

# December 1944: World War II at 80

Massacres, bad weather and devastating surprises for the Allies

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KENT



WRIGHT



U.S. soldiers trudge through the snow in the Ardennes during the Battle of the Bulge in December 1944. (National Archives photo)



The bodies of U.S. officers and soldiers – slain by the Nazis – are uncovered in the snowscape near Malmedy, Belgium. (National Archives photo)

December 1944 was one of the worst months on record during American involvement in World War II.

There were tragic massacres of American POWs in both the European and Pacific theaters of war.

On Dec. 14, more than 125 American POWs were slaughtered by their Japanese captors in the Philippine Palawan Prison Camp 10A. It became known as the Palawan Massacre.

The prisoners, who were among those captured along the Bataan Peninsula in early 1942, had been sent to Palawan Prison Camp where they spent the next two years in a grueling project, clearing land and building a concrete runway for planes using only hand tools. They were fed one bowl of rice each day.

In October 1944, Allied forces began bombing the airstrip.

The Japanese guards forced the prisoners to dig bomb shelters in the compound to be used during air bomb raids. The dugout trenches were overlaid with coconut logs for added protection.

Unknown to the prisoners, the guards were under order to dispose of the men if the Allied forces got too close.

On Dec. 14, as Allied Armies advanced toward their location, Japanese guards sounded the air raid warning to get the 150 prisoners into the earthen shelters.

Once the Americans were trapped inside the shelters, the guards poured gasoline on the shelter entrances and set them on fire. Then they began firing their weapons into the trapped men.

The resulting fire and melee of bullets killed 125 Americans.

Two-dozen prisoners were able to escape the trap through a hidden rear exit in two of the shelters. The guards hunted them down and killed 14 of them.

Eleven of the prisoners who

escaped made it back to the safety of U.S. forces with the assistance of Filipino scouts.

Another tragic massacre of U.S. POWs took place in the snowy region of Malmedy in Belgium.

On Dec. 17, German Waffen-SS troops brought over 120 captured American soldiers to a farmer's field and opened fire on them with machine guns, killing 84.

Forty-three of the captured Americans escaped the massacre and hid until they could safely return to the U.S. lines and report on the massacre.

American soldiers of the 11th Armored Division retaliated a few weeks later when they shot 80 German POWs in what became known as the Chenogne massacre.

## Weather

Bad weather added to the woes of December.

Throughout December, a bitterly cold maritime polar air mass descended upon the Belgium Ardennes-Ejiel region where U.S. forces had advanced.

The location was intended to be a rest area for weary troops, but it was difficult to find rest in such miserable conditions.

The North Pacific Theater was much warmer, but it endured its own bad weather in the form of Typhoon Cobra, which struck the U.S. Navy's Third Fleet east of the Philippine Island of Luzon on Dec. 17.

The 160 mph winds and high waves rolled some of the ships more than 70 degrees.

Three Navy destroyers, with near empty fuel tanks because they were unable to refuel in the storm, sank in the strong wind and high waves. Nine other ships were damaged. And several dozen aircraft were pushed overboard from their aircraft carriers.

Tragically, 790 sailors lost their lives because of the storm.

## Devastating surprises

The worst news of December came Dec. 16 when German ground forces pulled off a surprise attack against the Allied forces resting in the forested Ardennes region in Belgium.

The attack was designed to encircle and defeat the four U.S. armies, then take control of the Allied port at Antwerp, thus stopping their resupply line.

The Allies were unprepared for the attack, thinking that the Germans would never attempt to cross the hilly Ardennes, especially in such poor weather.

The heavily overcast weather helped the Germans conceal their movement and achieve a total surprise offensive.

The sudden attack, which included 410,000 German soldiers, 1,400 tanks, 1,000 aircraft and 2,600 artillery weapons, almost worked.

The Germans advanced far enough into Allied positions to create a large bulge 50 miles long and 70 miles deep in their lines, hence the name, Battle of the Bulge.

In the early days of the attack, the Germans pulverized many U.S. forces and took thousands of American soldiers as POWs. More than 23,500 Allied soldiers and airmen were eventually captured by the Germans and became prisoners of war.

A tense standoff between U.S. and German forces took place in the critical crossroads Belgian town of Bastogne.

There, the outnumbered and beleaguered American units, augmented by the 101st Airborne Division, stood

their ground and held out until Gen. Patton's Third Army arrived on the scene with his tanks on Dec. 26 — exactly 80 years ago today.

Bastogne was secured, preventing the Germans from using the vital crossroads.

The battle raged on as the Americans made a counter-attack.

## Local ties

Maurice Kent of Martinsville, assigned the Army's 29th Infantry Division, was among the surprised U.S. forces in Belgium.

He was badly injured in the fight.

He recalled being bogged down in his fox hole from the German artillery and tanks and thinking that the shells from German 88's were getting closer.

Next thing he knew, he woke up in a Belgian field hospital with no dog tags, no pack, no .45 pistol and no helmet.

The impact from a German 88 shell had exploded, damaging his nose, jaw (he lost most of his teeth) and feet. He wouldn't walk again on his own for more than two years.

"Nurse, how long have I been here?" he asked when he gained consciousness.

"Five days," she replied. "You are leaving tonight for England on a C-47."

He's not sure what happened to the buddy that was in the fox-hole with him. He never saw or heard from him again.

Kent was transported to the 187th General Hospital in London, where he spent the next five months of initial convalescence from January to May of 1945.

He eventually recovered

and lived a long life until his death in 2019.

Another devastating surprise occurred on December 24 in the English Channel.

Mooreville resident Loren Wright was dangerously close to the tragedy.

He arrived in England in November 1944 with his unit, the Army's 66th Infantry Division, 262nd Regiment.

On the evening of Dec. 24, his regiment was divided in half and boarded two British troop transports, the *SS Cheshire* and the *SS Leopoldville*, which would carry them across the English Channel and deliver them to Cherbourg, France.

The 66th Division was slated to augment troops already engaged in the Battle of the Bulge.

During the crossing, a German U-boat fired on and sank the *SS Leopoldville*.

"I happened to be on the other ship," Wright said with a mixture of gratitude and sadness.

There were 2,235 American troops on board the *SS Leopoldville*, among them one half of Wright's 262nd Regiment.

Eight hundred and two American soldiers of the 66th Division perished — either by going down with the ship or dying of injury or hypothermia while awaiting rescue in the frigid waters.

The men on the *SS Cheshire* knew that something happened when their ship's engines were cut and they drifted in total darkness, awaiting the dawn.

"We all stayed on the deck with rifles, helmets and overcoats on," recalled Wright. "It was pretty cold!"

When the men finally

learned that their sister transport ship had been sunk, they were given strict orders not to write home about the tragedy or ever to speak to others about it.

The Allied Commanders feared that the reaction of the American public to the sinking would have an adverse effect on the war effort.

Details of the sinking remained classified by the War Department until 1958.

Wright didn't have much time to dwell on the disaster.

The remaining members of the 66th Infantry Division, no longer of sufficient numbers to augment the forces in Belgium, were sent instead to the "Lorient Pocket" on the western coast of France to relieve the 97th Division, which was engaged in combat with 50,000 German forces dug in there.

Wright spent the next four months on the Allied line keeping the Germans trapped in the Lorient Pocket.

He survived the war and lived a long life, passing in 2017.

Adding to the national grief in December, famous and well-loved band leader U.S. Army Major Glenn Miller perished in a missing plane incident over the English Channel on Dec. 15 while on his way to Paris to schedule concerts for the troops in France.

All these events put a heavy damper on the normally festive holiday season and reminded the Americans that the war was far from over.

Next time: January 1945.

Learn more about Ronald P. May and his books at [ronaldpmay.com](http://ronaldpmay.com) or contact him at [ron@ronaldpmay.com](mailto:ron@ronaldpmay.com). Check out his videos on YouTube at: World War II History & Stories with Ron May.

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