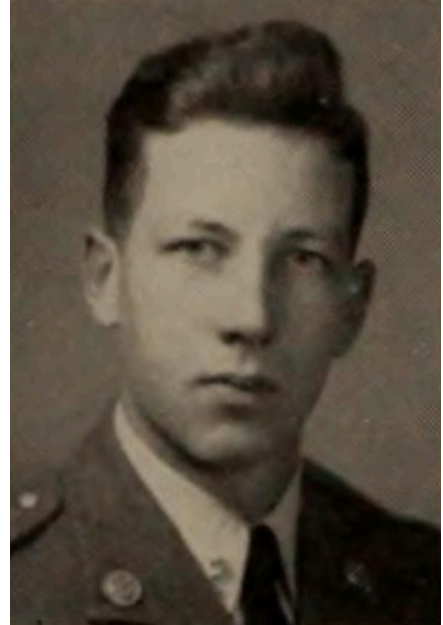


## Strafed

The 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division was an inexperienced bunch. The division had arrived in France only on December 6, 1944. It moved to the front on December 10, taking up positions on a 21-mile-long sector opposite what were believed to be low quality German troops. In the early hours of Saturday, December 16, that illusion was shattered when the Germans launched their last great offensive of World War II. The main effort of the German attack targeted the unbloodied, thinly spread 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, among whose soldiers was Corporal Horace Gordon Meisner, Jr. a member of Clemson's Class of 1945.

Meisner was a mechanical engineering major from Savannah, Georgia. He was assigned to Company C, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment in the Cadet Brigade and was a member of the Savannah-Clemson Club. With the end of the 1942-1943 academic year, Meisner entered the Army.



Meisner was assigned to the 81<sup>st</sup> Engineer Combat Battalion, which was a unit of the 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. After training in the States, the 106<sup>th</sup> sailed for England, arriving in mid-November 1944. When it finally moved into the frontlines west of the Ardennes Forest, the division covered an area four times wider than Army doctrine stipulated.

Two of the 106<sup>th</sup>'s regiments were positioned forward. Each was supported by a company from Meisner's 81<sup>st</sup> Engineer Battalion. On the morning of December 16, these two regiments and their supporting engineers were quickly surrounded and cut off. "The sheer weight of German numbers could not be denied," wrote historian Stephen Ambrose. "Isolated American groups continued to fight, but without ammunition resupply they couldn't do much." The two forward regiments of the 106<sup>th</sup> were forced to surrender, the largest mass surrender of the war against Germany.

The captured GIs were without weapons, food, or water, and many were without overcoats and overshoes despite the swirling snow and frigid temperatures. They were marched sixty miles to the east, eating snow to avoid dehydration. Once they reached German railheads, they were crammed into box cars used by the Germans to transport horses and other draft animals to the front. In many of the cars, the Americans were packed so tightly that all they could do was stand, which was preferable to sitting on the manure-covered floor. Sanitation was limited to a metal bucket which soon overflowed. The combination of below-freezing temperatures, inadequate sanitation, and insufficient food and clean water led to outbreaks of dysentery. And there were other dangers as well.

When the dismal winter weather began to clear on Christmas Eve, Allied air power rejoined the battle. Enemy trains became prime targets for the P-47 Thunderbolt fighters attempting to disrupt the movement of German troops and supplies.

Staff Sergeant John Collins was one of the prisoners from the 81<sup>st</sup> Engineers. In a journal entry on January 3, 1945, he wrote that he was in the same train car as Corporal Meisner. “I feed Meisner snow—I know we should not use the snow but it’s either that or die of dehydration and thirst.” By this time, Meisner was “very sick,” but there was no medicine or care available. The following day, the Germans provided their prisoners with “some type of barley watered down soup. They called it coffee. I gave Meisner part of mine. It perked him up.”

On January 7, the group of Americans arrived at a prisoner of war camp at Muhlberg. By this point, Collins had lost contact with Meisner, who had been wounded in the leg when Allied aircraft strafed his train. “I have looked for Meisner,” Collins wrote on January 8, “but so far to no avail.”

Collins would never see Meisner again. The Germans later reported that Meisner reached the camp, but he succumbed to his wounds on February 23.

Corporal Horace Gordon Meisner, Jr. was survived by his parents and his sister, whose husband was then serving in Germany. He is memorialized at the Henri-Chapelle American Cemetery in Belgium.



See also *Citizen Soldiers: The U.S. Army From the Normandy Beaches to the Bulge to the Surrender of Germany, June 7, 1944 – May 7, 1945*, by Stephen Ambrose, 1997; and *A Time for Trumpets: The Untold Story of the Battle of the Bulge*, by Charles B. MacDonald, 1985.