

# Defense of Stavelot



During the fight for Stavelot, soldiers of a 30th Division Field Artillery unit move forward through the heavy snow wearing their white camouflage cloaks.

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**W**ITH THE 107TH INFANTRY, 30TH DIVISION, BELGIUM—Their mission was to take over the defense of Stavelot and hold it. Stavelot, they were told, was in friendly hands. But as they approached the town they found an Armored Infantry unit sitting on top of a hill eating K rations. "Who are you?" they asked. "We thought you were holding the town." And the Armored Infantry replied: "They ran us out."

So the 107th Regiment went into Stavelot, fought that night and next day to clear it of Germans, held it for three days against furious counterattacks, and then sat on it for 2½ weeks. Stavelot was as far northwest as the Germans got in the Battle of the Bulge.

Before Stavelot there had been five months of constant sustained attack for the regiment. It was their first defense since Mortain and, for most of the men, their first real defense ever. In it they learned things, and they argued among themselves the merits of defense and attack.

They found that there is a difference in the psychology of attack and the psychology of defense, but the psychology of attack was so strong in them that the other was not given a chance to assert itself. "They never got to the point where they thought defensively," said Capt. John Kent of Birmingham, Ala., commander of A Company. "They looked at defensive action only as something leading up to attack, and you couldn't call Stavelot anything but an aggressive defense.

"Here's what I mean. We occupied buildings on one side of the river, and the Jerries were in buildings on the other. Although we had received fire from the buildings, I had a sergeant who did not believe the Jerries were over there. 'Let me go and see,' he'd keep asking me. Well, I couldn't do it because he was one of my best noncoms, and I didn't want him going out and getting shot.

"I called up the battalion and asked them if they wanted to patrol over there, and they said hell, no, they didn't want to patrol over there, so I said to the sergeant: 'If we do send somebody over there sometime, I'll let you know.' Eventually we sent a patrol from another company, and he led it across the river.

"Another time I had to hold the men down was when they wanted to cross the river and burn out the buildings on the other side. At this time some SS men were filtering down into the buildings and sniping. And Tiger Royals were hiding behind the buildings and running out to put direct fire on us. We were so extended at the time that I just couldn't allow them to go because we couldn't take a calculated risk.

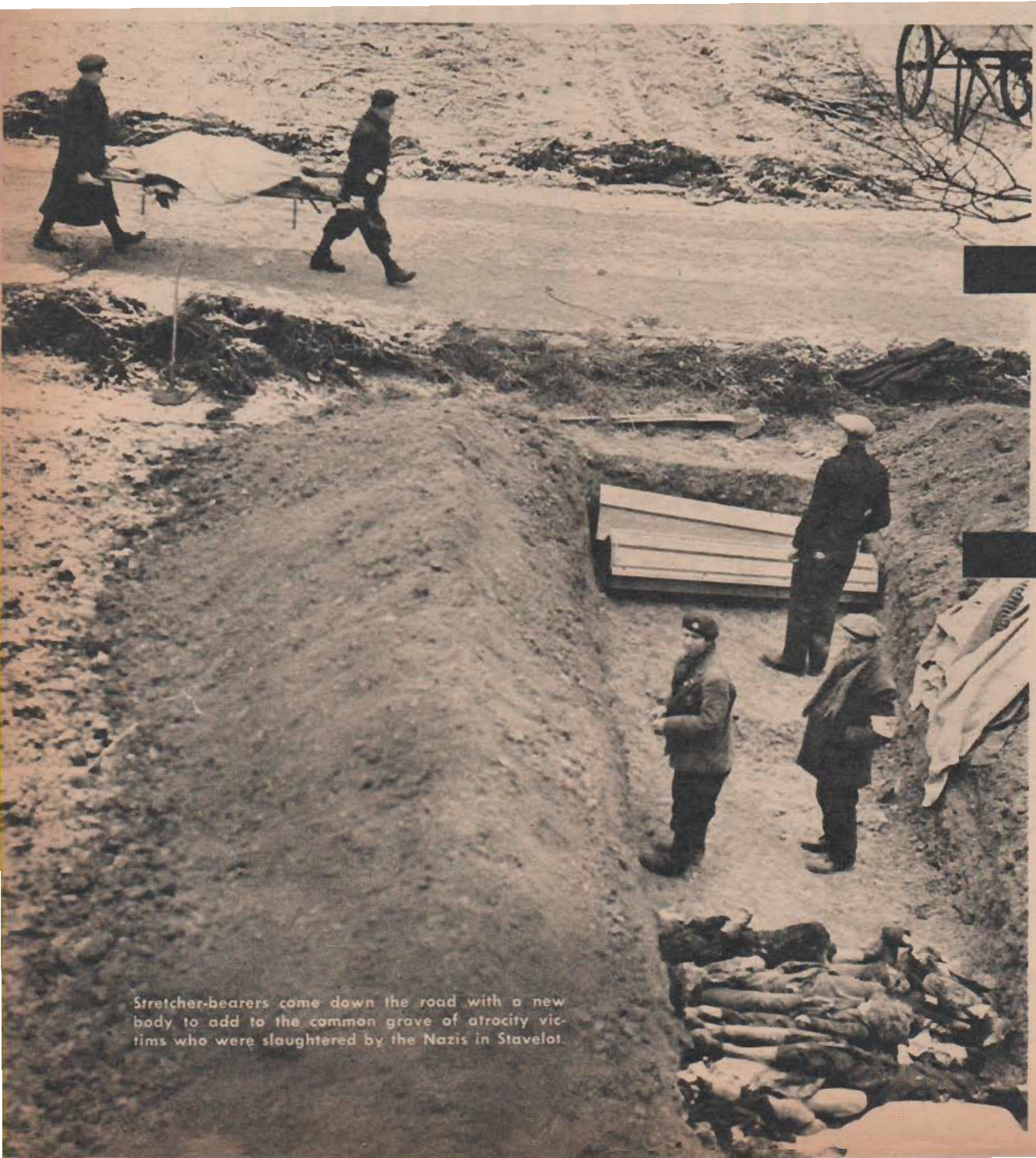
"Americans are just too restless. My men wanted to go out and knock off something and then come back and sit. They don't have the patience for defense."

But the Infantry puts it this way: "Hell, with this defense you get too nervous just sitting there. A man hears something moving around in the dark, a motor running or something like that, and he wants to know what's out there."

There are finer points than mere curiosity to the workings of a defense, the Infantry decided. At Stavelot the enemy was wearing U. S. GI clothing and some of them were driving U. S. vehicles. It was difficult to distinguish an American from a German, and the responsibility for a wrong guess was heavy.

"Now in an attack," declared the Infantry, "whatever is out in front of you is bound to be a Jerry. But at Stavelot it was different. We got caught our first night in town. There were two boys on guard at a door, and a couple of fellows came up to them and said: 'Have some coffee.' Of course we thought it was somebody from the kitchen or something, but the next thing we knew we didn't have any guards on the door.

"Another time two men came up to a foxhole



Stretcher-bearers come down the road with a new body to add to the common grave of atrocity victims who were slaughtered by the Nazis in Stavelot.

where we had one man on guard and one sleeping. One of these men started arguing with the boy on guard, and the other fellow, slipping around behind him, picked up a BAR and shot both our men through the back."

During the day the Infantry found they had more trouble with snipers than they had while in attack. For a while snipers didn't make much difference, and then it got to be serious. "The men hadn't considered Jerry small-arms fire very effective," said Capt. Kent. "And although I had told them to do most of their moving at night they didn't pay much attention to me. There was one spot that was pretty well zeroed in, and two of our men got creased there—they were unhurt but their clothes were cut by bullets. Still they didn't pay much attention. Finally, a third man came along and got hit in the leg. He rolled under cover and bandaged himself all right, but he had to stay there until dark before he could get out. After he got hit, the rest of the men figured I had some sense after all."

The Infantry's casualties at Stavelot were caused mainly by direct tank fire, and because they were on the defense, enemy support artillery could pound them in their more or less stabilized positions. The attack-minded Infantry didn't like the idea. "When you're in an attack," they said, "about the safest place you can be, as far as the artillery is concerned, is right up in front. It's usually the reserve company or people farther back who get hurt then. When one of those Tiger Royals comes flying up, they let you have it right in the face. We hit one of those things nine times with bazookas, and they bounced off like you were throwing rocks at it."

Company A's riflemen almost unanimously preferred offense to defense, and their reasons simmered down to the fact that they didn't want the initiative taken away from them. "A man likes to keep moving," said the Infantry.

Only mortarmen said they liked it better on the defense. "On the attack," said a section leader, "we have to fire and run. But at Stavelot we had everything staked in, and all we had to do was sit there and throw 'em."

The machine-gun section felt they could take it or leave it. "When we're in an attack," said a gunner, "you can give me open ground. But in a town like Stavelot I'd rather be on the defense. I like them cellars when I'm sitting down."

*The infantrymen who were told to hold the town had the spirit of attack too strongly ingrained to stay put behind their own lines.*

**S**TAVELOT showed the Infantry a new kind of German, or at least a German they hadn't thought for a long time. "The SS," Capt. Kent said, "were just as determined to get in as we were to keep them out." Riflemen, who had seen Jerries wading neck deep across the icy river that divided the action zone, were of the same opinion. "Them bastards was hopped up," they declared.

Whether hopped up by pep talks or a real shot in the arm, the SS did fanatical things. Once three jeeploads of them raced across a bridge that divided the sectors of A and B Companies. One jeep made it all the way across, but no German got back alive.

Three times the Infantry was driven out of its positions in the houses by the river, forced out by direct fire from tanks, and three times the Infantry came back and drove out SS men who had crossed under that fire. The Infantry counted the bodies of four or five Germans who tried to wade the river in the daylight, less than 100 yards from the rifles and machine guns of men who don't like defense.

"If they were crazy enough to try it," said the Infantry, "we sure as hell didn't mind shootin' 'em."

It was because of such attempts that the Infantry decided their enemy wasn't rational. German audacity at times was almost theatrical. During one night of the fight they brought two jeeps and two half-tracks (American) into the Stavelot square where they found an American-manned tank blocking their way. They drove the jeep up to the tank, and one of them, apparently exasperated, yelled: "Move that tank." For a while after that it wasn't safe to move a foot across that square.

"We learned a few things about Jerries there," said Capt. Kent. "For one thing, we found that we'd get a counterattack on our left flank and half an hour later we'd get one on our right. If they attacked on the left the last thing at night, they would attack on the right the first thing in the morning. It was a good thing they were that dumb—we had just enough artillery to stop one attack at a time, but if they'd tried it on both flanks at once, we couldn't have held 'em."

**B**UT the psychology of defense is a state of mind—in this case not a feeling of defeatism but a feeling of cold anger—and perhaps the Infantry wouldn't have achieved this state of mind at all except for something that happened on the third day of the battle. On that day there were six counterattacks—three on each flank—and the Germans got across the river into the part of the town held by the Infantry, forcing them back. When the infantrymen fought their way back to their original positions, they found the Germans had slaughtered some civilians in a cellar.

"We counted 22 in one pile," they said. "It looked like most of them had been shot, but some had their throats cut. There were old people and children—just kids. Some had their heads bashed by rifle butts, and one little kid looked like he had been slung up against a wall and his head busted open."

Capt. Kent told what happened later. "I got a phone call from the platoon sergeant, and he said: 'Sir, we got 12 prisoners down here. What do you want me to do with 'em?' I said: 'What do you mean, do with 'em? Send 'em back.' He said:

'Sir, it's a lot of trouble sending 'em back.' I said: 'I know it, but we need information. Send 'em back.' He said: 'Sir, I got an offer from a man here. Says he'll give a month's pay to bring them back.' I said: 'Get those prisoners back here whole.'

'Those 12 prisoners signed confessions about killing the civilians, and the reason they gave was that the kids' crying bothered them. In a way I'm sort of glad we were there to see that on account of the effect on the men. Now they say: 'Damn 'em, kill 'em all. They're all alike.' The prisoners and their confessions were what turned the men's minds. The SS certainly didn't get any mercy from us after that.

'A good fighter never gets mad, or if he does, it's an impersonal anger. Now, you take an old man, one who has been in this for a while, and he knows that when he's attacking the Germans they will try to pin him down with machine-gun fire, and as soon as he gets pinned down, they will throw mortars in on him. On attack I've seen some of these old men charge right into a machine-gun position rather than get stopped out in front of it. And they'll say to themselves: 'You son of a bitch—try and pin me down.' They'll tell you later: 'I just got mad thinking about what they was trying to do to me.'

'But at Stavelot, after we saw those dead civilians, the men changed. They'd make sure of where Jerry was, sit and watch him until they couldn't miss, and then pour everything they had at him. It seemed like they wanted to pulverize everything there was across the river. That wasn't impersonal anger; that was hatred.'

And that was the Infantry's psychology of defense.