The Fighting Tigers at Bastogne

The 10th Armored Division in Gen. George S. Patton’s 3rd Army played a key, but little known, role in the defense of Bastogne during the Battle of the Bulge. A quick history lesson may be of interest to those who are not that familiar with the battle around Bastogne in the winter of 1944.

On 19 November 1944, after fierce fighting, the 10th Armored had pierced the vaunted "Siegfried Line" and led the Third Army attack into Germany. This attack to the east came to an abrupt halt on 17 December 1944 as the Germans had launched their Ardennes Offensive further to the north. The Germans swept in from the east with ten tank and fourteen infantry divisions. The 75 mile front was protected by only five American divisions who were expecting to rest and to receive new troop reinforcements.

The 10th Armored Division was one of the first divisions to rush north against “the Bulge”. Combat Command A of the 10th moved 75 miles in a single day, directly into the attack. The 10th assumed responsibility for protecting Luxembourg and the 3rd Army's right flank. Combat Command B (CCB) was called to Bastogne by Gen. Patton on 17 December 1944. At that time, the 101st Airborne Division was resting and refitting in Reims, France; CCB of the 10th Armored Division was the only major combat unit defending Bastogne during the initial hours of the battle. The Tigers held Bastogne against eight German Divisions while the 101st rushed to Bastogne, entering that city while CCB had already begun their defense of the town at three strategic villages near Bastogne – Noville in the north, Longvilly in the east and Wardin in the south. The armor and the men of CCB provided the 101st paratroopers the essential time needed to dig in before the city was completely encircled by the German attackers. CCB of the 10th Armored remained with the 101st Airborne during the entire fight and siege at Bastogne.

General Anthony McAuliffe was the U.S. commander in Bastogne during the battle and is famed for his reply to the Germans of “Nuts!” when they demanded...
the city’s surrender. Gen. McAuliffe praised the men of the 10th Armored Tiger Division some years after the battle by noting that, "In my opinion, Combat Command B of the 10th Armored Division never properly was credited with their important role in the Bastogne battle." Ironically, The 101st got the primary credit for the defense of Bastogne, partly because censorship permitted the 101st to be mentioned before the 10th Armored Division. The movement of Patton’s troops were often concealed due to the German’s extreme interest in his troops’ battle movements.

In 124 days in combat, the 10th Armored Division had 4,697 battle casualties and 3,694 non-battle casualties for a total of 8,381, which represented 78.5 percent of the division's authorized strength. The veterans of the 10th Armored Division, as well as all other veterans who served in WWII, are once again suffering from increasing casualties in their ranks as most veterans are now 87 years of age and older, with many now in their 90's. There are currently about ninety 10th Armored Division veterans on our 10th Armored Division Veterans Western Chapter roster. The sixteen men who were able to travel to the 2010 Reunion in Phoenix are shown in the photo below. Only ten veterans of these sixteen remain as of this writing (March 14, 2013).

It is both our duty and our privilege to honor the sacrifices that these veterans rendered more than 68 years ago, for we know that in a relatively short time they will no longer be with us. I have heard some of these veterans say that “the only heroes were the ones that didn’t get to come home” as they pause and remember their buddies who did not return home with them at the war’s end. May we all continue to show our gratitude to the military veterans who have given so much in the defense of their country, and especially to remember those that gave their lives for both their comrades and their country.

-Craig Charlton, Western Chapter newsletter editor