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The Killing Field at Malmedy

Forty-five years ago, former SS troops gathered by the thousands. Old friends emerged from self-inflicted obscurity. Many, intent on still concealing their less-than-positive one-time career pursuits, joined comrades-in-arms unfazed by the bloody legacy they splattered on the pages of history. They were Adolf Hitler's elite personal security who took an oath to their Fuhrer rather than to their country.



The SS comrades no doubt reminisced about the wondrous years when they and Nazi Germany were giants of the Earth — respected by many and feared by all. But their primary mission that day was to pay homage to and express their love for their General who passed from the scene. Some 7,000 former SS troops, many with a goose-step in their heart and the “Horst Wessel Song” in their soul, gave a convicted war criminal one final salute as their esteemed commander, SS General Josef “Sepp” Dietrich, was lowered into the bosom of their fatherland. (The “Horst Wessel Song,” named after Nazi “brown shirt” activist Horst Wessel, was the national anthem of the Nazi Party.)

Josef Dietrich was Hitler's favorite General. Herr Dietrich commanded the Schutzstaffel (SS), Hitler's personal guard. Commander Dietrich traveled with his Fuhrer. His relationship with Hitler earned him a living residence in the Chancellery. Soon enough the commander was promoted to SS-Gruppenfuhrer (Major General). After his faithful participation in the Night of the Long Knives — Hitler's operation to purge the SS's main competitors, Ernst Rohm's Sturmabteilung (SA) — Dietrich was promoted to SS-Obergruppenfuhrer, Waffen-SS (Lieutenant General).

During World War II, SS-General Dietrich led German campaigns in Paris, Dunkirk, the Balkans, and Normandy. He commanded the 1st SS Panzer-Korps and the 6th SS Panzer-Armee. His loyal service to the Fuhrer earned him the Knights Cross of the Iron Cross with Oak Leaves, Swords, and Diamonds, an honor awarded to very few. He was also a war criminal — convicted by a U.S. military court for giving orders that led to the cold-blooded murder of captured, unarmed American soldiers.

Massacre in Malmedy

It was Hitler's final assault in Belgium, Unternehmen “Wacht am Rhein” (Operation “Watch on the Rhein” or the Battle of the Bulge). The month-long battle in the freezing winter was the largest combat



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engagement in American military history. Over 800,000 Americans took part, and suffered more than 81,000 casualties, including 19,000 killed.

Hitler's goal was to divide the American and British forces in the Ardennes Forest, swiftly take the deep-water port in Antwerp, thereby cutting off necessary supplies for the Allies, and then surround the Allied armies and force a favorable negotiated peace. The Germans needed to strike quickly so as to secure Allied fuel dumps, as the Germans didn't have fuel enough for more than half of the planned campaign.

The fast capture of the bridges was essential for success. Four German Armies were committed to the battle. The SS Sixth Panzer Army, commanded by SS-General Josef "Sepp" Dietrich was assigned the primary objective of capturing Antwerp. The operation was to be carried out with extreme brutality. And in order to achieve the Fuhrer's objectives, the barbarous Waffen-SS panzer commander SS-Standartenfuhrer (Colonel) Joachim Peiper was selected to spearhead the assault.

SS-Standartenfuhrer Peiper, General Dietrich's notorious subordinate, began his Third Reich career in the Hitlerjugend (Hitler Youth). Soon after Hitler became Chancellor, Peiper entered the SS. Peiper's career took off when he became a personal adjutant to Reichsfuhrer-SS (General of the Army) Heinrich Himmler, the mastermind of the Holocaust. Peiper's SS work in France and Italy got him noticed by the German high command.

Peiper's military conduct on the Eastern front, though, brought him fame as a ruthless commanding officer. In Poland Peiper came under the command of Reinhard Heydrich, chief of the Reich Main Security Office, which included the Gestapo and the intelligence service of the Nazi Party known as the SD. Therein, Peiper's men worked alongside Heydrich's Einsatzgruppen, the SS unit given the task of rounding up the Jews of Europe, especially Eastern Europe, shooting them, and toppling them into mass pits and ravines. Further east, Kampfgruppe Peiper (Peiper's tank unit), nicknamed the "Blow Torch Brigade" for its earned reputation of ferocity toward civilians, burned down Russian villages and slaughtered noncombatants, according to locals.

In the Belgian campaign, Kampfgruppe Peiper was to seize the Meuse Bridges around Huy, and hold them at any cost, until SS-General Dietrich's Sixth Panzer Army could cross the river and split the Allied lines. On December 16, 1944, Peiper and his panzers went into action, but poor terrain forced Peiper's tanks to deviate from the plan and shift the advance toward the bridges via the crossroads of Baugnez. The Americans referred to the area with intersecting roads as "five points."

En route, Kampfgruppe Peiper engaged Battery B of the American 285th Field Artillery Observation Battalion. Armed with rifles and light arms, the Americans were no match for Peiper's Waffen-SS mechanized unit. The Americans surrendered and thus became prisoners of war protected by the Geneva Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, Geneva, 27 July 1929:

Prisoners of war are in the power of the hostile Government, but not of the individuals or formation which captured them. They shall at all times be humanely treated and protected, particularly against acts of violence, from insults and from public curiosity. Measures of reprisals against them are forbidden.... As soon as possible after their capture, prisoners of war shall be evacuated to depots sufficiently removed from the fighting zone for them to be out of danger.

But Peiper's rules for handling captured American GIs came from a higher legal authority, the highest: his Fuhrer.

The frightened American prisoners of war were soon taken to a field near Malmedy where they joined



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other GIs captured earlier that day. Some 120 American POWs, shivering from the freezing temperature, stood and waited in the snow. Many prisoners had their hands on their helmets, a posture signaling surrender. Several GIs smoked cigarettes. Notwithstanding their awareness of international treaties protecting them from ill treatment by the Germans, the GIs were certainly still worried about what was to become of them. Who wouldn't? Personal thoughts no doubt came to mind — the newborn child whom a GI hasn't yet met, Mom, the anticipated reunion with one's wife, family, or sweetheart.

The captured soldiers, focusing on the Waffen-SS pointing their machine guns in their direction, couldn't help but also notice the Waffen-SS panzers on the move. The POWs also saw a tank and truck approach and come to a halt nearby. And then the sound of automatic gunfire popped through the noise emanating from the steady grinding of Peiper's panzers' tracks. The order had been given, "Macht Alle Kaput" — finish off everyone. Americans fell onto the snow-covered frozen ground. It did not take long for the GIs to understand what was happening. Panic ensued. POWs ran in all directions. An SS massacre was underway on the killing field at Malmedy. Those wounded Americans still breathing as they lay on the blood-reddened snow got a bullet in the head from the Luger of a Waffen-SS "soldier." No one was intended to survive the carnage to reveal what occurred at the crossroads at Baugnez.

But some GIs did make it to nearby woods, and they eventually got back to the American lines. The soldiers divulged what happened on the field at Malmedy. Stories also emerged about another massacre around Malmedy, where several GIs found momentary safety in a café near the crossroads — safe until Peiper's "Blow Torch Brigade" torched the café and shot the Americans fleeing from the flames.

The GIs who heard about what happened to their comrades at Malmedy were angry, very angry. The Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Europe, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, was furious at yet another atrocity committed against American GIs, this time by the Waffen-SS 6th Panzer Army at Malmedy. When he became aware of what the 12th SS did, General Eisenhower declared, "I think that the American Army as a unit will handle the 12th SS, every man they can get a hold of. They are the men that killed our people in cold blood.... We hate everybody that ever wore a 12th SS uniform." Reprisals against the Waffen-SS were reported. Word got back to the states too. Americans insisted on payback for the SS atrocities committed against their unarmed sons.

It took a couple of weeks for the American military to gain control of the crossroads at Baugnez. Then the U.S. forces saw firsthand the scene that the survivors of the massacre had described to them about the killing field at Malmedy. Scores of American soldiers, who lay buried under newly fallen snow, were discovered. The closeness of the proximity of the POWs to each other indicated that they had been gathered into a small area and then shot. The bodies were removed for formal identifications and post-mortem examinations. The medical examiners quickly noticed the gunshot wounds to the POWs' heads, indicating that many had been shot at very close range. More murdered GIs were recovered nearby several days later. The count of dead GIs was 362, 84 of them at the Baugnez crossroads in Malmedy. One hundred and eleven Belgian civilians were also slaughtered. The bloody track along the Germans' path was believed to have been left by Peiper's regiment.

Trial and Turbulence

At war's end American forces swept up Waffen-SS on the run and gathered others from groups of German prisoners held in American POW camps who were believed to have participated in the Malmedy massacre and other atrocities. Peiper and 1,000 comrades from various SS divisions were collared. The SS were soon brought before a military tribunal in a case entitled *United States v. Valentin Bersin, et al., Case No. 6-24*, set up at the World War II concentration camp in Dachau, Germany. (Bersin was the



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first of the 74 Malmedy massacre defendants, who were listed in alphabetical order.) The trial began on May 12, 1946.

The uniforms that the German POW defendants wore during the trial were not adorned with the double-bolt SS insignia and the medals displayed when the SS terrorized and slaughtered millions. Hanging over the shirts of their uniforms this time was a numbered card that dangled from a chain around their necks, the purpose of which was to identify the numerous SS defendants in the dock. What an irony that members of the SS, whose comrades in the SS Totenkopfverbände slaughtered millions of Jews (and others) with identification numbers tattooed onto their arms, were displaying identification numbers as well. Among the accused were #11 a/k/a SS-General Josef “Sepp” Dietrich and #42 a/k/a SS-Standartenführer Joachim Peiper.

SS-General Dietrich was charged with ordering his men to ignore the rules of war dealing with captured enemy prisoners in violation of the Geneva Convention and to shoot American prisoners of war. SS-Stand-artenführer Peiper was indicted for ordering his units not to take any prisoners. He, however, was never actually charged with personally killing an American POW at Malmedy.

Peiper took the stand in his own defense, offering to take responsibility for his men in exchange for their release. He pled not guilty to any connection with the crimes charged and specifically denied commanding his men to kill American POWs. Peiper also asserted that any testimony his men may have given implicating him in the murders of unarmed American POWs was obtained under torture, though no physical torture by Americans was ever confirmed. He also insisted that the Belgian civilians his men were charged with slaughtering were partisan combatants. Peiper surprisingly got some support from an American officer, Major Harold McCown. McCown testified that he was treated well by the Waffen-SS Colonel, after being taken prisoner at La Gleize, another massacre location in the Malmedy area cited in the indictment, and that he had no knowledge of any massacres committed by Peiper’s unit at La Gleize. The Major added that Peiper assured him that no GIs would be shot.

Defenders of the SS in the docks also pointed their fingers at Jewish interrogators, prosecutors, and a military judge, accusing the Jews of performing their duties as if they had a personal score to settle with the Waffen-SS. As to the specific charge that the Waffen-SS defendants murdered American POWs, several defendants testified that the American GIs were shot while escaping. Other GIs, defendants asserted, were killed after they recovered weapons and engaged the SS in a firefight.

Survivors of the massacre also pointed their fingers — but at those in the docks who, they charged, participated at the killing fields. The witnesses further explained how SS men laughed as they emptied their Lugers into the heads of wounded American POWs.

Although there were doubts as to whether Peiper actually ordered his men to kill American POWs, Peiper was found guilty in the two-month trial and he, along with 42 SS comrades, received the death sentence. The hangman, though, never saw them dancing at the end of his rope. Their sentences were commuted to life in prison, mostly for political reasons. There were 22 life sentences, among them SS-General Dietrich, who also had a sentence of death hanging over his head after a trial in absentia by the Soviets. Others received lesser prison time.

Only months following the collapse of what was supposed to be a thousand-years Reich, Germans were increasingly growing annoyed with the American occupation and American judgment of them. Former Nazis who had worked their way back into power in postwar Germany vigorously objected to any verdicts and sentences, as did the church in Germany. And they and their arguments received support



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from powerful Americans too. U.S. Congressmen in German-American districts, who with their constituents were sympathetic to the plight of the German POWs, claimed that they were concerned about the manner in which the trials were run, asserting that the SS POWs were not given a fair trial. The U.S. Senate looked into the allegations too. There was even talk that a case would get to the U.S. Supreme Court for review. A special commission was appointed to look into the controversial trial.

“Almost forgotten in the hubbub over the alleged ill-treatment of the S.S. officers was the indisputable evidence that at least seventy-one unarmed U.S. war prisoners were slain in cold blood on a snowy field near Malmedy on December 17, 1944, on the orders — or incitement — of several S.S. officers,” concluded World War II chronicler William L. Shirer in his book *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. It was all bad PR for America at a time when Germany’s cooperation was critical during the escalating geo-political post-war realities involving the United States and the Soviets.

Emboldened by the help they received from some Americans, Germans intensified their pressure on the United States to put an end to the war crimes trials and release those already convicted from prison. Soon, the defendants’ sentences were commuted. By 1956, all the prisoners in Landsberg prison convicted of war crimes in connection with the Malmedy massacre were released. Peiper was the last to be paroled, after spending 11 ½ years in prison. Peiper relocated to France. On July 14, 1976, Bastille Day, his house was firebombed with Molotov cocktails. Peiper never got to safety. Ironically, he died there in flames similar to the fire his men set when they torched the café at the crossroads at Baugnez and shot American GIs fleeing for safety. No one was ever apprehended for the firebombing, but it is believed that those who brought their form of justice to Peiper were former members of the French resistance.

Returning home after his imprisonment, Herr Dietrich soon became active with his former SS associates at the HIAG — *Hilfsgemeinschaft auf Gegenseitigkeit der Angehorigen der ehemaligen Waffen-SS* — an organization founded in the early 1950s to assist former SS “soldiers” with legal assistance and in obtaining pensions that were denied to them by the German government because of their notorious activities during the war. Dietrich succumbed to a heart attack in 1966. He outlived, at 74 years of age, by more than a half century the young American GIs whom the SS General was convicted for complicity in their murders.

Despite the hero’s send off given to former SS General Josef “Sepp” Dietrich by his SS comrades and others, there was no doubt about the role the Waffen-SS had in the massacres of Allied POWs. Nor was this their only atrocity, at least according to chief American prosecutor at the Nuremberg Trials, Telford Taylor. In his book *The Anatomy of the Nuremberg Trials*, Taylor wrote: “All the major military atrocities in Western Europe were committed by Waffen-SS — for further example, the Malmedy massacre of American troops in Belgium and the shooting of sixty-four British and American troops by the Waffen-SS Hitlerjugend Division.”

A Precarious Postwar Dilemma

One could understand the logic of Americans in and out of politics who strongly believed that the United States would not get the cooperation of the Germans during the new war, the escalating Cold War with the Soviets, if the unpopular war-crimes trials, according to Germans, were not forever put to a close with convicted Waffen-SS and other Germans released from prison.

However, as *Judgment at Nuremberg* screenwriter Abby Mann reminded all concerning such logic involving the release of war criminals for political expediency: “It is logical in view of the times in which



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we live. But to be logical is not to be right. And nothing on God's earth could make it right."

Photo: Josef "Sepp" Dietrich during the trial



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