

The Cellar

Things seemed to be improving for Second Lieutenant George Albert Hendley and the soldiers of the 119th Infantry Regiment. After an exhausting drive across France and into Belgium, the regiment had advanced into Germany, clearing the west side of the Roer River. Now, in early December, the regiment was welcoming replacement troops and exchanging battle-weary equipment for new. Sure, it was cold, but the approach of Christmas, even in a combat zone, lightened the moods of the men. Then, everything changed. On December 17, 1944, the 119th was alerted for movement. The Germans had attacked in mass through the Ardennes Forest and were pressing westward, attempting to split the seam between US First and Ninth Armies and drive through to Liege, Belgium. The 119th was sent to plug the gap and halt the German advance until the bulge in the Allied lines could be wiped out.



George Hendley was a textile engineering major from Spartanburg and a member of the Clemson College Class of 1945. Assigned to G Company, 2nd Battalion, 1st Regiment of the Cadet Brigade, Hendley attended Clemson for only one year. In October 1942, Hendley volunteered for active duty. He was placed into the enlisted reserves at Wofford College and called to active duty in April 1943. Hendley reported to Fort Jackson and was sent to Camp Croft outside of his hometown for basic training. He was then ordered to Fort Benning, Georgia for officers candidate school. He was commissioned in February 1944. After stops at Camp Fanning, Texas and Camp Van Doren, Mississippi, Hendley shipped overseas in July.

Allied commanders responded quickly and decisively to the Germans' winter offensive, moving units from north and south of the bulge to reinforce its shoulders and prepare for counterattacks. Hendley's 119th regiment was ordered to the vicinity of Stoumont, Belgium to block the Germans' main advance led by *Kampfgruppe* Peiper, a task force named for its commander, Lieutenant Colonel Joachim Peiper. Peiper's command was attempting to pierce Allied lines and reach its only means of resupply, American fuel and supply depots in Belgium.

Major Hal McCown was the commanding officer of the 3rd Battalion of the 119th. By December 19, McCown's battalion was in defensive positions around Stoumont, along the main road to La Gleize, the route Peiper needed to control in order to advance and keep the German offensive on its precarious timetable. The two sides continued to patrol and probe along disorganized and confused forward positions as the temperatures remained below freezing and snows fell over the already white landscape.

On December 21, McCown had inspected his front-line positions and was returning to his command post when he, his radio operator, and his orderly were captured by a German patrol that had infiltrated the lines. McCown was taken to the Germans' headquarters where he was briefly interrogated by Peiper. Refusing to provide any information, McCown was shortly escorted to a cellar where he was held with four American lieutenants from the 119th, one of whom was Hendley.

McCown was impressed by the youth, discipline, and moral of the Germans whom he noted were well equipped and supplied, except for food. At 2300 hours, McCown was removed from the cellar and returned to Peiper's

presence. For the next six hours, the two officers conversed, with Peiper defending Nazism and touting the secret weapons which he claimed would shortly turn the war in Germany's favor. Having heard of the massacre of American prisoners-of-war by Peiper's troops at Malmedy, McCown pressed the German commander for an assurance that he and his fellow prisoners would not be mistreated. "I give you my word," Peiper replied. McCown noted that "at no time were the prisoners of this organization mistreated. Food was scarce but it was nearly as good as that used by the Germans themselves. The American prisoners were always given cellar space to protect them from the exceedingly heavy American artillery barrages."

With German mobility limited by their fast-dwindling fuel supplies, US artillery was firing salvo after salvo into La Gleize. Following his all-night session with Peiper, McCown was taken back to the cellar where Hendley and the other lieutenants remained. "All that day," McCown later wrote, "American artillery pounded the town incessantly." The five German guards often sought refuge from the bombardment by joining their captives in the cellar.

On the afternoon of December 22, an American artillery shell scored a direct hit on the cellar, throwing one of the German guards halfway across the room and knocking a 2.5 meter hole in the wall. "Lieutenant Hendley and Lieutenant Youmans of my Regiment helped pull the German out from under the rubble and got him on the floor of the undamaged part of the cellar. Within a few minutes another shell landed a few feet outside the hole in the cellar wall and shrapnel and stone flew through the room. Lieutenant George Hendley was killed instantly and three Germans were wounded," one of whom subsequently died.

McCown would escape from the Germans on December 23 as, now out of fuel, they attempted to sneak through the snowy woods and back toward the east. McCown would later testify at Peiper's war crimes trial, vouching for the good treatment his captor had afforded to him and his men. Peiper would be sentenced to death, have his sentence commuted to life, and eventually be released after serving eleven years.

George Hendley was survived by his parents, a sister, and a brother. His remains were returned to Spartanburg after the war and buried at the West Oakwood Cemetery.

