airborne Division, isolated and attacked with murderous fury by a skilled enemy in a bitter ten-day struggle, has shortened the war by months. Only the future verdict of history can say how close to the truth this opinion comes.

But what we do know is that a single division, fighting against hopeless odds and in hopeless circumstances, rose to such heights of courage that the little, unknown Belgian town of Bastogne has now become a word to which untold generations of Americans will thrill. We do know that a comparative handful of soldiers held back the full weight of three combined Nazi armies in so decisive a manner that Von Rundstedt's initial victory in the Belgian bulge started him on the road to final defeat.

This is the story of the gallant 101st and the peppery general who found himself shoved into command by the absence of his superior. On Saturday morning, December 16, having secretly screened the regrouping of his troops, Field Marshal Von Rundstedt struck with all the mighty power he had in his 6th Panzer Army, 5th Panzer Army and 7th Army.

Our own general staff gives him credit for handling the situation with tactical brilliance and certainly no dough-foot who felt the full impact of the blow will ever doubt it. Our G2 did not expect a counter offensive. The Nazis launched one. A mass of German armor had been waiting behind the Ruhr to crush any Allied bridgehead that crossed it. That's what we thought. Von Rundstedt whipped it 200 miles in a single day to spearhead the attack.

We knew nothing about this movement until it swooped down on a southwesterly line from Bonn through Pruem and ripped a twenty-five mile gap in our Belgium-Luxemburg line between St. Vith and Vianden. The 106th Infantry Division was overrun and rendered ineffective as a fighting force. Three other divisions were badly mauled and elbowed aside and the full weight of Nazi armor poured through the opening.

That evening, December 16th, Brig. Gen. A. C. (Tony) McAuliffe, deputy commander of the 101st Airborne Division, in Paris for a press conference, was sitting around having a drink before dinner when the phone rang. It was Colonel Eaton of the 18th Airborne Corps.

"What's up, Doc?" McAuliffe asked.
 "We're having a little trouble."
 "Well, what is it?"
 "I don't care to say it on the phone."

RADIOED FROM BELGIUM

THE little man had a deadpan face and a star on each shoulder, and he was getting ready to go to a football game when it happened. They were calling it the "Champagne Bowl" game and it was going to be a real killer-diller, according to the paratroopers of the 101st Airborne Division. There would be Wacs to act as cheerleaders, with everything almost like the old days back home. Football with snow, wind and clear bright sun, and with American regimental teams out to settle a year-old rivalry. The men of the 101st were resting. They had earned the right to some fun. But then it happened.

It began slowly but ominously and with grim undertones that they hoped would die away until the night of Sunday, December 17th, when there was a telephone message for the little man, Brigadier General Anthony C. McAuliffe, who describes himself as "the Old Croak." McAuliffe was having a drink. He put his glass down slowly and uncertainly as he listened to the blunt message that drained the bubbles from the Champagne Bowl.

"I'll have to give you a little double talk," the voice said. "Court's in trouble. Jim leaves Tuesday." You've got to get going by daybreak, the Germans but such double talk might have confused the Germans but it was clear enough to the man in command of the 101st.

Jimmy is leaving tomorrow morning and you will have to get going at two in the afternoon."

McAuliffe knew what it meant. McAuliffe was to shove off with his men, too, even though it was the worst possible moment his paratroopers could be called on to do a job. They had jumped in Normandy and in Holland. In the latter place the men had taken a severe seventy-three-day pounding and now, with several thousand replacements, were resting and re-equipping. Just a short time before he had discussed it with Maj. Gen. Maxwell Taylor and they had decided that it would be impossible for the 101st to go into combat for some time.

To make it even worse, the commanding general, Taylor, was now in Washington; two regimental commanders were in the United Kingdom on leave. Also the chief of staff had been dead a week and the G1, Lt. Col. Ned Moore, who had no tactical background, though a fine administrator, was filling in. It was into this situation that McAuliffe was thrust.

He is a slight, vital 46-year-old West Pointer who, when he was given his brigadier's star in 1942, was one of the Army's youngest. He has an uncanny gift for expression that combines color and clarity to such a degree that he has become the war correspondents' delight.

His orders set his staff to work immediately. "And they really worked," he told me later. "They worked right through the night. Nobody slept except me."

The job of rushing the division into the line was given to Brig. Gen. C. O. Thrasher's Oise base section. Col. G. M. Bostock, Dallas, Tex., who did the actual work sent out an SOS to other base sections to send all available vehicles to a rendezvous point. MPs set up road blocks and commandeered empty trucks. The quartermaster rushed up a four-day supply of K rations, clo blankets and other equipment. Ordnance filled canteens for arms, ammunition, shells and hand grenades. Civil warfare section, medical department, signal and engineers, arms exchange and the dozen other services necessary to properly equip a single division gave support for the 101st top priority.

At noon the next day the first of the cattle trucks piled into the loading area of the 101st camp and the paratroopers were jammed in, fifty to a truck. By 7 p.m. a convoy of 500 vehicles, properly spaced out, was on its way to the front. Hundreds of MPs were strung out along the way to help guide it through the dense fog that had fallen.

General McAuliffe, accompanied by division G3, rode in advance of the troops and reported to corps headquarters, where he learned just how confusing the picture really was. Nobody knew where the enemy was or, in the large sense, where our own troops were. It was certain from all the reports that came pouring in that the German offensive was mounting in fury.

The elements showed that the three divisions were

The reference to "Court" meant that Lieutenant General Courtney H. Hodges' American First Army was in a tight spot. The words about "Jim" meant that a fellow officer of McAuliffe's already was on his way to help; and now the 101st was being summoned in the midst of its rest period. Just why, not even McAuliffe knew at the moment, but he could guess it was bad.

It was bad. Up to the north at headquarters, the corps commander looked at a large-scale black-and-white map which covered the wall. In front of him, a weird tree of red grease pencil was spreading out—a tree lying on its side with a wide base in the east, stretching trunk and branches westward down the roads and over the hills and the rivers and the villages. As the commander looked, one of his officers went to the wall and rubbed out sections of the red tree in order to add more branches and make the trunk thicker. It was Sunday, December 17th—the same day McAuliffe got his message—and the sprawling, cannibal tree was the pattern of the German break-through, the beginning of the most serious defeat for the United States Army since Bataan.

For thirty-six hours, men had been changing that map minute by minute. For thirty-six hours the red grease pencil had been trying to keep pace with the German tanks

projective of splitting the Allied 1st and 12th Army groups. At the moment, so far as available information was concerned, there was a combat command of the 10th Armored Division at Noville just five miles northeast of Bastogne on the main Bonn-Pruem highway, and a combat command of the 9th Armored Division astride the second main highway that runs east-west through Bastogne. These units, each consisting of some fifty tanks, a battalion of infantry, a company of engineers, ack-ack and tank destroyers were depended on to keep the Germans out long enough to give the 101st a chance to get into position.

At 2 a.m. the 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment, with the 907th Glider Field Artillery Battalion attached, pulled into the bivouac area northwest of the town. By morning the rest of the units had pulled in. By morning, also, the full weight of the onslaught hit the two main roads. The armor of the 10th on the Noville road block stood firm in its tracks although it took heavy losses. The armor of the 9th at the road block just south of it fell back to Longvilly and left behind five medium tanks, some infantry and a unit of ack-ack armed with quad-barreled 50s to cover the withdrawal. The multiple 50s were used against ground targets and so many Jerries fell under their murderous fire that for a time they thought it was one of our secret weapons. The power of the attack was crushing and, charging (Continued)

over fields of their own dead. The man panzer divisions overran the town. Only one of the five succeeded in escaping. Most of ground troops died where they fell. The part these men of the 9th Army played in holding back the enemy the 101st could get into position magnificent.

At his command post in the bivouac area McAuliffe, still not too certain of the exact situation and getting news of heavy penetrations of enemy armor from all parts of the front, phoned Lieutenant Colonel Ewall, commanding the 501st Parachute Infantry. When Ewall came in, McAuliffe said: "The situation at Longvilly is cloudy. Take your regiment out there and attack. That'll clear it up."

Ewall didn't bat an eyelash or ask a question. He just said: "Yes, sir," and went off. His regiment was pulling through Bastogne and

with a bazooka. To cover the road up from Arlon, McAuliffe threw in the 326th Airborne Engineers. The 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment, commanded by Col. Robert Sink, Lexington, Ky., was split and one battalion sent to Noville where the combat command of the 10th Armored was taking a heavy battering.

All through the night the enemy attacked with all his armor on the entire front of his break. At Noville, Neuff and Marvie he was thrown back, but to the north and south of this semicircular, six-mile defense line his tanks and infantry came through. Preparing for the worst, McAuliffe added to the semicircle facing the front or protecting the rear. In the north-south Laroche highway he put a battalion of the 502nd Parachute Regiment, commanded by Lt. Col. Steve Chappuis, spread in depth from Bertogne to Longchamps. Other units of this regiment were in Flamierge, Mande St. Etienne and Champs, three little towns of Bastogne. As an added precaution placed a handful of men and tank destroyers at the crossing of the St. Hubert road about eight miles of our own lines.

On the 19th, three days after the first full night for the 101st, the going was tough. At Noville the German armor was pouring along their heavy tiger tanks toward the front. They lost one, but they were in a late position to replace it. The multiple-barreled sharpshooting batteries finding marks in the woods. By 10 a.m. the

north, south and east. Every building had at least one hit scored on it. Enemy patrols slipped into the town at night, put taps in on telephone lines and listened to conversations between commanders. They secured the locations of every CP and each in turn was bombed and hit. Ewall had a 500-pounder wipe out his S3 staff. Another CP received a square hit from a 1,000-pounder and the whole command was wiped out. For the first time Jerry airplanes were out in force. The JU 88s made nightly raids that dealt punishing blows. They would drop their flares and light the town in an eerie glow. Then they would circle back and dive through the flame-streaked, geometric patterns of ack-ack fire.

The only thing McAuliffe yelled about was the wounded. There was no adequate place to operate on them. The Germans had taken most of the surgical equipment and the greater part of the medical staff from the division hospital south of Bertogne in a strong tank-led patrol raid. McAuliffe visited the wounded every day. There was one infantryman suffering from a fractured femur who told the general that he had coined a name for the division.

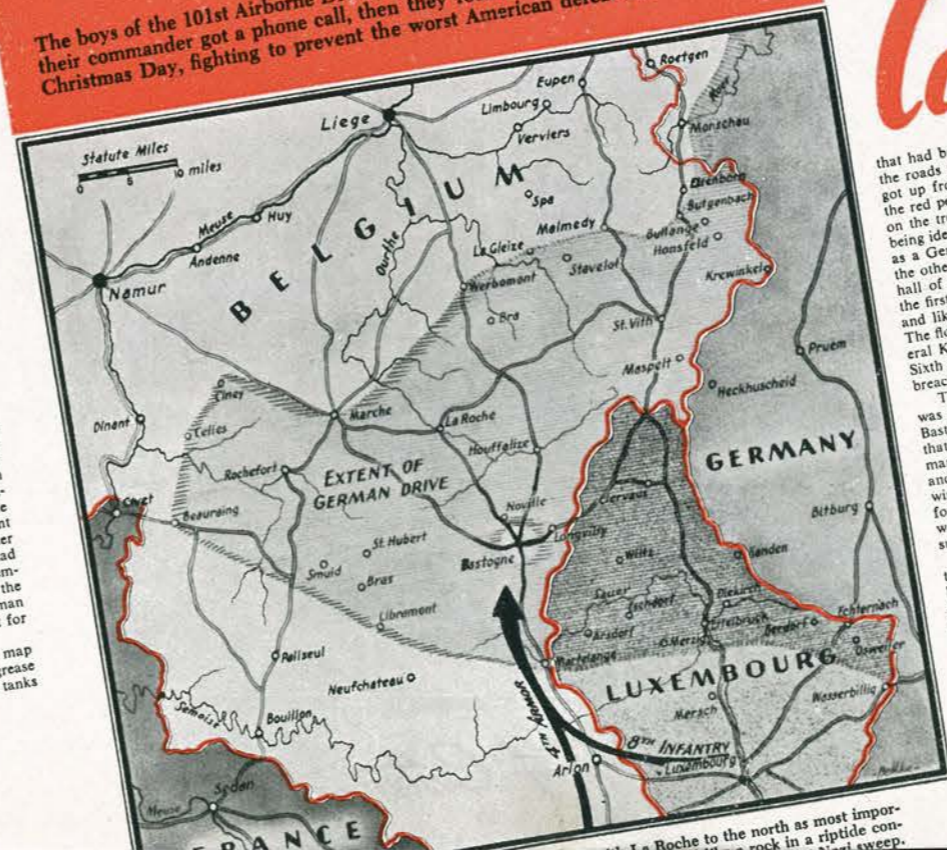
"We're the battered bastards of the bastion of Bastogne," he said. Strays of the battlefields began drifting in through the German lines. They were soldiers whose units had been cut off and destroyed or taken prisoner and now, without officers or direction of any sort, were headed back toward their own lines. They were fed, given a rifle and put back in the lines. They called themselves the "Chairborne Infantry," while McAuliffe listed them as task force Snafu.

BASTOGNE!

How we stopped Von Rundstedt

By Robert Richards and Richard C. Hottel

The boys of the 101st Airborne Division were planning a football game, but their commander got a phone call, then they found themselves besieged on Christmas Day, fighting to prevent the worst American defeat since Bataan



Collier's

that had broken through our front and were pouring along the roads to the west. For a day and a half tired men had got up from incessantly ringing telephones and had taken the red pencil and drawn little flags on the map like leaves on the trees. They were German divisions—new divisions being identified hour by hour as a few prisoners came in, or as a German staff car blundered into our lines. One after the other, little flags speckled the area until it looked like a hall of fame for the German army. Names appeared like the first SS Panzer division, bearing the name Adolf Hitler, and like the Grossdeutschland Panzer Grenadier Division. The flower of the German army, under Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, was organized into the Fifth and Sixth Panzer armies and was beginning to flow through the breach in our lines.

That was how it started for McAuliffe and the 101st; that was how they found out about the little Belgian town of Bastogne, an ugly and unexciting cluster of houses and shops that nobody thought about twice until an avalanche of German armor burst into eastern Belgium and Luxembourg, and the ghosts of the 1940 blitzkrieg again roared along the winding roads of Bastogne and how it sprawled across every found out about Bastogne and how it sprawled across every work of roads that meant life or death to Von Rundstedt's surprise offensive.

Even before McAuliffe received his telephone message that Sunday night, there were many American soldiers who had learned the name of Bastogne and had died in the learning. To some of them it was a place on which to rally; to all of them it was a place to hold at any cost. If McAuliffe had wanted to know about Bastogne that night, the Tenth Armored Division could have told him. The Ninth Armored could have answered, too, and the First Army's 28th Infantry Division. They knew and would not forget.

McAuliffe was going to find out about Bastogne, but that night he knew only one thing: They wanted him to get there. All right, he would. He would be ready to move Tuesday morning.

Then his telephone rang once more. It was that voice again: "Did we say daybreak on Tuesday, Croak? ... Sorry, but you must get going by daybreak on Tuesday, Croak. (2 P.M. Monday.)" So they went to work. The Old Croak worked twice as hard as he was regularly only divisional deputy commander. Major General Maxwell Taylor, leaving duty, leaving

a Nazi major and captain stepped out. They were taken to the commanding officer of the unit and to him they handed a note addressed to the USA commander of the encircled town of Bastogne. A courier hurried it back to division CP and it was given to McAuliffe. The general slit open the envelope and read the message:

"The fortune of war is changing. This time the USA forces in and near Bastogne have been encircled by strong German armored units. More German armored units have crossed the river near Ortheuville, have taken Marche and reached St. Hubert by passing through Hompre-Sibret-Tillet-Librimont, all in German hands.

"There is only one possibility to save the encircled USA troops from total annihilation: the honorable surrender of the encircled town. In order to think it over, a term of two hours will be granted beginning with the presentation of this note.

"If this proposal should be rejected one German artillery corp and six heavy AA battalions are ready to annihilate the USA troops in and near Bastogne. The order for firing will be given immediately after this two-hour term. All the serious civilian losses caused by this artillery fire would not correspond with the well-known American humanity. The German commander."

McAuliffe tossed the letter aside and said: "Nuts!"

The G3 asked if he was going to answer it.

"I don't think I'll bother," McAuliffe said. The staff sat around a few minutes discussing the propriety of the situation and it was decided that an answer be given. Then discussion was carried on as to what answer to make.

G3 said: "Why not just answer it with the first remark you made?"

McAuliffe was amused. "That sounds okay to me," he said. "Send in a stenographer and we'll make it as formal as his note." The G1 entered, opened his pad and took the following dictation. "From the USA commander of the encircled town of Bastogne to the German commander. Subject: surrender. Answer: 'Nuts.' Signed, the USA commander." It was placed in an envelope. Colonel Harper asked permission to deliver the note himself. It was granted and he took off. At Neuff the German officers were impatiently waiting. Harper handed the envelope to the major.

"What does this 'nuts' mean?" the major asked.

"It means go to hell," Harper explained. The Germans drew themselves up stiffly and saluted. They climbed into their vehicle and drove back toward their lines. A few minutes later the shelling started and the truce was over. Once over the attacks hit our lines in their most vulnerable points, but somehow the men were plugged. Company commanders bellowed for reserves, but McAuliffe let them plug it out and a few minutes later he would hear the sheepish report that all was well and the Jerry