

# December 1944, Belgium

## KEEPING THE SOLDIER WARM

by Ken Osen

**A**t 05:30 on 16 December 1944, a massive German artillery barrage erupted across the 80 mile Allied front in the densely forested Ardennes region of eastern Belgium. This signaled the beginning of a major German offensive on the Western front officially referred to as Unternehmen Wacht am Rhein (Operation Watch on the Rhine).

The Ardennes was considered a quiet sector, thus the U.S. units deployed there were a mix of inexperienced troops and units sent to the sector to recuperate after the fall battles in Aachen and the Hurtgen forest. Allied overconfidence and overcast weather conditions lulled the troops into

a false sense of security. The G.I.s were caught completely off guard. This area was also, except for the Vosges Mountains, the most difficult terrain on the entire line of the Western front, and considered too difficult for any major offensive. The battle that unfolded became one of the bloodiest battles for U.S. forces in the war and received a great deal of media attention – it was coined by the press as “The Battle of the Bulge.”

The weather that occurs in the Ardennes and Eifel terrain during the winter is generally severe, and it was in 1944. This is mountainous country, often with much rainfall, deep snows in winter and harsh

winds. The mists and fog are frequent and heavy, normally lasting well into late morning. During the first few days of the offensive in 1944, heavy fog blanketed most of the area of operations, and by 22 December competing weather systems from Russia and the Atlantic brought on a hodgepodge of snow, blizzards, fog and rain. Along the German supply roads beyond the Eifel, the snow fell continuously.

Fighting was furious, and in some cases green American units faced off with equally green Volksgrenadiers. Units were rebuilt after their near destruction in the Normandy fighting. The Germans immediately fell behind schedule as

American units organized pockets of defense all along the front.

Once the Allied High Command realized the magnitude of the German attack, the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAPE) reserve composed of the 82nd and 101st airborne divisions were alerted to move to the front. Both divisions were resting and re-equipping after the failed Market Garden operation in September 1944, and were still in the process of being re-equipped. The 82nd Airborne, in a slightly better state, was immediately deployed around Cheneux and Trois Ponts and engaged in hard fighting in the path of the advance of Kampfgruppe Peiper. The first elements of the 101st

Airborne arrived about four miles west of Bastogne shortly after midnight of 19 December, with the entire division arriving by 09:00, immediately digging in behind the 10th Armored Division's forward positions. The American soldiers were outnumbered approximately 5-1 and were lacking in cold-weather gear, ammunition, food, medical supplies and even senior leadership.

The 23rd and 24th of December broke clear, cold and windy, a mixed blessing for the soldiers in exposed positions. Conditions on the ground were miserable, with temperatures hovering at 20 degrees F, but “unlimited visibility” allowed Allied air cover and resupply by parachute.

For many reasons, the U.S. soldiers fighting in the Ardennes hadn't received proper winter clothing, and as a result suffered badly in temperatures they normally would have been equipped to handle. Couple this with the disruption of the German attack that minimized warm meals, a place to dry out or warm new clothes, and it was pretty miserable.

The flying weather degraded, and by 28 December the sky was overcast with low stratus clouds preventing further Allied air operations. Soon an arctic front from Scandinavia produced heavy snows, and even blizzards that greatly reduced ground visibility. Vehicular movement on the narrow roads was bogged down for both sides and soldiers exhausted themselves wading through snowdrifts. Unattended casualties and those in a state of shock died if left out in the snow for half an hour or more. Soldiers in fixed positions with damp or wet clothing suffered frostbite and trench foot.

The Germans were better prepared for winter fighting with the experience of combat in terrible conditions on the Eastern front. Many articles of improved cold weather clothing, including completely reversible camouflage uniforms, were

**OPPOSITE TOP**  
Long Column of American Infantryman of the 359th Infantry Regt, 90th Division, 3rd U.S. Army move across a snow covered field. U.S. Army Signal Corps Photo

**OPPOSITE BELOW**  
This pair of airborne infantry illustrates the variety of clothing worn; in this case the M1943 uniform with rigger modified trousers over woolen clothing and sweaters with arctic overshoes. The rifleman on the left wears the dismounted raincoat and a knit scarf from home, along with the standard helmet net appearing with the M1943 uniform. Note the parachute first aid packet tied to the British type helmet net on the soldier on the right

**BELOW**  
Here is a GI wearing the heavy Melton double-breasted overcoat issued in large numbers in the ETO. The men often slept in the overcoats for warmth. This soldier has his M1943 folding entrenching shovel tucked into the front of his belt and carries a metal can of .30-caliber ammunition

**BOTTOM**  
W.Britain Winter G.I.s  
U.S. 101st Airborne Infantry Wearing Overcoat Kneeling Firing Carbine, Winter 1944-45 No.25041  
U.S. 101st Airborne in Greatcoat Standing Firing M-1 Garand, Winter 1944-45 No.25066  
U.S. 101st Airborne Officer in M-43 Jacket Directing Movement, Winter 1944-45 No.25067  
25042 - U.S. 101st Airborne Infantry Wearing Raincoat Prone, Winter 1944-45 No.25042

developed after the disastrous winter of 1941-42 in Russia and were issued in large numbers to front line soldiers. This was also an advantage when the battleground became snow covered, as the American soldiers did not have an equivalent snow camouflage uniform and stood out in their dark olive drab uniforms.

In contrast, the U.S. Army entered the war with a uniform largely developed between the wars that primarily relied on traditional uniform items for cold weather such as heavy woolen overcoats, sweaters, long underwear, scarfs, gloves and knit caps. Specialized clothing was developed for mountain troops and armored vehicle crewmen, but it was never available for large-scale issue to the infantry.

Many of the shortcomings of the standard field uniform were recognized during the fighting in Italy, and the U.S. Army undertook a major redesign of the combat uniform culminating in what became known as the M1943 uniform. The clothing was designed to be worn in varying weather conditions by layering clothing under the new olive-drab (shade OD7 and later the darker) cotton sateen jacket and trousers. This allowed







**This selection of original WWII clothing illustrates the common clothing that each soldier was issued from the late 1930s to the end of the War. All are in various shades of Olive Drab wool and cotton.**

① Left side illustrates from top to bottom: 1937 pattern OD wool serge trousers standardized in 1938 for most arms, a cotton handkerchief and a web trouser belt for enlisted men. Immediately below on the left is a pair of OD cotton drawers and a sleeveless OD cotton undershirt.

The left row top is the OD wool flannel shirt adopted in 1934 and modified in 1937. Below the shirt is a wool and cotton mix winter undershirt in light OD, a pair of winter drawers and OD cotton and wool socks.

② This picture illustrates common articles to keep the soldier warm and dry. This and the previous picture use a standard OD wool blanket as a backdrop.

**Top row left to right:**

The Enlisted men's 32oz wool Melton double breasted overcoat standardized in 1939, together with the new pattern high necked sweater developed with the M1943 uniform. To the right is the M1942 pattern raincoat issued to all troops along with the M1941 wool knit cap designed to be worn under the steel helmet, along with one of the many types of home knit items either sent directly from a loved one or issued through the Red Cross.

Bottom row left to right: OD wool mittens with trigger finger. These were designed to be worn with the cotton poplin and leather shell when available, followed by a pair of OD wool gloves, the standard issue OD gloves with leather palms and the OD wool scarf. The next item at the bottom left is the OD poncho in synthetic resin developed in late 1942, originally meant to replace the OD raincoat in tropical regions, but issued in all theaters. The last two items are also home knit items, a scarf and a pair of wristlets, or muffettes. Pattern books for knitting were circulated by the large wool manufacturers to enable some degree of standardization in the homemade items.



③ This photo illustrates the most common items available to the infantryman, although there were a number of other cold weather items used when available such as tankers jackets and Mackinaw coats.

From upper left to right:

The second pattern OD field jacket introduced in 1941 featuring a zipper and buttoned wind flap, with a cotton poplin shell and flannel lining. The M1943 four pocket field jackets in OD shade No.7 designed to replace the M1941 and other specialized combat clothing for universal issue. This was first issued to airborne units in the ETO in late 1944. In the top center is the iconic M1steel helmet adopted in June of 1941. This is a front seamed fixed bale style common in the ETO. This helmet used both the standard M1compressed canvas and resin liner. The M-1C helmet had a different web strap with a snap to attach the M1C airborne liner. In the middle row from left to right is the cotton poplin detachable hood designed for the M1943 jacket, the cotton web adjustable suspenders for the M1943 trousers which were often worn over the woolen trousers and were sized one inch larger than the label to accommodate layering.

At the bottom is a pair of the M1943 OD cotton sateen field trousers that have been modified with rigger applied cargo pockets made from waterproof tenting material to duplicate the cargo pockets on the M1942 airborne trousers that these replaced. In some cases web tapes were also attached on the inner thighs. To the right is a pair of the standard issue M1943 trousers. The M1943 uniform was made in OD No.7 and later OD No.9, but could vary in shade between manufacturers, the number of



washings and the effect of UV light which is true for all other items pictured.

④ This photo shows the typical items that an Airborne Infantryman in the Ardennes might have carried, in addition to the bulky layers of clothing required to keep as warm and dry as conditions allowed.

On the left hand we see the lightweight assault gas mask bag (often the gas mask was discarded and the well designed bag retained to carry a variety of other items), a bandoleer of .30 caliber M1Garand ammo in clips, an M1Garand, a Mk II A1 Fragmentation grenade, a canvas muzzle cover for the M1. A pair of 12 eyelet brown leather Corcoran jump boots with a pair of OD wool socks is to the right of the rifle. These got wet very easily, like all leather boots of the period causing serious injury to the feet. The woolen mittens with trigger fingers are below with an example of the M3 trench knife in the M8 plastic scabbard authorized in July 1943. This example has a German utility strap added to the web frog along with leather thongs at the bottom to allow the knife to be carried on the lower leg. At the top right of the picture is an M1 helmet with the adjustable liner visible along with an M1923 cartridge belt, M1936 suspenders, M1910 canteen, M1942 first aid pouch, M1Garand bayonet and M1943 entrenching shovel. The contents of the M1936 field bag are dumped out onto a resin waterproof poncho. Visible are a M1932 meat can, a tin of chewing tobacco, a M1910 canteen cup with folding handle, knife, fork and spoon, two clips of M1ammo in clips, Lucky Strike cigarettes, GI toilet paper, and a K-Ration Supper unit. Pictured in the lower left is a pair of the second pattern canvas and rubber arctic overshoes, an important piece of footwear to protect the feet from wet and cold, but not always available.

