

# January 1945 – World War II at 80



ABOVE: Soldiers of the U.S. 75th Infantry Division tramp through the snow in the Colmar Pocket sector in the Alsace region. (Public Domain photo) // LEFT: Martinsville native James Barrick was a C-47 pilot who assisted in the supply drops to Allied troops in Bastogne, Belgium. (Courtesy clip)

## Advances and Sacrifices – The European Theater

By Ronald P. May

The first month of 1945 brought an extension of the hardships of December 1944.

### Battle of the Bulge and Morgan County men

On the Belgian-German border of the Ardennes Forest, the Battle of the Bulge, which began on Dec. 16, raged on.

The good news was that by January, the American forces had stopped the German advance into Belgium and began steadily pushing the Nazi Army back toward Germany.

The bad news was that it all came at a great cost.

Several men from Morgan County made noteworthy contributions, and some of them lost their lives in the effort.

Army medic Albert “Bert” Baughn served bravely on the “Bulge” battlefield, tending to the wounded.

Drafted in 1943 following his graduation from Martinsville High School, Baughn saw combat in France before making it to Belgium.

Wounded on Dec. 17, the second day of the Battle of the Bulge, he was evacuated to a field hospital.

Knowing his unit was in a critical battle with the Germans, he pleaded with the Army doctors to release him so that he could return to the front and care for the injured.

He got his way and made it back to his unit the next day.

A few weeks later, on Jan. 8, despite the bold Red Cross worn on Baughn’s arm band and helmet, a German sniper placed him in his crosshairs and fired, killing him instantly.

The 19-year-old had been in Europe for less than a year, but he had made a significant contribution treating and saving many comrades on the battlefield.

Two other Morgan County men kept busy in the sky over Belgium.

James Barrick, a C-47 pilot assigned to the 72nd Troop Carrier Squadron, 434th Troop Carrier Group, was one of them.

Barrick, a Martinsville native who had earlier dropped paratroopers into Normandy on D-Day, came to the aid of First Army units, including the 101st Airborne Division, trapped in Bastogne, Belgium, with German forces surrounding them.

The only hope for the outnumbered Allies to hold out was being resupplied from the sky.

And that’s where Barrick and other transport pilots helped save the day.

In what Air Force leaders later described as the largest and greatest supply mission in the European theater, more than 800 C-47s flew resupply missions four days in a row, often in adverse weather.

Bundles attached to parachutes floated down to the American ground forces, containing lifesaving medicine, food and ammunition.

In a Jan. 19, 1945, article of *The Daily Reporter*, Barrick was quoted as saying: “When

I learned that the 101st Airborne Division was one of the American units in the Bastogne sector, I was twice as anxious to get the supplies to them. My Group dropped those Airborne troops in Normandy and Holland. They’re a good bunch of boys, and we all realized the urgency and necessity of these missions.”

Morgan County native, Raymond Thompson, also participated in the resupply airdrops over Bastogne.

Thompson was a C-47 flight engineer serving with the 436th Troop Carrier Group.

Receiving that precious assistance on the ground were men like Gilpin Hammack of Martinsville.

SSgt. Hammack served with the 398th Infantry Regiment, 100th Division.

During the battle, he was shot in the lower body but survived.

For the rest of his life, Hammack, a Purple Heart recipient with two battlefield promotions, carried the German bullet lodged inside of him.

### Battle of the Colmar Pocket

As the Battle of the Bulge was wrapping up, another battle that had formed into a bulge was heating up 206 miles southeast of Bastogne in northeastern France, near the town of Colmar.

Colmar is in the Alsace region at the base of the Vosges Mountains.

The region had formerly been a part of France, but when the Germans invaded France in 1940, they made Alsace part of Germany.

By November 1944, German forces were desperately trying to defend the 850 square mile area around Colmar from the U.S. 6th Army Group’s advancement.

That advancement had surrounded the German troops and produced a pocket of German control. Hence, the conflict became known as the Battle of the Colmar Pocket.

It was on this battle-scarred ground that a U.S. infantryman from the 6th Army Group became the most highly decorated soldier in World War II.

His name was Auddie Murphy, a 19-year-old first lieutenant from Texas who would go on to become a movie star in a 21-year acting career.

Murphy was in the 15th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Infantry Division.

On Jan. 26, 1945, Murphy, who had been made acting commander of B Company, was engaged by German troops that outnumbered his unit.

The Germans struck one of the company’s M10 tank destroyers, setting it on fire and causing the crew to abandon it.

Murphy called for his company to withdraw to defensive positions as they were overwhelmed by advancing tanks and infantry.

Murphy, however, did not withdraw from the location.

He remained alone on the line and fired at the advancing enemy with his M1 carbine while using his radio to call in for artillery support.

After emptying his carbine,



Audie Murphy went on to a career in Hollywood, but not before receiving the Medal of Honor for his heroics on the battlefield in January 1945. (Public Domain photo)



Ray Thompson



Gilpin Hammack

he jumped on the burning M10 tank destroyer that had been hit by the Germans and began firing the destroyer’s .50-caliber machine gun at the advancing Germans.

Even after being shot in the leg, he continued firing the weapon and holding off the enemy’s advance and killing or injuring 50 Germans.

Once the machine gun had emptied, he returned to his company and then led them back to the line to repel the Germans.

For his brave and sacrificial action in that battle, he was awarded the military’s highest honor, the Medal of Honor, which he received later in June after Germany surrendered.

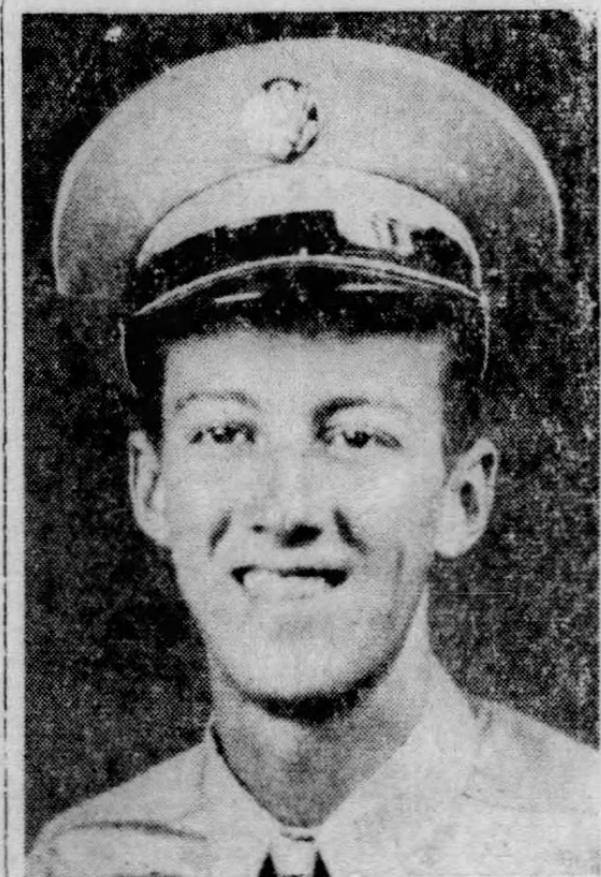
His was a tale of being wounded but winning, and it became a fitting moniker for the events in Europe in January 1945.

\*Murphy would later die in a tragic plane crash in the mountains in Virginia on May 28, 1971. He was 45 years old. He is buried at Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia.

Next time: *Advances and Sacrifices – The Pacific Theater (January 1945)*

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

## SECOND INJURY PROVES FATAL



P. F. C. ALBERT I. BAUGHN

P. F. C. Albert I. Baughn, who was first wounded Dec. 17 and later returned to duty, was killed in action in Belgium Jan. 8. His father received the word Sunday in a telegram from the War department. The following day he received a card of sympathy from General Marshall.

Martinsville resident Albert ‘Bert’ Baughn was one of many casualties in the Battle of the Bulge. (Courtesy clip)



C-47s resupply the 101st Airborne Division in Bastogne, Belgium. (Public Domain photo)