

The Longest Winter

The Battle of the Bulge and the Epic Story of World War II's Most Decorated Platoon

Alex Kershaw

For Discussion

1. What characteristics did the men of the 394th Regiment's I&R platoon have in common? What qualities enabled them to work together as an exceptional team?
2. Despite his age, why do you think twenty-year-old Lieutenant Bouck was able to command the I&R platoon in combat? Which of Bouck's leadership qualities were shared by other officers of the 394th Regiment and the 99th Division?
3. Writing of the platoon's last days in Camp Maxey, Kershaw notes that "very few men accepted last-minute offers of transfers to noncombat units: already their squads and platoons had become surrogate families . . ." (p. 23) In what ways did the 394th's I&R platoon serve as a surrogate family for the eighteen men in its two reconnaissance squads? What specific functions of family life, support, and dynamics did the platoon provide?
4. To what extent does our knowledge of the platoon and its individual members—and of other combatants, on both sides—enhance our understanding and appreciation of what they experienced and accomplished, and of the severity of the Battle of the Bulge overall?
5. Kershaw writes that Private Clifford Fansher, the platoon's first replacement, "was one of hundreds of thousands of young Americans forced to endure the abominable replacement system that winter . . ." (p. 50) What made that system so abominable? Can you think of any alternative systems that would have better served the individual replacements as well as the units to which they were assigned?
6. How did the men of the platoon cope with the dangers, anxieties, and fears associated with their work, their "lethal sport"?
7. Kershaw notes that "Allied intelligence had spectacularly failed to detect the scale of the buildup" of German troops and armor in preparation for the Ardennes offensive. (p. 63) Why was that so? What were the consequences of that failure?
8. How would you characterize and judge the actions of key officers and enlisted men on both sides of the front lines during the Battle of the Bulge? How did specific decisions and actions benefit or undermine the fortunes of the two sides?

9. When Lieutenant Bouck requested artillery support on December 16, 1944, as more and more Germans entered Lanzerath, none was forthcoming. Kershaw writes: “He and his men were outside of the 99th Division boundary, outside their own regimental boundary, and outside of the V Corps boundary. Artillery support was by now desperately needed all along the Ghost Front, and it was directed first to assigned areas within boundaries.” (p. 91) Given the position of Bouck’s eighteen-man platoon and his reports to headquarters regarding the German advance, why couldn’t artillery be directed in the platoon’s support?

10. On December 16, 1944, Bouck and his platoon were ordered to “hold at all costs.” (p. 91) How justified might Private Joseph McConnell have been in thinking this a “stupid order” and in thinking that the platoon would just be sacrificed? What justification might senior officers have had in insisting that the platoon hold its position in the face of tremendously overwhelming opposition?

11. Kershaw describes in some detail several wounds and other results of battle with which most of us are not familiar—Louis Kalil’s and radioman James Fort’s injuries, for example. (pp. 96–97, 107) To what extent does Kershaw bring us to understand the details and results of all-out battle while keeping us from looking away?

12. What personal qualities and skills of Lieutenant Colonel Jochen Peiper might have proven admirable under other circumstances? To what extent were his behavior and objectives during the Battle of the Bulge different from those of similarly ranked and placed American officers?

13. How might we account for the atrocities committed by the German SS troopers under Peiper and others, beginning with the shooting of fifteen-year-old Johann Brodel in Lanzerath and the Malmedy massacre? How might those incidents have been prevented?

14. Writing about the POW train on Christmas 1944, Kershaw notes that “captivity was bonding the platoon members closer to each other than even the events of December 16 and the long months of training.” (p. 164) How did the various shared experiences of Bouck’s platoon contribute to their bonding? On the other hand, how might each of those experiences have shattered their camaraderie?

15. How did Lyle Bouck and the members of his platoon manage to survive imprisonment in the German stalags? What, besides luck, enabled Bouck and his men to survive the forced transport south from Hammelburg to Nuremberg and then to Stalag VIIA north of Munich? What methods and techniques did they adopt in order to keep going? To what extent was the relationship between Corporal Sam Jenkins and Corporal Aubrey McGehee, for example, different from or similar to the determination of platoon members to assist one another in their ordeals?

16. Kershaw writes that, upon his 1969 return to the hillside at Lanzerath, the forty-six-year-old Lyle Bouck “realized that perhaps one factor above all—their youth—had explained why he and his men had stood and held . . . Older men—fathers, wiser and more cautious adults—would surely have retreated as soon as the Germans appeared in such superior numbers.” (p. 275) What other factors do you think contributed to the platoon’s achievement on that hillside in December 1945?

17. Why did it take more than thirty years for the eighteen men of the 394th Regiment's I&R platoon to receive combat medals? What arguments might be made in support of their receiving medals of higher distinction?

18. If, as Kershaw contends, the Battle of the Bulge was the greatest and most important battle for American soldiers of World War II, why do you think it is not as well-known as the invasion of Normandy, the North African campaign, Iwo Jima, and other major battles? What evidence does Kershaw present to make this claim?

19. What is the single most important thing to remember about the Battle of the Bulge and the sacrifice made by so many?

About the Author

Alex Kershaw is the author of the widely acclaimed and best-selling books *The Bedford Boys* and *The Longest Winter*, and two biographies: **Jack London** and *Blood and Champagne: The Life and Times of Robert Capa*. He has been a journalist and screenwriter in Britain and now lives in Bennington, Vermont.