

THE  TIMES

## Old soldiers remember Battle of the Bulge



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Last updated at 12:01AM, January 24 2015

The Battle of the Bulge began with an artillery barrage that shook the earth around the largely inexperienced Allied troops on what they had previously called the Quiet Front (Adam Sage writes). They went on to witness death, bloodshed, trauma and finally a victory 70 years ago next week, that effectively settled the outcome of the Second World War in Europe.

Now Bastogne, the Belgian town whose crossroads was at the centre of the battle, is paying tribute to the American and British soldiers who repelled Hitler's last, desperate attempt to turn the war in his favour.

The centrepiece of the commemoration is an exhibition at the town's new war museum featuring five "Aggies" — students of the Texas A&M University — who found themselves under fire in the mud and snow of the Ardennes.

William Pena, 95, is the only one of the five still alive. Born in Laredo, he had just finished his degree when he was called up to join the US army's 28th Infantry Division. Lieutenant Pena was an unlikely soldier — he preferred painting — but was sent to Europe in September 1944 as casualties mounted after D-Day. On December 16 he was in the Ardennes when the Nazis launched the surprise offensive aimed at reclaiming the strategic port of Antwerp. "Just before daybreak, we began receiving the heaviest artillery and mortar barrage I had ever experienced," Mr Pena wrote in a book on his time in the combat zone. "I could not believe the Germans had stored up so much firepower." The work, *As Far As Schleiden*, recounts the shock, the tiredness, the grief, the screams of the wounded and the "spectacularly beautiful sight" of a German phosphorus round lighting the countryside.

Mr Pena survived the Battle of the Bulge, but lost his left foot after stepping on a mine in Germany in March 1945. He went on to become a leading American architect.

Speaking to *The Times* yesterday, he said: "I wasn't aware of the importance of the battle at the time. It was touch and go on a daily basis to do the grind of things you had to do to hold that line. But we held it. I was an architect. I wasn't made for war, but then so many of us were not made for war."

About 500,000 US troops fought in the battle, with 55,000 British. More than 20,000 Allied soldiers were killed.