

# FORUM & FEATURES



## A Christmas Story

MAJOR GENERAL ALBERT H. SMITH, JR., USA (Retired)

Old soldiers like to tell war stories, especially to the officers and men who are now carrying the ball. I am no exception.

I joined the 16th Infantry Regiment in July 1940 and served continuously with it as part of the 1st Infantry Division in the United States, in North Africa, in Sicily, and in north-west Europe until my departure from Europe on VE-Day, 8 May 1945. I took part in eight campaigns and three invasions with the 16th Infantry, and these experiences instilled in me a pride in the unit and a love of the 1st Division that is with me today. To me, the 16th Infantry (of which I am now Honorary Colonel of the Regiment) and the "Big Red One" are the greatest.

In December 1965 the 16th Infantry was again overseas and again in active combat, this time in South Vietnam. I was at Carlisle Barracks as a member of the Institute of Advanced Studies and wanted to send some sort of special Christmas greeting to the soldiers in my old unit. I decided that maybe the story of the regiment's Christmas in 1944 might bring them a chuckle or a smile. This is the story.

The 16th Infantry was one of the two assault regiments to tackle

Omaha Beach in Normandy on 6 June 1944. Thereafter, without any real break, the regiment fought its way across France and into Germany. It tore its way through the Siegfried Line and then had a really tough time in late November and early December pushing through the Huertgen Forest. Word trickled down that we were finally to be pulled out of the line for a

much needed rest in the peace and quiet of Belgium.

The dream became a reality, and in mid-December the regiment moved back to a wonderful little Belgium city called Verviers. We all got a bath and clean clothes and were able to sleep on cots for a change. A few lucky ones managed to get leaves to Paris, Brussels, or England. The rest

*You Are Cordially Invited*

*To The  
Sixteenth Infantry Regiment's  
RAIN CHECK  
Officers' Party  
and Dance*

*Déc. 23, 1944  
Time 2000 hrs.*

*R. S. V. P.*

*Place Pathé-Nouveauté, Verviers  
Bob Kyle & Orchestre*

*Deewood 1*

Invitation to the Officers' Club dance. (The words "Rain Check," understandably, had to be added later.)



Front of Christmas card . . .



and inside.

of us happily settled down to enjoy ten to fifteen days of rest and rehabilitation.

Christmas parties were planned for all grades. In fact, the officers' dance, scheduled for 23 December, was the talk of the European theater — at least in that area near Verviers and Liege. We even sent out invitations. Off-duty nurses and Red Cross girls from 100 miles around promised to attend.

Then it happened! The Germans decided to make one last great attack in the west. This was the Battle of the Bulge.

To make a long story short, the 16th Infantry spent not two weeks, but two days in Verviers and then moved out on less than 12 hours notice to contain the advancing German forces.

Our situation during the period from just before Christmas until well into January was accurately portrayed by a Corporal Wilhelms of the 16th Infantry, who made our Christmas card that year. The accompanying photograph does not do justice to his wonderful coloring, but the drawing does show how we spent our Christmas holiday that year — in foxholes.

(During World War II, receiving mail boosted individual morale more than anything else — even more than a good hot meal. And to encourage that in-coming mail, soldiers wrote home even under the most difficult conditions. Recognizing that very

basic fact of life, the regiment's leaders rapidly arranged for this Christmas card to be printed and distributed to all the members of the regiment.)

What with the cold and the snow and all the rest, it was a tough period for the soldiers of the 16th Infantry. But, as always, the men of the 16th did a magnificent job and, in their sector, stopped the Germans in their tracks.

That's the end of the Christmas 1944 war story, except that it all turned out well eventually. The Allies won the war, and 1st Division soldiers stayed to guard the peace in Germany until the division came home in 1955.

In my 1965 message to the 16th Infantry, I added to this story the following:

*Heartfelt Seasons Greetings and the best of everything to you new members of the 16th Infantry who are waging today's war.*

*We know that you are doing a tremendous job over there, and that the 16th Infantry and the Big Red One will win the battles that will end the war in Vietnam — as they did in World Wars I and II. The alumni of those wars, I can assure you, take great pride in your every combat action. Our thoughts and prayers are with you.*

*God bless you.*

How was the story received in Viet-

nam? Lieutenant Colonel Bill Lober, who at the time commanded the 1st Battalion, 16th Infantry, wrote me on 13 December 1965 and said, in part:

*I can't begin to explain the deep impression your narrative of Christmas '44 had on us. Your letter was on my desk when we got in on the 9th after twelve days of jungle campaigning . . . to say the least, your letter and story perfectly proved the close tie between present members of an organization and those who filled the ranks in the past, a fact that we treasure highly.*

Although the 16th Infantry and the 1st Division are not involved in a shooting war this year, they are, nevertheless, serving as they have always served. And thousands of other soldiers are still standing guard around the world. So, to the soldiers of the 16th Infantry and to all those other soldiers as well, I send you, in addition to my 1944 Christmas story, "Best Wishes for a Merrier Christmas and a Happier New Year."



MAJOR GENERAL ALBERT H. SMITH, JR., began his Army career in 1940 and served for more than 33 years. Much of this service was with the 1st Infantry Division, including eight campaigns in World War II and three in Vietnam, where he was assistant and acting division commander.