The Courage of General Anthony McAuliffe at Bastogne

- **Compelling Question**
  - How can you act courageously in the face of the unknown?

- **Virtue**: Courage

- **Definition** – Courage is the capacity to overcome fear in order to do good.

- **Lesson Overview**
  - In this lesson, Students will learn about the life of General Anthony McAuliffe. In particular, they will examine his courageous stand during the Battle of the Bulge and its impact on the allied war effort. Using this example, students will learn how they can be courageous in their own lives.

- **Objectives**
  - Students will analyze General Anthony McAuliffe’s role in the Battle of the Bulge.
  - Students will understand how they can be courageous in their own lives.
  - Students will apply their knowledge of courage in their own lives.

- **Background**
  - The Allies had invaded North Africa, Sicily, and Italy, before launching the invasion of Normandy on D-Day, June 6, 1944. By December of 1944, the Allied armies had fought their way off the beaches of Normandy all the way to the eastern borders of France and Belgium. Despite Germany’s strategic victory during a counter-offensive named Operation Market Garden, its army seemed on the verge of collapse. To the south, the Allied armies had knocked Italy out of the war and had landed another large force in the south of France to follow up invasion of Normandy. To the east, the Soviet armies were advancing steadily, driving German forces further and further back toward Berlin. It seemed to most observers that it was just a matter of time before the Nazis were finally defeated.

As winter settled in in the west, there was a temporary lull in the fighting as Dwight D. Eisenhower, Commander of the Allied Forces, rested his troops and shored up his supply lines. These supply lines were preciously thin. Because of the destruction to France’s infrastructure during the German occupation and retreat, the Allied armies were still completely dependent upon deep-water ports on the English Channel. One of the most important of these was Antwerp. These ports were now many miles behind the lines. But all seemed secure as harsh winter weather was expected largely to bring a halt to military operations. Even the 101st and 82nd airborne troops settled in to what they thought would be a lengthy rest after severe fighting.

In this, German planners saw an opportunity. If they could secretly mass a large offensive in the west and punch through the thinly held Ardennes region of the Allied line and capture Antwerp, they could possibly divide the Allied armies and cut their supply lines and make them ineffective as fighting units. With this accomplished, the Germans could drive the allies out of Europe, or at the very least, negotiate peace. It was a desperate gamble. On Hitler’s orders, German planners gathered what reserves they could and prepared to attack.

- **Vocabulary**
  - Enveloping
  - Division
  - Normandy
  - Holland
  - Ominous
  - Tenacious
  - Annihilation
  - Epitomize

- **Introduce Text**
  - Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the “Walk-In-The-Shoes” question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.
• **Walk-In-The-Shoes Questions**
  - As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
    - What challenges are you facing?
    - What fears or concerns might you have?
    - What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?

• **Observation Questions**
  - What was General McAuliffe’s role in the Battle of the Bulge?
  - Why was it necessary for General McAuliffe to hold the city of Bastogne?
  - What do General McAuliffe’s actions say about his identity?

• **Discussion Questions**
  - Discuss the following questions with your students.
    - What is the historical context of the narrative?
    - What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
    - How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
    - How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
    - How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
    - What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
    - Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
    - How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?

• **Additional Resources**
  - The United States Army, The Battle of the Bulge
    [www.army.mil/botb](http://www.army.mil/botb)
  - PBS American Experience, The Battle of the Bulge
    [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rek0uZPUm6I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rek0uZPUm6I)
  - Arlington National Cemetery, Anthony Clement McAuliffe
    [http://www.arlingtoncemetery.net/amcauli.htm](http://www.arlingtoncemetery.net/amcauli.htm)
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Narrative

December 22, 1944

It was the worst winter in living memory. Cold winds swept down from the North, enveloping the continent of Europe in a thick blanket of snow and ice. Exhausted Allied troops were stretched across the length of the eastern border of France. For six months, they had fought bitterly to gain a foothold in Europe, suffering thousands upon thousands of casualties. It was nearing the end of the sixth year of war, the third for the United States, and the prospect of yet another Christmas away from home was on the minds of the thousands of men in the cold and muddy foxholes all along the front. They relaxed, despite the miserable conditions, because no army would attack in such weather.

One division in particular was glad for the lull in fighting brought on by the cold weather. Temporarily under the command of General Anthony McAuliffe, the 101st Airborne Division had suffered heavily the previous year. Known as the Screaming Eagles, these men and their commander had seen more than their fair share of combat. They had been dropped behind enemy lines in the pre-dawn hours of June 6 as the leading edge of the Allied invasion of Normandy. They had fought bitterly to capture key road junctions and towns that allowed the infantry landing on the beaches to move inland. They continued to fight the German army for weeks after, slogging through the thick hedgerows of the French countryside in the ferocious Allied push to break out of Normandy.

After a brief rest in England, the division again saw heavy combat in September as part of the Operation Market Garden. This operation was a high risk attempt at capturing Holland by seizing a series of bridges. The 101st’s mission was to help secure a middle series of bridges while the British airborne would secure the final series of bridges that led into Germany. However, this tenuous path into Germany proved to be much more heavily defended than British planners anticipated. After days of fierce fighting, it became clear the mission was a disaster, and a retreat began. The 101st was given the unenviable task of covering the retreat of the Allied armies along a section of road that became known as “Hell’s Highway”.

General Anthony McAuliffe had participated in all of these campaigns. By 1944, McAuliffe was the commander of the division artillery. Though he broke his back during a practice jump in May, he still went into Normandy with the rest
of the division on June 6. During the landings, Brigadier General Don Pratt was killed, promoting McAuliffe to the position of assistant Division Commander. In this role, he participated in Operation Market Garden in September of 1944, fighting with the division through the terrible conflicts in Holland.

Thus, Anthony McAuliffe found himself with the 101st Airborne that cold December with the battle-weary veterans of the division. He had temporarily been placed in command of the division while commanding General Maxwell Taylor attended a staff conference back in the United States. The division was in the reserve, resting and reequipping after the hard fighting that fall. All signs seemed to point to a quiet holiday season for the troops.

Then suddenly, on December 17, the Germans launched a massive offensive. Thousands of men, tanks and trucks had been massed in secret along the Ardennes forest and struck a stretched out and exhausted Allied line like a bolt of lightning. The quiet snow-covered woods were filled with squeaking of tank tracks, the roar of engines, and the sharp crack of rifle fire. The German attack quickly overran the inexperienced troops in that sector, inflicting heavy casualties. General Eisenhower swiftly moved to strengthen his line at the point of the attack. He repositioned the 10th Armored Division and then moved forward his reserves, including the 101st Airborne.

McAuliffe must have been feeling shock and doubt that cold evening as his men were moved forward. He was only a temporary commander. Would he have the full respect of his commanders and his soldiers? Many had assumed the Germans were all but defeated. How could they be attacking? How large was their force? How well-prepared was the division for combat? Soon, for better or for worse, McAuliffe would have all of his questions answered.

The division dropped everything they were doing, grabbed their gear and some ammunition, and were rushed by truck to the area around the city of Bastogne on December 18. An ominous cloud of uncertainty hung over them. McAuliffe realized the division was drastically unprepared. They were short on food, medical supplies, and ammunition. They had not needed to stock up on these supplies in the previous weeks as they were stationed close by the supply depots. Perhaps worst of all, they had not been issued their winter clothing. They advanced quickly into a chaotic atmosphere, made even more confusing by German troops in American uniforms deliberately sent forward to disrupt Allied relief efforts.

McAuliffe deployed his men in the woods around the city of Bastogne. They dug into the frozen ground, and prepared for the worst. The next several days saw fierce fighting that ebbed and flowed around the city. The Germans advanced relentlessly with tanks and heavy artillery bombardments, and McAuliffe coolly directed the defense of the city. The weather aided the Germans advance as thick fog, snow, and clouds prevented the allies from receiving supplies or martial assistance from the air. Nevertheless, McAuliffe and his men fought back tenaciously.

By December 22, the defenders around Bastogne were completely surrounded and drastically low on supplies. The commander of the German forces sent a message to General McAuliffe demanding he surrender. “The fortune of war is changing” it read. “There is only one possibility to save the encircled U.S.A. troops from total annihilation: that is the honorable surrender of the encircled town.”

General McAuliffe knew the situation was desperate and that his men were barely holding the line. He had fought with his men all across France. He had seen combat and knew the limits of his men. He knew they were low on supplies, cold, and exhausted. He was isolated, completely cut off from his senior commanders, and facing a seemingly endless German assault. In every modern tactical sense, he had lost. To continue to resist could mean the complete annihilation of his men. However, he also knew that his resistance was critical if the allies were to have enough time and space to recover, and launch a counter-attack.

McAuliffe hardly hesitated in answer the German’s. His reply was short and to the point. In no more than one word he said, no. The American’s would fight on to the end. In the face of great danger, with everything on the line, McAuliffe did not back down or hesitate. He and his men would fight and survive. They would not give up or capitulate. They would resist.

His response was read out to all the men under his command. His example inspired those men to stand fast and hold out just a little longer. They courageously fought on until General Patton’s Third Army, making a courageous advance of their own, finally relieved them on January 2.
McAuliffe never lost faith in his men or his cause. He knew the role he had to play. He knew the challenge that was at hand, and he rose to it. The allies desperately needed to slow the German attack so they could reorganize and respond. The thorn in German side that halted their advance was Bastogne.

McAuliffe did not make an easy decision sending his men into nearly impossible circumstances that would leave many of them dead, but it was the right decision. Making the right decision took a great deal of courage, particularly when that decision could be his last. In overcoming the challenges of being in a temporary command, of moving into an unknown position, lacking supplies or support, and fighting on when completely isolated, McAuliffe epitomized the virtue of courage at a time when it was needed most. The courage, determination, and tenacity of the general and the men under his command were essential to the Allied effort and eventually to defeating the Nazis in Europe.