



HERITAGE
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THE 106TH AND THE BATTLE OF THE BULGE

Members of the 106th Infantry Division inscribed their names on the Southampton D-Day Wall while enroute to the Battle of the Bulge.

THE BATTLE OF THE BULGE

Following the success of D-Day, the tide was turning against Nazi Germany. Allied troops swept through France, German cities were bombed, the Italian peninsula was lost, and the Red Army was closing in on the Eastern Front. In order to halt the Allied Army, Hitler planned a major offensive. The Ardennes Counter Offensive was launched on 16 December 1944 with the intention of pushing through the Allied lines to retake Antwerp.

The area was predominantly occupied by American soldiers; it was previously considered a quiet sector, and the majority were draftees with training to complete or battle-weary units using it as a rest area. The early morning shell attack took them completely by surprise. Hitler had amassed 30 infantry divisions and 12 Panzer divisions across the Ardennes, which proceeded to punch a 50-mile bulge-shaped advance through Allied lines.

The battle was hard: both sides suffered from a lack of resources and the harsh winter weather, and all suffered major losses. However, Allied reinforcements arrived quickly, and the Americans defended vital road junctions which halted the German advance. As the fighting continued, the Allies gained the upper hand as the terrain favoured the defenders and weather conditions cleared, allowing air attacks on German forces and supply lines. By the end of January, the front line was restored to its former position, and the Allied counterattack was able to advance into the heart of Germany and ultimately end the war.

Over 600,000 American troops were involved, and it remains the largest and deadliest land battle ever fought by the US Army, with over 81,000 Americans killed, wounded or missing.



THE 106TH

The 106th Division was an 'all-draftee' division formed in March 1943. None of the men or officers had military experience. They trained for eight months at Camp Atterbury in Indiana, before 60% of the division were sent to the Pacific in the spring of 1944.

More men were drafted in to bring the division back up to strength, with many being reassigned from the Army Air Corps, Army Ground Forces and Service Units. In October 1944, the division sailed from Boston to the UK where the men were billeted in villages in the Cotswolds while they paused to take stock of equipment and complete their training.

On 11 December 1944, the division sailed from Southampton to Le Harve where they were then taken by road through France and Belgium to the Schnee Eifel region in the Ardennes, which was deep in snow with sub-zero temperatures and thick fog. In the rush to get there, the division had taken with them very little ammunition, no winter clothing, and only a week's worth of supplies.

During the battle, three quarters of the 106th's men (10,671) were killed or captured. Two of those who left their names on the Southampton wall, Golden and Knight, were captured and held as POWs, though all of those names on the wall traced to the 106th survived the war. The remainder regrouped for rehabilitation, and finally sailed back to New York in October 1945.

In September 2019, the 106th Infantry Division Association held its 73rd Annual Reunion. Sadly, none of the seven veterans present remembered the Wall, though one commented, 'Heck, we moved through that area so fast there was no time to scratch a name on any wall.' However, it appears that, of the 12,000 men sailing from Southampton in December 1944, some must have had a brief moment to leave their mark.

106TH MEMBERS ON THE D-DAY WALL

Delbert W. Smith
Private, 424 Infantry, Missouri

Enlisted in March 1943 at the age of 20, Delbert had previously worked on his family's farm. He passed away in 2005.



D.W. SMITH
MISS

John Curtis Hodges
Private 1st Class, 424 Infantry, Illinois

John enlisted in 1943 at the age of 18. After the war he was married twice and was one of the oldest surviving veterans until he passed away in 2017.



CURT HODGES
CHICAGO ILLINOIS

Ralph Odom
Corporal, 424 Infantry, Alabama

Ralph (pictured centre) was 22 when he enlisted in 1941. After the war he worked in construction, real estate and mineral rights. He passed away in 2008.



RALPH ODOM

William Mueller
Private 1st Class, 424 Infantry

William survived the war and went on to become an aeronautical engineer.



W^M MUELLER
NEW YORK

Walter Edwin Shirk
Private 1st Class, 424 Infantry, Pennsylvania

Walter was 18 when he enlisted in March 1943. He passed away in 2003.



W.E. SHIRK

Robert Golden
Corporal, 423 Infantry, New York

Robert enlisted in July 1943 at the age of 18. He was one of the POWs captured during the Battle of the Bulge, but lived until 1994.



ROBERT GOLDEN

Robert Smith
422 or 424 Infantry

It is not clear which Robert Smith wrote his name on the wall, as there are several possible candidates.



ROBERT SMITH

William H. Knight
422 Infantry

William was one of the POWs captured during the battle; he survived, and went back to work at the Norfolk Naval base in Virginia. He passed away in 1973.



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