

# The Brave Innkeeper of "The Bulge"

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**By using wit, courage and the choicest  
Cognac, Peter Rupp saved 14 Americans from  
certain murder by the Nazis.**

On Sunday, the 17th December 1944 the day  
after the Battle of the Bulge erupted, war came  
roaring into the tiny Belgian town of Ligneuville.  
Hotel owner Peter Rupp, who had been an active  
member of the anti-Nazi underground, knew that  
the dangerous game he'd played during the  
years of German occupation was not over.



*Mr Peter Rupp and his wife Balbina*

From a kitchen window of his Hotel du Moulin, Rupp could see the American stragglers being rounded up. Then he noticed a German Sergeant pistol in hand, marching eight prisoners into the yard. The sergeant shoved one of the prisoners out of line, and stepping close drew his pistol, Rupp gasped and started for the back door. From the back yard a shot sounded, another followed, Rupp shouted at a German Sergeant that American prisoners were being murdered, but the non-commissioned officer paid no attention. Despairing of getting help from the Germans, Rupp stated for the back door again. He had lost count of the shots, but they were continuing at brief intervals. The terrible thing was that no one cared. When he finally got to the door and stepped in the back yard. The German sergeant with the automatic pistol was advancing on a single still standing American. The American, who was not more than 18 or 19 years old twisted away and started to run, but the German seized him and forcing the barrel of his weapon into the youngster's open mouth, he pulled the trigger. The last of the eight Americans fell stiffly among his comrades, who were already frozen in the grotesque postures of death.



*The eight bodies discovered on January 1945*

Horrified, Rupp clung weakly to the doorjamb. Then the Nazi sergeant, his executions

completed spun stiffly on his heel and marched briskly from the yard. This winter marks the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of the Bulge, greatest and bloodiest ever fought by Americans. At 5 A.M. on December 16, 1944, Adolph Hitler launched his final great offensive, as 250,000 Germans spearheaded by 1,000 tanks and assault guns, smashed deep into the Ardennes, defended only by battle exhausted or green U.S. troops.

Before it was over, the Americans suffered 80,000 casualties, and Peter Rupp the 69-year-old innkeeper who'd been outraged by the needless slaughter of eight captured Americans, became one of the battle's most unique and unsung heroes. His only weapons had been his wits, his courage and several cases of very good cognac.

Twenty-five miles behind the "*Ghost Front*," the people of Ligneuville felt safe and secure on the Saturday evening of December 16. They had no idea the greatest offensive on the Western Front had been aimed in their direction all day. Neither did the men of the American 49<sup>th</sup> Anti-Aircraft Artillery Brigade, bivouacked in the village.

The next morning as Rupp, his wife Balbina, their daughter Maria and her two children headed for church, a line of American tanks and trucks roared down the hill from Malmedy, six miles to the north. An hour later, as he and his family slowly filed home, the last armored vehicle passed, the clouds of dust settled, the gas fume dissipated. It was quiet again. Too quiet, thought, Rupp. His suspicions were confirmed when he heard a faint, distant rumble. It sound like thunder, but Rupp knew it was the storm of battle.

Panic in the village mounted as the 450 anti-aircraft men hastily pulled out. Only a few Americans were left. These soldiers had arrived late the night before, driving the supply

trucks of Combat Command B of the Ninth Armored Division.

Suddenly, a bulldozer roared down the hill from Baugnez at twice its safe speed. "*German tanks!*" shouted the driver to Captain Seymour Green who stood near the Hotel du Moulin. "*Get the outfit ready to move*", Green called to first Sergeant Page Shenk, of Luray, Virginia. But as the first of Green's service trucks started rolling southward out of the village, a powerful tank spearhead of the First SS Panzer Division, Hitler's "Own," roared down upon Ligneuville from the north. Its leader, Lieutenant-Colonel Jochen Peiper, who had sliced 25 miles into Belgium that morning, ordered his armored cars to wipe out the Americans.

The lone Sherman tank beside the Hotel du Moulin held the Germans back for a while, then an 88 scored a direct hit on the single American defender, and Peiper's men raced through the town, destroying the last laggard trucks in Green's column.

Soon the rest of Peiper's Battle Group poured down the hill from Malmedy, a town whose name would soon be a synonym for massacre. Only moments before, almost 100 captured Americans standing helplessly in a field had been murdered by these young Nazi zealots. Incensed by the unexpected delay caused by the Sherman, the SS men impatiently dismounted from their tanks and armored cars and burst into the Hotel du Moulin. Once again the inn had changed flags.

Rupp's tiny wife, Balbina, betrayed no outward emotion. She, being a Swiss, had little fear of the Germans. Their daughter, Maria, had even less fear, since 1930, she had been married to a German. Rupp himself was the bland host, an innkeeper learns to be an internationalist. But unknown to his neighbors, unknown even to his family, he was actually an ardent member of the secret Belgian White

Army. During the first Nazi occupation the Hotel du Moulin had been a station in the Underground Railroad. Using the nom de guerre of "*Monsieur Kramer*" he hid Allied fliers in a vacant room and kept them until it was safe for them to pass on the next station. In all, 22 American, British, and French fliers owed their lives to "*Monsieur Kramer*".

Since Rupp was an exceptionally generous host to these secret guests, his narrowest escape during the occupation had come the day the budget-minded Balbina threatened to call in the Gestapo to solve the mystery of constantly disappearing food. It took all of Rupp's persuasion to call off the investigation without revealing he was the thief.

Rupp was still unsuspected when the American armies, sweeping across France in the fall of '44 liberated Ligneuville. Now the war had come back to the Hotel du Moulin and eight murdered American prisoners lay in the back yard. Rupp could not let such an atrocity go unchallenged. There were other American prisoners, and they, too, would be in danger.

While Rupp tried to protest the butchery, 14 more American prisoners were herded into the lobby; behind them was the same stocky SS sergeant who had killed the others. Rupp dropped his role of "Good German" and, reckless of his own safety ran up to the sergeant.

*"Murderer!"* he shouted. *"You killed eight of them! I saw you put the pistol in their mouths".*

The sergeant punched Rupp in the jaw, knocking out two teeth.

*"I know you mean to shoot these men, too"* panted Rupp. *"But you can't! They're prisoners".*

A staff officer approached. *"Shoot them all,"* he said angrily. *"And shoot this noisy Belgian swine first!"*

*"Leave them alone, Sergeant."* A combat officer, wearing SS insignia, came out of the command post. He looked with distaste at the other officer. Then he said in a hard voice, *"Sergeant, put these men in that room and treat them as you'd want the Amis to treat you."*

The 14 Americans were crowded into a room on the main floor. Their leader, Captain Green, found the temper of the Germans hard to gauge. Some treated him diffidently some casually others seemed ready to shoot at the first opportunity.

In the kitchen, Peter Rupp was worrying about *"his 14 Sammies."* The Germans were in a dangerous mood if one thing went awry, the murdering might start again; it was a delicate situation requiring all the tact, diplomacy and firmness Rupp had learned as an innkeeper. Then an idea occurred to him. He had hundreds of bottles of the finest cognac and champagne in a secret wine cellar. He'd use them to keep the Boche happy. He crept down into the cellar, filled his arms, with bottles and returned to the kitchen.

*"Maria,"* he told his daughter, *"Give the guard a good cognac so I can talk to the prisoners."*

Without question she left the room. A moment later, Rupp went to the prisoner's room and was admitted. He held out two bottles.

*"Just a minute,"* Green said suspiciously. *"Are you Belgian or German?"*

*"Belgian, of course!"*

A GI hid the bottles.

*"Thanks for the cognac", Green said, "but we're hungry".*

Rupp left the room and returned with eight plates on a tray. On his way back with six more meals an angry SS officer stopped him.

*"What's the idea?"*

*"Well, you're not feeding them, so I have to".*

Rupp's wife Balbina had entered the hotel in time to hear the last exchange and like her native Switzerland, she was small in independent. *"See here"* she said, looking at the officer *"I'm from the Swiss Red Cross I have orders to look after all prisoners, and they get that food!"*

Rupp, his face beaming, hurried in to the prisoners while his wife continued haranguing the SS officer. The meals delivered, he then stood guard in the lobby surreptitiously handing out bottle after bottle of cognac to Germans, regardless of rank.

The atmosphere grew cordial then jovial. Midnight finally passed. But there was still no sleep at the Hotel du Moulin. The command post was in a constant turmoil as reinforcements from the east kept pouring into the village. Then a courier returned from Peiper's spearhead now five miles deeper into Belgium. The news was electrifying at dawn a strike would be made all the way to the Meuse River. Excitement rose. As the perfect host, Peter Rupp made a trip after trip to the secret wine cellar the Germans drank toasts to the Fuehrer ate heartily, sang songs of the Homeland and completely forgot about the prisoners.

At 5 A.M. Balbina walked into the hotel. Now there was quit except for snores and the faint chatter of a radio in the command post. Peter Rupp stood in front of the prisoners' door, a benevolent guard his head nodding from exhaustion *"Now its your turn to look after the*

Americans” he told his wife. *“I’m going to sleep a bit.”*

The crisis had passed, his 14 Americans would live.

Several day later, on December 20, Captain Green and the others were moved to Germany and prison camp. Peter Rupp’s responsibility was over. Ligneuville soon became the center of battle again as Americans commanded by Field Marshall Montgomery, began to counter attack from the north and General Patton’s Third-Army drove up from the south. During an over powering artillery barrage, Rupp was seriously wounded. By January 20 the triumphant Americans had arrived and the innkeeper was taken to an Army Hospital in St Hubert.

A week later Balbina visited her husband. *“What is this?”* she asked, handing him very official looking document that had been delivered to the now completely ruined inn.

He read the English inscription; it was a certificate from Air Chief Marshall Sir Arthur Tedder, honoring Rupp for helping save 22 Allied airmen *“What is this?”* he repeated with a grin. *“Why it’s for me – the thief who kept stealing our food!”*

When Rupp learned that the Americans, in addition to wounding him, had destroyed his hotel and *“liberated”* his secret wine cellar, he remarked sadly but with his usual good nature, *“For freedom, was this so high a price.”*

Today to the left of the Hotel du Moulin, which Rupp rebuilt, stands a simple but impressive monument to the eight Americans murdered there in the Battle of the Bulge. Rupp, now retired, raised the money from the people of Ligneuville, personally making up the large balance. But he himself needs no monument.





*The monument with flowers presented by CRIBA and the town of Malmedy (2004)*

This Christmas, like every Christmas for the past 14 years, the Ligneuville Post Office will get a flow of cards from the U.S. men like Seymour Green, now a attorney in Ardmore, Pennsylvania can never forget the host of the Hotel du Moulin. Green and the others know they are living on borrowed time - borrowed for them by Peter and Balbina Rupp. The men, including Captain Green were from Service Company 27<sup>th</sup> Armored Infantry Battalion, 9<sup>th</sup> Armored Division, Also included was Tom Berry.