

# ***Footsteps of My Father***

## **A Resource for Teachers**



Master Sgt. Roddie Edmonds

## **Why is this lesson important?**

The Holocaust is a story of persecution, mass murder, and genocide. It is important that students understand that history is not inevitable. This lesson focuses on individual action, personal choice, and moral responsibility that resulted in saving the lives of 200 Jews, American GIs captured during the Battle of the Bulge.

## **Standards / Objectives**

- To locate elements of the Holocaust within a broader unit of study.
- To understand the importance of and events surrounding a major battle of World War II
- To introduce the concept of rescue of Jews by non-Jews during World War II and the Holocaust.

## **Prior to teaching this unit, students should have a basic understanding of:**

- The Holocaust
- European geography during World War II
- American involvement in World War II
- The significance of the Battle of the Bulge.

## Overview/Historical Context

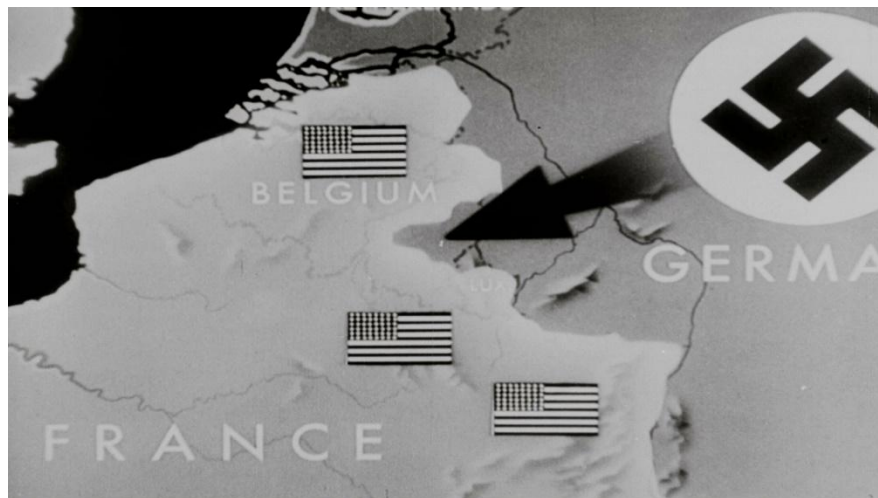


<http://www.history.army.mil/reference/bulge/images.htm>

On D day—June 6, 1944—the Allies launched a massive attack on Hitler’s “Fortress Europe,” battling their way onto the beaches of Normandy in northwest France. Allied troops and armored divisions under the overall command of U.S. general Dwight D. Eisenhower spread inland. In bitter fighting, they fought their way through fields and along country lanes, into villages and from door to door, while Allied bombing and strafing battered German defenses. In August, amphibious landings from the Mediterranean poured troops and supplies diverted from Italy into southern France. Meanwhile, Allied forces crossed the Seine River and liberated Paris. By mid-September, the Allies were in control of Belgium and stood ready to strike Germany.



On December 16, 1944, massed Allied troops were poised on the border of Germany— along a 200-mile front—when the Nazis mounted a surprise offensive in the forests of Belgium. The Allied line bulged, but it did not break.



Allies quickly mobilized, pouring troops and matériel into the breach. A month of bitter fighting in winter cold and deep snow cost the Allies nearly 100,000 casualties; 20,000 Americans died. The Battle of the Bulge further depleted Germany's disappearing fighting forces; already, its army was deploying boys, many of them younger than sixteen. As German resolve hardened, the stage was set for a bloody battle for the Nazi homeland and capital of Berlin.

*Smithsonian National Museum of American History*

## Suggested Activities

1. "We are all Jews here." This phrase is spoken many times throughout the documentary. To what extent can the same phrase mean different things to different people? What do you think the phrase meant to the following people? And what does it mean to you? What makes a person act or fail to act?

- Roddie Edmonds
- Paul Stern
- Lester Tanner
- Major Steigmann, the German commandant at Ziegenhain
- President Barack Obama

For critical reflection, consider the following extension prompt:  
Review the remarks of Paul Stern about Roddie Edmonds's response to the German commandant - look at his tone of voice, his body language about a Christian saying, "We are all Jews here". Compare this to how Barack Obama said the same phrase. Do you see differences?

2. Why do you think Jewish American GI's were instructed to toss away their dog tags if they were captured by the Germans? Using the film, examine the reasons why several of the Jewish American POWs wanted to keep their dog tags while others did not.

For critical reflection, consider the following extension prompt:  
Do you think the US government should have sent Jewish American soldiers to the European theater of war knowing that Jews in Europe were being murdered by the Germans and their collaborators?

3. Review the attached summary of the Geneva Convention as to how captured prisoners of war (POWs) are to be treated. Based on the testimony of the four Jewish POWs in the documentary, explain how the Germans were in violation of the Geneva Convention. How does this differ from how the Germans treated the Jewish American POWs?  
[https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/geneva-convention#section\\_3](https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/geneva-convention#section_3)

## Suggested Activities, cont.

4. Read and annotate the diary entries written by Master Sgt. Roddie Edmonds while a POW. Identify the primary focus of the entry, give examples, and reflect on the treatment of the American POWs by the Germans. Answer the document analysis questions which go along with each journal entry.  
With a partner, discuss the role hunger played in his journal entries and his thoughts.
5. Prepare a timeline from when the Americans arrived in Europe through to liberation. Read the following diary entries written by Master Sgt. Roddie Edmonds. Place them within the timeline. Analyze these entries, compare it with the documentary, and describe in your words what transpired during these days.

**Teacher's Note:** Roddie Edmonds did not include in his diary the interaction between himself and the Commandant of the Stalag. Students should notice this right away. There is a void in the diary. This can be used as a prompt to talk about heroism and courage when working with your students.

## **Resources**

### **Holocaust:**

<https://jfr.org/>

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/introduction-to-the-holocaust>

<https://www.yadvashem.org/>

[http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Holocaust/An\\_Overview](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Holocaust/An_Overview)

### **Righteous Gentiles and Rescue:**

<https://jfr.org/>

<https://jfr.org/rescuer-stories/edmonds-master-sgt-roddie/>

<https://jfr.org/video-library/reunion-2016/>

### **World War II:**

<https://www.army.mil/both/>

<https://www.archives.gov/files/publications/prologue/2014/winter/bulge-final.pdf>

## **Glossary of Terms and Places:**

**Allies:** The countries of Great Britain, France, the Soviet Union, and the United States of America, who fought against the Axis during World War II.

**Ardennes:** Forest of, a wooded plateau region in western Europe, in northeastern France, southeastern Belgium, and Luxembourg; World War I battle 1914; World War II battle 1944-1945.

**Axis Powers:** The World War II alliance, originally among Germany, Italy, and Japan, and later expanded to include Finland, Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, and Bulgaria.

**Bad Orb:** Also known as Stalag IX-B, a German prisoner of war camp during World War II.

**Battle of the Bulge:** The final major German counter-offensive in World War II, begun December 16, 1944, and thrusting deep into Allied territory in northern and eastern Belgium; repulsed January 1945.

**Berga:** A slave labor camp and sub camp of Buchenwald concentration camp during World War II.

**Geneva Convention:** One of a series of international agreements, first made in Geneva, Switzerland, in 1864, establishing rules for the humane treatment of prisoners of war and of the sick, the wounded, and the dead in battle.

**GI:** Of, relating to or characteristic of a U.S. enlisted person.

**POW:** Prisoner of war.

**Righteous Among the Nations:** Sometimes called "Righteous Gentiles," the term refers to non-Jews who have been honored by Yad Vashem with this title for having risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust.



**Stalag:** Main camp, permanent camp (i.e. for long term holding of prisoners of war or, in the case of concentration camps, for central administration).

**The Holocaust:** Derived from the Greek word "holokauston," which was a translation of the Hebrew word "olah," meaning "a sacrificial offering burnt whole before the Lord," the word "holocaust" was commonly used in English to refer to great slaughters or massacres. In the 1960s the term came to be used by academics and popular writers, especially when capitalized and after "the," to name specifically the genocide of the Jews during World War II. There is a continuing debate as to whether the term "the Holocaust" should also be applied to the planned murder of Gypsies, the handicapped and other victims of Nazi persecution.

**Third Reich:** The name that Hitler gave to his regime, which existed from 1933 to 1945. (The Second Reich had ended with the resignation of Kaiser Wilhelm II at the time of Germany's defeat at the end of World War I.)

**Wehrmacht:** The name of the German army from 1935 – 1945.

**Ziegenhain:** Also known as Stalag IX-A, a German prisoner of war camp during World War II.

## **Additional Information Sheets/Resources**

1. Viewing guide for film
2. Diary entries written by Edmonds and primary source analysis
3. Geneva Convention
4. Battle of the Bulge Fact Sheet

# Viewing Guide for Film

## Footsteps of My Father Viewing Guide

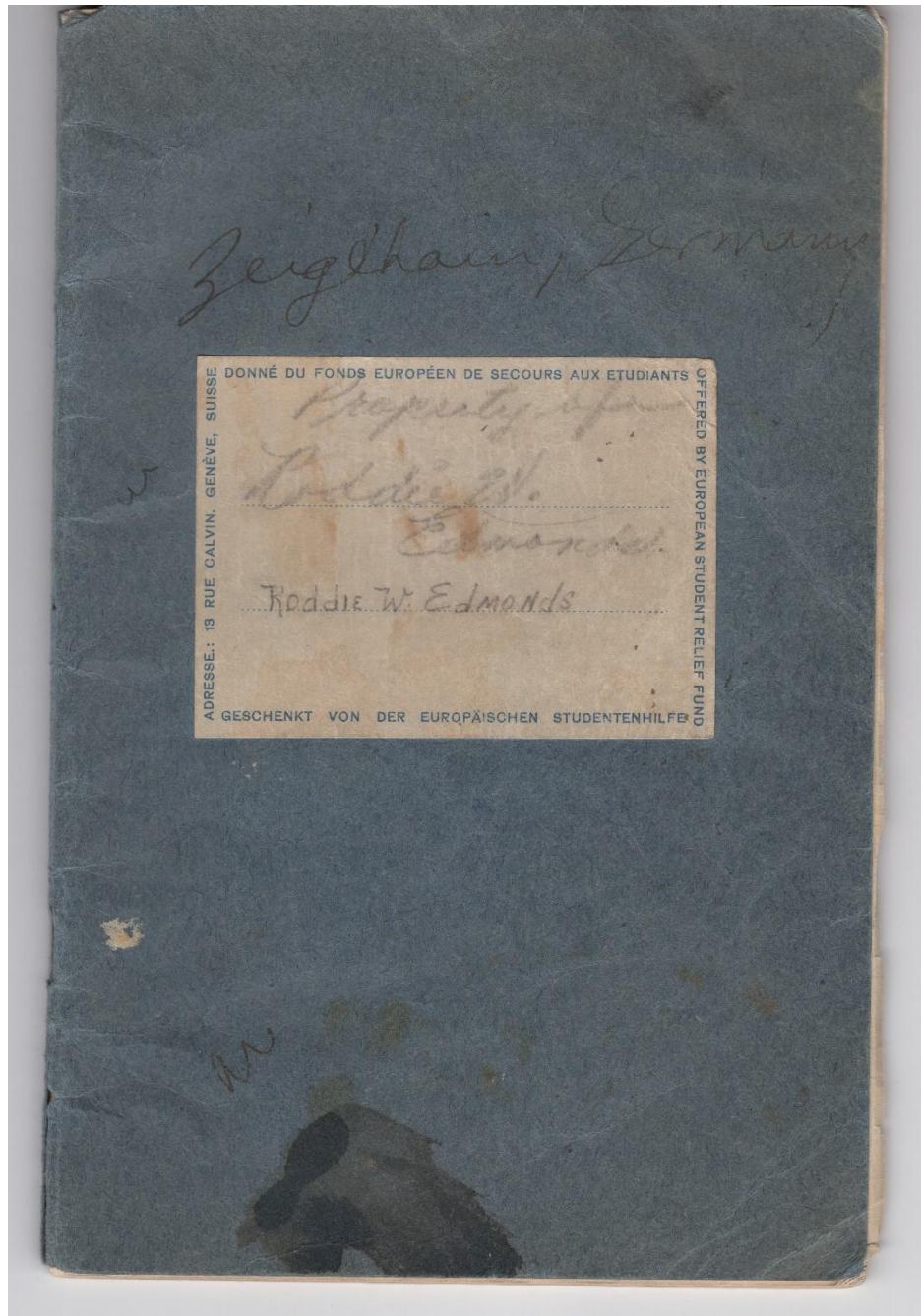
1. Why did Master Sgt. Roddie Edmonds decide to keep a diary?
2. What did Pastor Chris Edmonds discover after Googling his father's name and rank?
3. What did "H" stand for on the soldiers' dog tags? What was its purpose?
4. What was a "replacement" in WWII?
5. What significance did weather conditions play during the Battle of the Bulge?
6. In his diary, how did Edmonds describe the moment he and his men had to surrender?
7. Approximately how many American soldiers were captured during the Battle of the Bulge?
8. What were some of the immediate concerns of the newly captured American POWs?
9. Upon arrival at Stalag IX-B, the POWs were asked to give their name, rank, and serial number. What other question were they also asked?
10. How did the Germans use this information?
11. Of the 1,292 American POWs at Ziegenhain, approximately how many were Jewish?
12. On January 27, 1945, an order was given that the next morning, all Jewish American prisoners were to report for formation. What decision did Edmonds make?
13. When the German commandant said, "You can't all be Jewish," how did Edmonds respond?
14. Describe the effect Edmonds' response had on the Jewish American soldiers under his command.
15. Why did the German commanders want to evacuate the prisoners from the camp in March 1945?
16. When he and his men were told to begin marching out of the camp, what did Edmonds tell his men to do?
17. How do the Jewish American GIs describe their day of liberation?
18. When talking about Edmonds, President Barack Obama said "his moral compass never wavered." What do you think this means? What is a "moral compass?"

# Footsteps of My Father Viewing Guide

## Answer Key

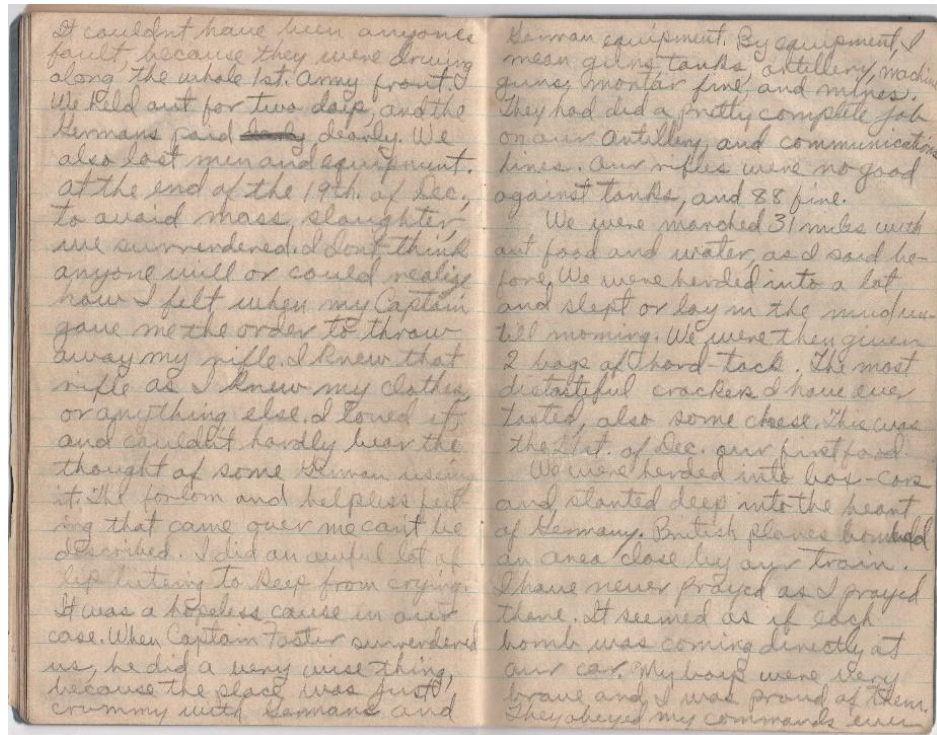
1. Didn't want to talk; knew friends and family would want to know; thought it would be the best way to keep a record.
2. Found an article in the NY Times; Lester Tanner mentioned Edmonds saved his life while a POW; mentioned bravery and courage of Edmonds.
3. Hebrew; to help with identification in burial process and ensure right kind of grave.
4. Filled up slots opened by casualties.
5. Weather cleared; Allied bombing now possible; bombed railroad cars.
6. Forlorn, helpless, hopeless cause
7. Approximately 20,000
8. Jewish name; afraid they would be shot.
9. Religion
10. Segregated Jewish POWs
11. 200
12. He said they were not doing that and that they would all report for formation.
13. "We are all Jews here."
14. Amazing; saved our lives; proud; a remarkable person; a true Christian; brave; stood up; admiration; respect.
15. Americans were nearby; didn't want to be there when Americans came.
16. Nobody march out; keep going back to barrack.
17. American tanks came in; kissed tanks; saw it as the date of their freedom.
18. Answers will vary.

## Journal Entries Written by Master Sgt. Roddie Edmonds



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**Directions: Read each journal entry. Answer the questions which go along with the entry.**



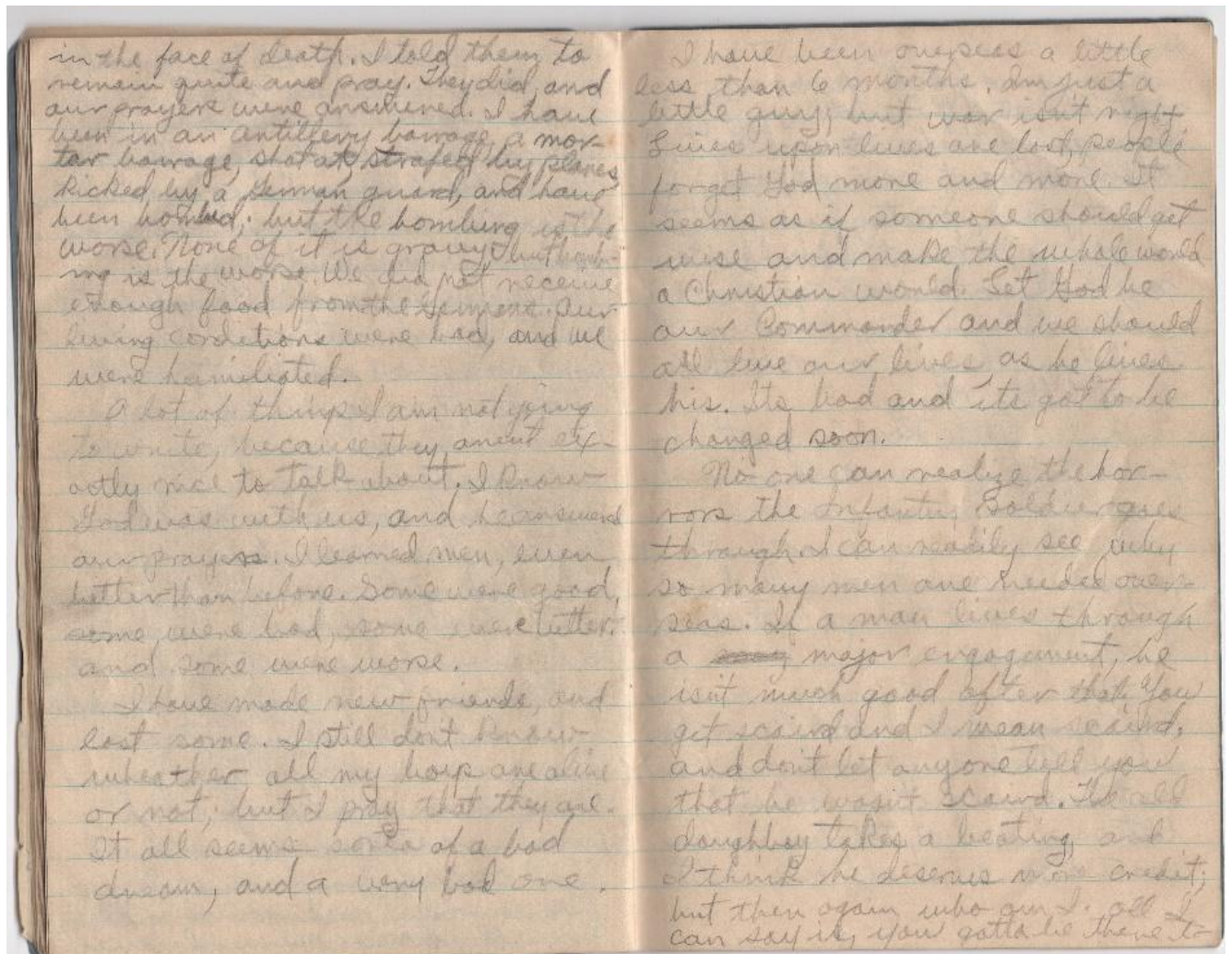
"...We held out for two days, and the Germans paid dearly. We also lost men and equipment. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> of December, to avoid mass slaughter, we surrendered. I don't think anyone will or could realize how I felt when my Captain gave me the order to throw away my rifle...The forlorn and helpless feeling that came over me can't be described..."

"We were marched 31 miles without food and water...We were herded into a lot and slept or lay in the mud until morning. We were then given 2 bags of hard tack; the most distasteful cracker I have ever tasted, also some cheese. This was the 21<sup>st</sup> of December, our first food... We were herded into boxcars and started deep into the heart of Germany..."

1. What is the main idea or message of this journal entry?
2. List 2 words or phrases from the journal that support the main idea.
3. What questions do you have after reading the journal entry?



## Journal Entries Written by Master Sgt. Roddie Edmonds



"We did not receive enough food from the Germans. Our living conditions were bad, and we were humiliated... A lot of things I am not going to write, because they aren't exactly nice to talk about..."

"No one can realize the horrors the infantry soldier goes through... You get scared and I mean scared, and don't let anyone tell you that he wasn't scared."

1. What is the main idea or message of this journal entry?
2. List 2 words or phrases from the journal that support the main idea.
3. What questions do you have after reading the journal entry?

## Journal Entries Written by Master Sgt. Roddie Edmonds



1. What is the main idea or message of this journal entry?
2. List 2 words or phrases from the journal that support the main idea.
3. What questions do you have after reading the journal entry?
4. Discuss the role hunger played in these journal entries.

*\*We would like to thank Pastor Chris Edmonds for making available portions of his father's wartime diary.*

## **Geneva Conventions of 1906 and 1929**

In 1906, the Swiss government arranged a conference of 35 states to review and update improvements to the First Geneva Convention.

The amendments extended protections for those wounded or captured in battle as well as volunteer agencies and medical personnel tasked with treating, transporting and removing the wounded and killed. It also made the repatriation of captured belligerents a recommendation instead of mandatory. The 1906 Convention replaced the First Geneva Convention of 1864.

After World War I, it was clear the 1906 Convention and The Hague Convention of 1907 didn't go far enough. In 1929, updates were made to further the civilized treatment of prisoners of war.

The new updates stated all prisoners must be treated with compassion and live in humane conditions. It also laid out rules for the daily lives of prisoners and established the International Red Cross as the main neutral organization responsible for collecting and transmitting data about prisoners of war and the wounded or killed.

## **Geneva Conventions of 1949**

Germany signed the Convention of 1929, however, that didn't prevent them from carrying out horrific acts on and off the battlefield and within their military prison camps and civilian concentration camps during World War II. As a result, the Geneva Conventions were expanded in 1949 to protect non-combatant civilians.





## **Battle of the Bulge Fact Sheet**

- December 16, 1944 – January 25, 1945
- The Ardennes – the heavily forested area of Belgium, Luxembourg, and Germany
- U.S. First Army & Third Army
- Some 600,000 Americans, fought in the Battle of the Bulge
- 81,000 American casualties
- 20,000 American soldiers were captured
- 80,000 - 100,000 Germans were killed, wounded, or captured
- In the face of increasing Allied pressure, the Germans began to withdraw from the Bulge on January 8, 1945.
- The Battle of the Bulge was the last major German military offensive in Western Europe and was only temporarily successful in halting the Allied advance.
- The American advance continued, eliminating all German gains by the end of January 1945. Without halting, US forces challenged the German defenses of the Siegfried Line, now undermanned after the heavy German losses during the Ardennes offensive. The Battle of Germany lay ahead.
- America's largest battle of World War II

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