



## *Those Who Hold Bastogne: The True Story of the Soldiers and Civilians Who Fought in the Biggest Battle of the Bulge* by Peter Schrijvers.

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The Battle of the Bulge forms a unique chapter in the story of the US Army in Europe in World War II. From the landings in Normandy in June 1944 to the German surrender in May 1945, American forces were almost constantly engaged in well planned offensives against a fading Wehrmacht. But, on 16 December 1944, hundreds of thousands of German soldiers emerged from a (literal and figurative) fog and forced the GIs into a desperate defensive struggle. American resistance was most tenacious in and around Bastogne, a small Belgian city that marked the center of the “Bulge.”

Belgian born historian Peter Schrijvers (Univ. of New South Wales) has written seven books on World War II. *Those Who Hold Bastogne* is his fourth on events in Belgium. His brisk account of the battle highlights the American soldiers as well as the Belgian civilians trapped in the fighting. He vividly describes the course of the combat operations from the first German attacks until the Americans pushed the last enemy soldiers out of Belgium in early 1945. Schrijvers sometimes enlarges his focus to explain how the larger battle was evolving, but he concentrates on the fighting around the city, which was surrounded by German troops for seven days. The six excellent maps—all, unfortunately, placed at the front of the book—make it easy to follow the action.

For better and for worse, Schrijvers has chosen an “up close and personal” style of presentation: he introduces dozens of individual soldiers of every rank and tells us about their hometowns, civilian lives, training, and experiences at the battle. For example,

Lieutenant John Cunningham, the artillery battalion’s adjutant, had been appointed airborne liaison. The 36-year-old perfectly fit the mold of America’s citizen soldier. A tall man with blue-green eyes and wavy brown hair, he had spent his youth in Louisiana catching turtles and garfish in the bayous. After her divorce, his mother had taken over the family’s newspaper in Natchitoches. As soon as he obtained his college degree, John had become both manager and editor of the *Natchitoches Times*. He had married his college sweetheart, Famay Fournet, and had driven her around in an old Ford. By the time he was shipped to war in Europe, John was the proud father of a daughter of nearly two and a son of just a couple of months. Now, as darkness slowly retreated on January 5, any thoughts of balmy Louisiana seemed unreal in the bitter cold of the Ardennes. Lieutenant Cunningham set out with a party of new forward observers in two jeeps. He had volunteered to guide the men to their frontline outposts. They pushed past Millomont, unaware that the glidermen had abandoned the area: Miley’s airborne troops and Kilburn’s armor were not on the same radio frequency, and, in the confusion of the past hours, no one had bothered to relay exact positions to the artillerymen any other way. As the jeeps came out of a bend on a path through a frozen field, Germans opened up from a farm on a slope. Machine guns riddled the jeeps, snuffing out the lives of John Cunningham and his companions in the blink of an eye. (226–27)

Similarly, the author often describes wounds in horrifying detail: eyes hang from their sockets, limbs are sheared off, and shrapnel is imbedded in skulls. This specificity is a mixed blessing: we certainly feel that the ten soldiers killed in a particular village were all real individuals, but the gory details become distracting and numbing. Lieutenant Cunningham plays no other part in the battle.

Schrijvers's close attention to the civilians caught in the Bulge deserves praise. Many military historians ignore civilian casualties altogether, others merely mention that "x number of civilians died during the fighting" in such-and-such a village.<sup>1</sup> *Those Who Hold Bastogne* stresses the terrible predicament of the Belgians—and Luxembourgers—after 16 December. Belgium had been liberated by the Allies in September 1944; its people joyfully greeted American and British troops, and resistance fighters emerged from hiding. Now, in some villages, it was payback time. German SS and SD (Sicherheitsdienst) units and Gestapo squads sought out and murdered resistance members or anyone helping the Americans. And, of course, Wehrmacht artillery shells and Luftwaffe bombs killed Belgians in Bastogne. But the Americans, with their overwhelming air and artillery firepower, probably killed more Belgian civilians than did the Germans during the battle. Although Schrijvers gives many examples of GIs helping civilians, he also reports that an entire family was wiped out by American bombs aimed at German tanks<sup>2</sup> (1).

One major disappointment here is the lack of information about the German side of the battle for Bastogne in a book ostensibly concerned not only with "those who hold Bastogne," but "the soldiers" on both sides. Schrijvers's bibliography reflects his bias. Most of the documents and books listed are in English or (especially on German war crimes and the ordeal of the civilian population) in French. He interviewed at least one German veteran but rarely draws on the considerable corpus of German works on the battle itself. While the American struggle to supply the troops in besieged Bastogne is treated at length, German logistical problems receive only cursory attention. How did the Wehrmacht get food, fuel, and ammunition to its units throughout the battle? Logistics, never a strength of the Wehrmacht, were weak by 1944, and Allied airpower devoted most of its sorties during the battle to cutting off German supplies. Yet, the Germans fought on and were able to withdraw most of their forces after their last-ditch offensive failed.

Schrijvers has been well served by his publisher, which permitted him to include generous endnotes, a bibliography, and two indices—one general, the other of military units involved. Sixteen pages of drawings and photographs seldom found in other histories of the battle are a welcome enhancement. Both general readers and historians wanting a crisp yet detailed combat narrative of the defense of Bastogne will find it in *Those Who Hold Bastogne*.

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1. Danny S. Parker's superb *Battle of the Bulge: Hitler's Ardennes Offensive, 1944-1945* (1991; rpt. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2004) has a chapter on the ordeal of the civilians, but they are not intrinsic to the narrative.

2. See further Schrijvers, *The Unknown Dead: Civilians in the Battle of the Bulge* (Lexington: U Pr of Kentucky, 2005).