

When Hem Went to War

Ernest Hemingway and the
Battle of Hürtgen Forest

Kai Althoetmar

November 2, 1944

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Chapter 1: From Normandy to the southern Eifel

Apples, pumpkins and potatoes from the Thanksgiving service are still lying in front of the altar. The ceiling lights are set in modern glass spheres and the colourful stained glass windows show abstract motifs. The Catholic parish church of St Joseph in Vossenack, Rureifel, is no longer the one from 1870, which no longer exists. It is the one from 1953. Votive plaques hang in the vestibule next to a statue of the Virgin Mary. 'Mary has helped'. That was September 1955. 'Thank you for visible protection!' Easter 1961. 'Mary always helps.' October 1968. 'Thanks for rescue from mortal danger' - on 30 March 1970. 1982: 'Mary never leaves us' - except in November 1944, when Mary didn't help either.

In the late autumn of 1944, the church became a theatre of war. The 'All Souls' Day Battle' in the Hürtgen Forest, 6 November 1944, day five of the battle: the German attack from the Tiefenbach Valley, the 'Death Valley', just a few kilometres away, had only come to a halt in Vossenack. Two US companies had fled from the Germans in panic. Control of the town had previously changed hands between the Americans and Germans twenty-eight times. Young GIs are said to have entrenched themselves in the church and fired down from the organ loft, while the Germans returned fire from the sacristy.¹

Vossenack, municipality of Hürtgenwald, district of Düren, population 2,259. If you drive through the street village today, you will find everything normal: the brick houses, two butchers, post office and savings bank, village pub and the 'haircut shop for men'. It is the beginning of October 2014. The Italian restaurant is advertising porcini mushrooms with the pasta, and every Monday the grilled chicken man stops in front of the church. Everything is as usual. Only one thing stands out. Nothing in the village is old. Just post-war architecture everywhere. Only the retort housing estates with which the lignite company Rheinbraun compensates

for villages that have been dug up look like this—except that the excavator front runs 60 kilometres to the north.





The parish church in Vossenack. Photo: Kai Althoetmar.

One person who witnessed the fighting in the Hürtgen Forest was the American author Ernest Hemingway. Since the Normandy landings in June 1944, the later winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature had accompanied the U.S. Army during the war in the West. As a war correspondent, he wrote reports for the renowned US weekly magazine Collier's about D-Day, the liberation of Paris and the trench warfare in the southern Eifel. However, Hemingway's war adventure had actually begun much earlier: when the USA entered the war in 1941.

Flashback. September 1941: German troops have invaded the Soviet Union and were already fighting outside Kiev. The Americans—officially still neutral—were supplying Great Britain, the Soviet Union and China by sea with essential war material and have occupied Greenland and Iceland. The German war leadership was expecting the USA to enter the war soon. On 4 September 1941, the American destroyer USS Greer informed a British bomber of the position of the surfaced German submarine U-652. The British aircraft dropped depth charges. The German submarine commander believed he was under attack from the USS Greer and attacked the destroyer with torpedoes. From then on, the Americans attacked all Axis ships they saw in the sea neutrality zone. The U.S. Navy waged an undeclared naval war against the German Reich, Italy and Japan. On 6 November 1941, the Americans captured a German freighter disguised as a US merchant ship, the Odenwald, in the South Atlantic. Berlin and Rome reacted. On 11 December 1941, four days after the attack by Japanese naval aircraft on the US naval base at Pearl

Harbor in Hawaii, the German Reich and Italy declared war on the USA.

For Ernest Hemingway, who had lived in Cuba with his third wife Martha Gellhorn since 1939, it was also the signal to throw himself into the fray. Hemingway knew the war from his own experience: at the age of eighteen, he had been a volunteer Red Cross ambulance driver on the Italian side of the Isonzo front in Veneto during the First World War and had seriously been wounded by Austrian shrapnel on 8 July 1918 while handing out chocolate and cigarettes to soldiers in the front line. Despite his injury, he pulled a wounded Italian out of the line of battle. However, he was hit by machine gun bullets. Later, as a reporter, he covered the Greek-Turkish War from 1919 to 1922, the occupation of the Ruhr in the German Reich in 1923 and the Spanish Civil War that had broken out in 1936, before travelling to Japanese-occupied China with Gellhorn as a pair of correspondents in 1941.

In Cuba, the couple lived on the finca La Vigía in San Francisco de Paula, south-east of Havana. Since 1934, Hemingway's property had also included the twelve-metre-long sailing boat Pilar, which he was taking on trips to the Caribbean. After his return from China, it was to become a 'warship'. As in Spain, the supposedly apolitical novelist Hemingway felt called to fight against fascism. 'He wanted to experience his war at sea, in the air and on the battlefields as an adventurer who voluntarily takes risks, as a condottiere of another time,' writes Hemingway biographer Georges-Albert Astre. In 1942, Hemingway offered his services to the US ambassador to Cuba, Spruille Braden, and was integrated into Naval Intelligence.

The Pilar was transformed into a submarine trap. 'The boat was equipped with heavy machine guns, bazookas and

depth charges and was tasked with giving the appearance of a peaceful yacht, allowing itself to be stopped by an enemy boat, seizing it and sinking with it if necessary,' writes Astre.² Hemingway was the commander of the nine-man crew. For two years, he sailed and cruised through the straits of the Keys off the Cuban coast, always on the lookout for German submarines - which were actually travelling in US waters and also in the Caribbean. But: no German submarine appeared in front of Hemingway's enemy reconnaissance yacht. Everything that the illustrious leisure captain observed in terms of anomalies ended up with the naval defence. When the naval attaché himself patrolled Hemingway's waters in 1943 and located German submarines there, he ordered the author and his crew back. The next day, a German submarine did indeed appear. Ambassador Braden later judged: 'Ernest's services were so valuable that I strongly recommended him for an honour.'³

In May 1944, Hemingway decided to take part in the invasion of Europe and to report on it for Collier's—thus viciously driving out his wife Martha, nine years his junior, who had been writing about the war for the magazine. The marriage was at an end, and the strongman with a penchant for hunting, boxing and bullfighting was also suffering from impotence. Hemingway, then forty-four, had long been world-famous thanks to novels such as 'The Sun Also Rises' and 'A Farewell to Arms'. 'For Whom the Bell Tolls', starring Gary Cooper and Ingrid Bergman as fighters for the Spanish Republic, was just showing at the cinema.

At first, 'Papa', Hemingway's pet name, wanted to join General George S. Patton's armoured divisions of the 3rd US Army in Normandy. 'Tank warfare, however, proved too confusing for him, and he took up instead with the Fourth Infantry Division of the First Army', writes Kenneth S. Lynn, Hemingway biographer and long-time professor at Johns

Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland.⁴ However, if his letter to the Russian war reporter and writer Konstantin Simonov, dated 20 June 1946, is to be believed, Hemingway would have preferred to serve on the Eastern Front. 'All through the war I wanted to be with the army of the U.S.S.R. and see that wonderful fight, but I did not feel justified to try to be a war correspondent there since A-I did not speak Russian and B-because I thought I could be more useful in trying to destroy the Krauts (what we call the Germans) in other work.'⁵

In Great Britain, Hemingway prepared for the invasion - sometimes on the airfield and in the air, sometimes drinking in a hotel. As an inquisitive reporter, so the story goes, he flew on R.A.F. reconnaissance flights and bomber missions and wrote for Collier's about how the Royal Air Force pilots tried to intercept German V-missiles. During a visit to the editorial office of Time magazine, he met the US war reporter Mary Welsh, who was to become his fourth and last wife in 1946.