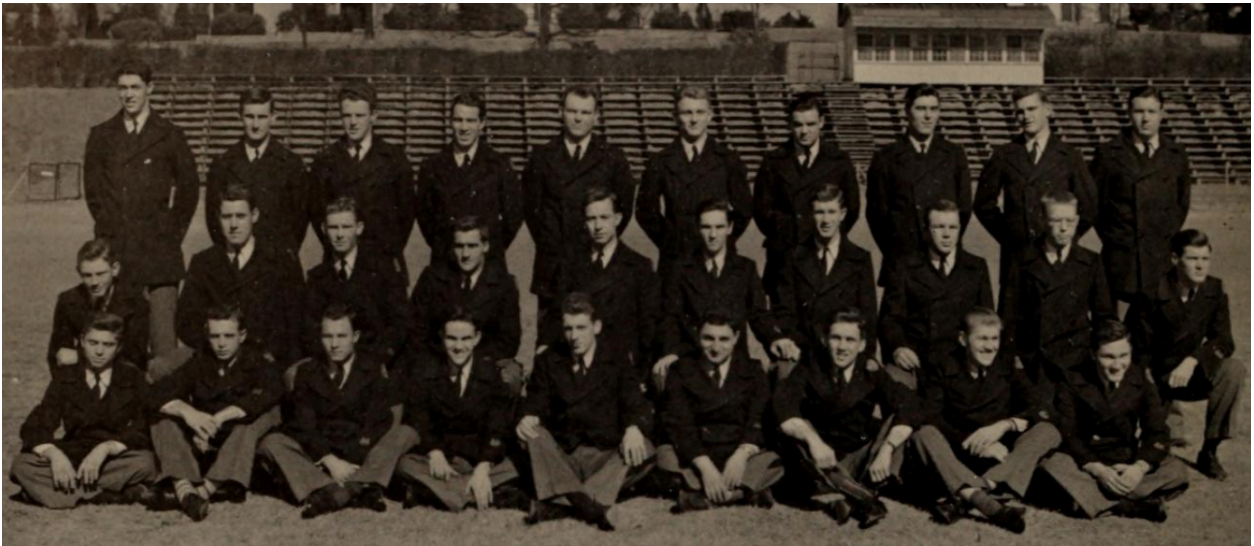


## Christmas in Combat

It was Christmas Eve, a night when he should have been snug inside his home with his wife Ileen, trimming a tree and perhaps wrapping that last surprise gift. Instead, Staff Sergeant Robert Cone Elliott of the 289<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment was marching along snowy Belgian roads to prepare to counterattack the Germans. It was 1944 and Elliott, a member of Clemson's Class of 1945, was smack in the middle of the Battle of the Bulge.

Elliott, a general sciences major, came to Clemson from Columbia in the fall of 1941. He was a member of that year's Tiger Cub, or freshman, football team. The Cubs claimed the unofficial state title for freshman teams by thumping Furman 33-0, beating the Citadel 19-6, and the Gamecocks 19-7. The outbreak of war on December 7 changed the plans of many of the young men at Clemson. Elliott returned home to Columbia and went into the grocery business.



*Robert Elliott, front row, far left, and his 1941 freshman football teammates.*

In March 1943, Elliott reported to Fort Jackson and was inducted into the Army. He was ordered to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri and then to Camp Breckenridge, Kentucky for additional training. In 1944, he was assigned to the 289<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment of the 75<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. The division sailed for England on October 22 and landed in France on December 13. Three days later, the Germans launched their great winter counteroffensive.

Though untested, the 75<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division was available and was rushed into defensive positions along the north shoulder of the bulge the Germans had pushed into Allied lines. On Christmas Day, Staff Sergeant Elliott's 289<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment was ordered to block the main

east-west highway between Grandmenil and Erezee. Soon the Germans tested the fresh American troops. With a captured Sherman tank leading the column and masking the eight Panther tanks that followed, the Germans attempted to run the 289<sup>th</sup>'s roadblock. The Sherman got through, but in the melee that followed, a 289<sup>th</sup> bazooka gunner disabled a Panther tank at a narrow spot where the highway ran along the side of a cliff. The other German tanks were forced to retreat to Grandmenil.

By nightfall on December 26, a task force from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Division reinforced by infantry from the 289<sup>th</sup> recaptured Grandmenil. The Germans' strategic advance had been checked and their initiative lost.

On January 19, as the 75<sup>th</sup> was fighting in the vicinity of Vielsalm, Staff Sergeant Elliott was killed in action. The Battle of the Bulge would continue for another week until Allied counterattacks finally restored the battle line to the Roer River. The battle was the largest and costliest combat of World War II for American forces with more than 19,000 Americans killed. It was the last offensive of the war for Germany's Thousand Year Reich, which would last less than four more months.

Staff Sergeant Robert Cone Elliott was awarded the Purple Heart, Bronze Star Medal, Infantryman Badge, Good Conduct Medal, American Campaign Medal, European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal with two bronze service stars, and WWII Victory Medal. He was survived by his wife, his mother, two sisters, and four brothers. In May 1949, Elliott's remains were returned to Columbia where he was reinterred in the Elmwood Memorial Gardens.



See also *A Time For Trumpets: The Untold Story of the Battle of the Bulge* by Charles B. MacDonald, 1985.