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**Witnesses remember Battle of the Bulge**

*Area residents recall moments from critical WWII campaign*

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| » click to enlarge « Witnesses remember Battle of the Bulge**Veterans of the Battle of the Bulge took questions from the audience and shared their experiences, 70 years after the Germans launched a surprise attack in the Ardennes forest of Belgium. The Germans were ultimately repelled by Allied forces after a bloody six-week battle. (Photo by Brian Louwers)**http://www.candgnews.com/sites/default/files/images/global/stories/cache/Detroit-Arsenal-of-Democracy-Museum-battle-inline-300x1024.jpg**Veterans of the Battle of the Bulge took questions from the audience and shared their experiences, 70 years after the Germans launched a surprise attack in the Ardennes forest of Belgium. The Germans were ultimately repelled by Allied forces after a bloody six-week battle. (Photo by Brian Louwers)**http://www.candgnews.com/sites/default/files/images/global/galleries/cache/Detroit-Arsenal-of-Democracy-Museum-1-full-800x600.jpghttp://www.candgnews.com/sites/default/files/images/global/galleries/cache/Detroit-Arsenal-of-Democracy-Museum-1-gallery-thumb-300-300x1024.jpg**About 150 people, including 17 World War II veterans, attended a symposium marking the 70th anniversary of the Battle of the Bulge Dec. 13 at the Detroit Arsenal of Democracy Museum in St. Clair Shores. (Photo by Brian Louwers)** |

WARREN — Hundreds of German tanks and a quarter of a million troops emerged from the frozen fog and driving snow early on Dec. 16, 1944, to strike Allied forces stretched across an 80-mile front in the Ardennes forest of Belgium.

Gathered to remember the decisive and bloody Battle of the Bulge that marked the end of Nazi Germany’s offensive operations on the Western Front during World War II, a panel of veterans who were there took part in a symposium hosted by the Detroit Arsenal of Democracy Museum in St. Clair Shores on Dec. 13.

The veterans, all now in their late 80s and 90s, met with about 150 museum patrons to share their first-hand accounts, participate in a presentation about the battle and discuss the equipment used by the troops who fought against the Germans — and the bitter elements — during one of the most costly engagements in the history of the U.S. Army. The Allies suffered more than 80,000 casualties over the six-week battle, and an estimated 100,000 German troops were killed, wounded or captured.

John Lind, director of the Arsenal of Democracy Museum, said the goal of the German forces was to drive a wedge through the Allied lines, to push to the Meuse River, and eventually, to the Belgian coast at Antwerp.

“The Germans basically cannibalized their Eastern Front defenses and they moved their most modern tanks and their most modern equipment to the west, and their objective was to create a bulge, or a salient, through the American lines, dividing the British and the Americans,” Lind said. “It was Adolf Hitler’s plan that they would take Antwerp and then make the Allies sue for peace, or come to a conditional surrender in the west.”

Donald Straith, 88, of Northville, was with the 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment of the U.S. Army’s 101st Airborne Division when word of the surprise German offensive came. He recalled how his platoon sergeant awoke the men at 3 a.m. on Dec. 19, 1944, and how the division was rushed to the area around the crossroads town of Bastogne to stop the German assault.

“The picture wasn’t clear. I know he said we were taking a beating on the Eastern Front,” Straith said. “We got up there the night of the 19th. We went out to Noville on the 20th. I got hit the morning of the 20th and evacuated back to Bastogne.”

Straith said he was lying behind a small hedge when a bullet pierced the skin between the thumb and index finger of his right hand and lodged in the forestock of his M1 rifle, which he held at his side. Though wounded, he had narrowly escaped death for the second time in a matter of minutes in Noville.

“About a half hour before that, a mortar shell landed in a slit trench next to me and blew all the dirt from mine in on top of me. That was a matter of 3 or 4 feet,” Straith said.

The next day, he suffered another close call on a road leading out of Bastogne.

“The morning of the 21st, somebody woke me up and said, ‘We think we’ve got a road open and we’re sending out a truck with the walking wounded.’ I ran out and got in the truck, the seat behind the driver,” Straith said. “We loaded up and left town. Just outside of Bastogne, we ran into a German roadblock with a machine gun. The driver took a round through the side of the head. I was in the first seat behind him. We all, of course, kind of dived to the floor. A guy two or three back from me took a round right in the base of the skull.”

As the machine gun raked the truck, a bullet cut through the back of Straith’s field jacket, putting a notch in the collar and a notch in the back of his helmet.

“If I had been a half an inch farther up, it would have hit my spine,” Straith said. “So three times in a matter of 24 hours. Pretty close.”

Guadalupe Flores, 90, of Toledo, served with the 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment of the 101st Airborne Division and recalled being attacked by air in Bastogne on Christmas Eve 1944.

“We got into a tank that was parked by a building and checked if the machine gun was working, and it was,” Flores said. “It was a 50-caliber machine gun, and I shot that plane down.”

George Koskimaki, 92, of Milford, served as the radio operator for Gen. Maxwell Taylor, commander of the 101st Airborne Division during World War II. Koskimaki authored several books about the division’s campaign in Western Europe, including “The Battered Bastards of Bastogne,” in which he chronicled the defense of the city between Dec. 19, 1944, and Jan. 17, 1945.

He attended the symposium held by the Arsenal of Democracy Museum and shared memories of his experiences.

“I think the thing I remember most is the bombing,” Koskimaki said. “On Christmas Eve, they bombed us, and on Christmas Day, at 3 o’clock in the morning, they bombed us. That’s when the big attack started on us. They had been fighting us from the south side of Bastogne and they started on the west side, trying to get through.

“They tried all different places to get in there, and every one of our units held their place. I don’t think we were even aware that we were surrounded, because that’s the way we always went into combat, behind enemy lines, dropping down by glider or parachute,” Koskimaki said.

Also in attendance for the symposium was St. Clair Shores resident Christiane Stein. Now 78, she was just 8 years old when the Battle of the Bulge raged in her hometown of Charleroi, not far from Bastogne.

Stein said her family spent years in the cellar of her home between the German invasion in May 1940 and the initial liberation of Belgium in September 1944. Her memories became more vivid as she grew up as a child during the occupation and she remembered well the shock her family felt when the Germans came back through town during the Ardennes offensive.

“I remember like it was yesterday,” Stein said. “My grandfather said, ‘If they get to the Meuse, we’re done.’ I was so scared.”

Stein thanked the 17 World War II veterans in attendance for the symposium, especially the group who endured the German attack and the terrible winter weather to deal a crushing blow to Nazi Germany’s plans to recapture its conquered territory.

“I want to thank you gentlemen, because I feel like you saved my life,” Stein said.