

'Nuts!' to the Nazis: The Ghosts of Christmas and of War

by [Jeff Plude](#) (December 2020)



Battle of the Bulge, Robert N. Blair, 1945

It was a gray day in September, the kind of afternoon in which Coach Luciano could be seen at the top of the bleachers yelling instructions, his gruff voice booming over the fields to his cross country runners as they raced around the perimeter of the high school. The funeral director, a

childhood friend of mine, was standing under the canopy with the family, which included Coach Luce's four children and his grandchildren, saying a few more words about him before he was lowered into the ground.

A good-sized crowd had followed Coach Luce over to the cemetery from the church. The coffin had been transported the couple of miles by a school bus. Coach Luce "lay in state" in the high school gym for a couple of days as old players and students marched by one last time to say thank you and goodbye. It was a strange hearse, but also fitting and poignant: he'd spent thirty-five of his ninety-one years on earth rumbling along in this yellow behemoth of youth through the villages and towns and countryside of upstate New York to and from basketball and football games, track and cross country meets.

In fact he himself was a star runner, the eldest of five of Italian-American parents who lived in a poor section of town. After high school Anthony A. Luciano went to Seton Hall, where he set a world record as part of a two-mile relay team that stood for sixteen years. But he left college for the Marine Corps in 1943, nearly a year after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. He served in the Pacific and after more than three years was discharged as a first lieutenant. I learned about his military service in his obituary—I never heard him or anybody else in town ever mention it. After the war he completed his undergraduate and graduate degrees, returned to his hometown, got married and started a family, became a renowned and beloved coach and athletic director, and deservedly won many honors and awards. He was the kind of coach a boy who plays sports longs to have and never forgets.

One of Coach Luce's kid brothers, however, was not nearly as blessed, at least not in worldly terms.

Coach Luce never said anything about him either. William C. Luciano (most likely Bill or Billy to his family

and friends) didn't go to college, since he would've been a senior in high school in 1942, the first full year the U.S. was at war with not only Japan but with Germany and Italy too. Instead he became a private first class in the Army and fought the Nazis in or on the fringes of the rugged Ardennes forest, a battleground from which he never returned home alive. He was killed in the Battle of the Bulge on Christmas Day 1944. He was only twenty.

So Coach Luce outlived his kid brother Bill by almost seven decades.

Every Christmas Day from then on must have been darkened to a greater or lesser degree for Coach Luce, not to mention his parents, Donato and Raffaella, as they remembered the kid brother and the young son killed on the same day as when everybody else was celebrating the birth of Jesus, the Prince of Peace. Along with the Christmas cheer there must have flowed plenty of tears.

For the U.S. the Battle of the Bulge is the most bloody, brutal campaign of the war. For five weeks in the depths of winter, front-line soldiers fought for their lives in the woods, in knee-deep snow and frigid temperatures, the coldest in the Ardennes in memory. The fog was so thick early on that American planes were grounded and couldn't drop food, medicine, and ammo into the besieged Bastogne (General George Patton, "Old Blood and Guts," commissioned a prayer from an Army chaplain to stop the continual rain). In a last-ditch effort the Third Reich had launched a major counteroffensive to penetrate the enemy line along its western border, creating a bulge in it about fifty miles wide. The small Belgian town was a major objective because it was a crossroads of main traffic routes, which led to Antwerp and the Atlantic coast. Over 20,000 American troops were surprised, outnumbered, overwhelmed. Hitler's plan nearly worked. Nearly four weeks after Bastogne was freed the Bulge was flattened, and four months later so were the Nazis and their fascist fantasies.

It reminds me of two other famous battles.

On one hand it was a turning point in the war, on par, I think, with the Battle of Saratoga (which Bill Luciano was probably more than familiar with, since he grew up only twenty miles from the national historic site and because American history was still taught in the public schools back then). The British also tried to split their enemy's forces, as did the Nazis with the Bulge, and failed miserably. The surrendering commander, "Gentleman Johnny" Burgoyne, was smug—he was a playwright and believed to be the author of a farce earlier in the war that mocked George Washington as a buffoon. What's past is indeed prologue; there was more to Washington than the British bothered to see.

I also think of the Battle of Trenton when Washington crossed the Delaware on Christmas night to attack the Hessians by surprise at dawn. December 26 was also the day a century and a half later that the siege of Bastogne was broken. Some might say Washington's plan—leading 2,400 troops (most of whom couldn't swim) along with horses and artillery on barge-like boats across a river nearly three football fields wide and in the middle of the night with snow blowing in their faces—was less daring than it was reckless.

Perhaps the same could be said about the general in command of Bastogne during the Bulge, Anthony McAuliffe.

Mercy Otis Warren, in her history of the American Revolution, of which she knew many of the principals, wrote that Washington's victory at "so unexpected a moment" produced equally unexpected dividends: "From the state of mind bordering on despair, courage was invigorated, every countenance brightened." McAuliffe's bold stand did the same thing. "The Battered Bastards of Bastogne," surrounded and up against it, were front page news for a week, giving the troops and the homefront the boost they desperately needed to defeat the Nazis once and for all.

On December 22 McAuliffe received a letter from Heinrich Freiherr von Lüttwitz, the Nazi general in charge of the siege. By that time several thousand American troops (the most well known being the "Band of Brothers" company from the 101st Airborne Division) had been cut off from the rest of the U.S. Army for three days. The message was only a couple of hundred words but long on condescension:

To the U.S.A. Commander of the encircled town of Bastogne.

The fortune of war is changing. This time the U.S.A. forces in and near Bastogne have been encircled by strong German armored units. More German armored units have crossed the river Our near Ortheuville, have taken Marche and reached St. Hubert by passing through Hompre-Sibret-Tillet. Libramont is in German hands...

It goes on to say that unless McAuliffe agrees to an "honorable surrender," the Nazis would "annihilate" his men. After his ultimatum the Nazi general can't resist a final taunt. But instead he ends up unwittingly mocking himself and his führer in a bureaucratic deadpan straight out of Kafka:

All the serious civilian losses caused by this artillery fire would not correspond with the well known American humanity.

—The German Commander.

The Nazis may have been short on fuel, but they had an ample supply of hubris. And unlike the Americans they were unencumbered by such an Achilles heel as "humanity."

After McAuliffe read the letter he said: "Us surrender? Aw, nuts!"

Such a quaint four-letter expletive was apparently typical of the brigadier general, who was said not to swear. Though perhaps such verbal purity was not nearly as uncommon

in civilian life back then as it is now, I suspect that at the time it was almost unheard of in the military. Even Patton, at the opposite end of the profanity scale, later expressed admiration for McAuliffe's wholesome rebuke. McAuliffe turned out to be in good American company—the very best, in fact. Washington also hated foul language, and not just around ladies. "His swearing was so infrequent," writes Ron Chernow in *Washington: A Life*, "that people commented on it when it happened."

As McAuliffe and his staff discussed what he should say in response, one of them suggested that the general's first reaction was best. He followed proper military etiquette, but overall the effect, I think, was a parody of Nazi bravado:

To the German commander:

NUTS!

—The American Commander

When the two Nazi officers waiting outside McAuliffe's office received his answer, they didn't know what to make of it. Was it a yes or a no? It must've caused a psychological flinch of sorts.

Like any resourceful commander worth his salt, McAuliffe wasted no time in making the most of his quirky but inspired defiance. He wielded it like a battle cry. Distributing a letter on Christmas Eve to his troops with the heading "Merry Christmas" he begins: "What's Merry about all this, you ask?" He goes on to say that they've gamely held the town while being pummeled by German artillery, mortar, and infantry attacks from every direction, while the enemy's "radios blared our doom." After reprinting verbatim the letter to give up or else—"impudent arrogance," McAuliffe calls it—and his own curt reply, he closes by answering the question

he started with:

We are giving our country and our loved ones at home a worthy Christmas present and being privileged to take part in this gallant feat of arms are truly making for ourselves a Merry Christmas.

Not exactly a gift you can wrap up and put under the tree. But a worthy one indeed!

By Christmas Day the weather had cleared up as Patton's Third Army raced toward Bastogne, which it reached the next afternoon to lift the siege. Bill Luciano was part of Patton's Third Army too, but so far as I can tell he was not part of that contingent. He fell in action the day before.

Coincidentally my father was also part of Patton's Third Army and also served in the Ardennes. But he didn't arrive until May 1, 1945. It was the last week of the war in Europe, seven months to the day after he turned eighteen. Not that he told me any of this—I didn't find out till I received his military papers many years after he died—because he wouldn't talk about it.

Except once.

I was about eleven, and I loved history. I knew my father was in the Army from 1944-46, but that was about it. I wanted to know what his part in the war had been. So one night he seemed in one of his good moods and I sidled up to him and started to ask him about it. And he started to tell me! Though my memory of that interview is understandably vague (having no notebook much less voice recorder). First he said he was on the front lines for a couple of weeks. Then he said that he was assigned to drive prisoners of war on these trucks that were sort of open in the back. There was a manned machine gun on the roof of the truck. They went through small towns and a few of the prisoners would try to escape, or civilians would run up to the truck. His nerves were soon shot, so he was

transferred. His next job was driving dead bodies. (Maybe they had him driving trucks because he drove one in his father's heating oil business). He said he had to park a mile outside whatever town he stayed at for the night because the smell was so bad. He taught me to count to five in German and to say "*Kommen sie hier!*" Then I moved in for the journalistic kill-too soon, as it turned out. I asked him flatly: "Did you kill anybody?" The interview was suddenly over. "That's enough," he said.

But three decades later, in 2001, my wife and I visited the Ardennes one afternoon during a trip to Europe. It was just after Thanksgiving and we drove the nearly hundred miles from Brussels through the Belgian countryside to Bastogne, past the fields and barbed-wire fences and farms, and then we entered the forest's winding roads and the towering dense pines. It was raining lightly and soon the woods would be covered with snow just like in 1944, though most likely nowhere as deep—we were three weeks shy of the time of year when the Bulge erupted.

I remembered seeing black-and-white photos of American soldiers in their ice-lined foxholes, sometimes draped in white sheets for camouflage. They were starved for sleep as much as food, their feet soaked and freezing and frostbitten, some even bootless. Major Dick Winters, the leader of Easy Company, says in his memoir, *Beyond Band of Brothers*, that trench foot created as many casualties as gunfire and shrapnel did. In *Band of Brothers*, the 1992 book by Stephen Ambrose that won the Pulitzer and led to the HBO miniseries the same year of our trip, an intelligence officer graphically described the bitter cold:

Riding through the Ardennes, I wore woolen underwear, a woolen uniform, armored force combat overalls, a sweater, an armored force field jacket with elastic cuffs, a muffler, a heavy lined trenchcoat, two pairs of heavy woolen socks, and combat boots with galoshes over them—and

I cannot remember ever being warm.

The soldiers in the 101st Airborne, who had been rushed into action from reserve duty, did not even have long underwear, let alone the many other cushy layers described by the colonel. That was gear that grunts could only dream about.

We visited a Battle of the Bulge museum outside of town. On the grounds nearby was a large monument, tall columns that radiated from an inner circle like spokes and were joined at the top, along which were inscribed the names of the U.S. states. It was moving. When we told the owner of the inn we were staying in that we were driving out there because my father was in the Bulge (I thought at the time that he had been, given when he was drafted, but I didn't ask him about it specifically during our single interview because I didn't know about it then), he thanked me for him for helping to save his country. The Belgians, who also suffered greatly at the hands of the Nazis, had never forgotten.

Since we weren't far from Luxembourg we decided to drive there and visit another World War II museum. As we cruised along the border near southwest Germany we saw castles here and there on the hillsides in the distance. Luxembourg, I think, is where Private First Class Bill Luciano may have died. A small marker on his grave says he served in Company G, 2nd Infantry Regiment, 5th Division. He was one of nearly 20,000 Americans who perished in the Bulge.

I wonder how much Coach Luce thought about Bill over the years. Perhaps a clue to the answer lies with Major Winters. In his memoir he quotes a young Englishman who wrote to him after seeing a documentary about Easy Company.

What is my attachment to men such as yourself, whom I have never met?... Perhaps (in part), fascination at how you and your comrades were able to return to relative normality after the war, with the ghosts of the dead watching what

you made of the life you were denied?

I learned a bit about this aspect when I was a general assignment newspaper reporter in my early twenties. I was assigned to cover an ongoing fundraising campaign by a chapter of the Vietnam Veterans of America to erect a local version of the national memorial in Washington to honor the soldiers of that war. I interviewed many of them about not only their time in the war, but the often overlooked and insidious war that came later—the inner war, the fallout, after they came home.

The ghosts of Christmas past and future, and the ghosts of war. They are superhuman phantoms that form an axis of power with endless reinforcements. Now I think I know why Coach Luce named his eldest son William.

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Jeff Plude, a former daily newspaper reporter and editor, is a freelance writer and editor. He lives near Albany, New York.

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