

**THE DESPERATE GAMBLE: A STUDY OF THE
GERMAN COUNTER-OFFENSIVE IN THE
ARDENNES FOREST SEPTEMBER-DECEMBER
1944**

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COUNTER-OFFENSIVE IN THE
ARDENNES FOREST SEPTEMBER - DECEMBER 1944

An Abstract
Presented to
The Graduate Council of
Austin Peay State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Rosemary Covino Marlowe
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ABSTRACT

On December 16, 1944 the Germans launched a violent counter-offensive in the Ardennes Forest. The shock and speed with which the attack took place was reminiscent of the earlier Wehrmacht victories. The German smashing of American lines could only be compared to Pearl Harbor.

The Ardennes offensive is a matter for examination because it was the last offensive the Germans were to undertake. The planning, preparations and execution took place at a time when professional soldiers on both sides believed in the inevitability of German defeat.

The last gasp by a dying behemoth becomes more complex when viewed through the surprise and chaos that occurred behind Allied lines. Intelligence systems on the Allied side had not nor perhaps could not prepare the high command for this bold and daring counter-offensive. But the signs were all there.

To state that the counter-offensive failed simply because one side possessed a greater army than the other is gross oversimplification. The disintegration of the battle had many and varied factors that could not be charted on a situation map.

The cost of the counter-offensive went beyond the sheer loss of men and equipment. It struck at the very soul of the German Reich. It was a campaign in which the victors along with the vanquished became the losers. For what was to be considered simply an ordinary victory for the Allied forces, was to play for the Germans an important and decisive role in the further prosecution of the war.

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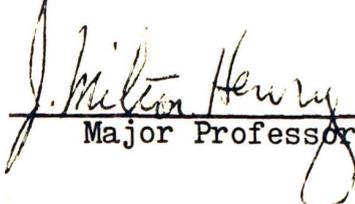
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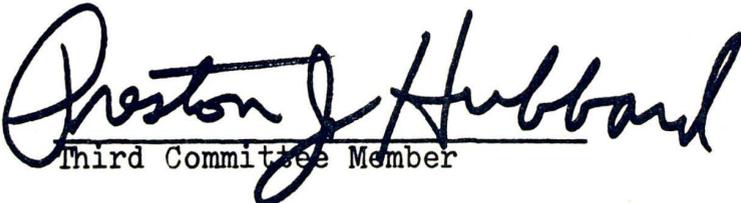
To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a Thesis written by Rosemary Covino Marlowe entitled "The Desperate Gamble: A Study of the German Counter-Offensive in the Ardennes Forest September - December, 1944." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in History.

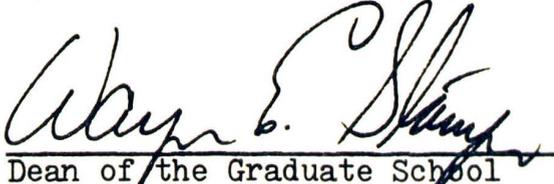

Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:


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INTRODUCTION

On December 16, 1944, the Germans launched a violent counter-offensive in the Ardennes Forest that rocked the Americans and British on their heels. This offensive will always engage the interest of professional historians when viewed in connection with the events of the months preceding the actual engagement of forces. The Ardennes was indeed a last minute effort by the Germans.

Unfortunately, reconstructing the events necessitated gathering much information from the German side through documents and depositions compiled after the ending of the war. Many of the original files kept by the Germans were destroyed or lost during the last months of the war or were deliberately destroyed by the Germans just prior to their surrender. In many cases, the veracity of many of these depositions have been questionable. The unusual secrecy that surrounded the planning of the counter-offensive, in and of itself, has reduced the amount of information available. Many of those who were included in Hitler's inner circle are dead and many of the high ranking officers involved were only aware of information connected with their portion of the operation.

Fortunately, for the student of history both the Germans and the Americans have a mania for recording and reconstructing major events. Many German officers involved in the operation had kept diaries and written memoirs that have survived. The American Army's Historical Division has commissioned hundreds of monographs on every phase of the counter-offensive many of which go beyond military interpretation. Within the libraries of the Office of the Chief of Military History, the United States Army War College, the United States Army Command Staff and General College and the United States Army Armor School can be found hundreds of pieces of information that when placed together form an entire picture of the events leading up to the counter-offensive, the counter-offensive itself and the eventual results of the counter-offensive.

All facets or facts have not been covered within these pages. One can only hope that the important points have been discerned and noted.

Chapter 1

A BRIEF MILITARY BACKGROUND TO THE COUNTER-OFFENSIVE

The situation facing the "thousand year" Reich of Adolf Hitler in the late summer and autumn of 1944 was nothing short of desperate. For Germany the year 1944 was one of defeat followed by defeat. The Wehrmacht by autumn was everywhere in retreat. It soon appeared that German satellites would either surrender or be cut off and Germany would be forced to fight alone.

On the eastern front the Russian army under the leadership of Marshal Zhukov had unleashed a massive offensive. With superior forces, the Russians had been able to drive the Germans back to the Vistula and onto the East Prussian border. They were able to strike on a wide front and at strategic points so as to cut off the German forces in the Baltic countries and to threaten the German position in the Balkans both militarily and politically.¹

¹Herman Gackenholz, "The Collapse of Army Group Center in 1944," Decisive Battles of W. W. II: The German View, ed. H. A. Jacobsen and J. Rohwer; (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1963), p. 382.

Early in August, the head of the Rumanian government, Antonescu, had begged Hitler for much needed reinforcements; but Hitler had not believed that the situation was desperate enough for such a move.² When the Russians descended upon Rumania, the Rumanians angered by Hitler's indifference soon turned out Antonescu, signed an armistice with Russia and denied the Germans the use of the valuable Ploesti oil fields. This came at a time when refinery after refinery was being reduced to rubble by the Allied air forces.³

Although the Russians were not at war with the Bulgarians, they were cognizant of a strong pro-Russian sentiment within the country. Using the flimsy excuse that German ships had harbored in Bulgarian ports during their invasion of Rumania, Russia declared war on Bulgaria. In a bloodless two-day war, Bulgaria, too, was changed from a German ally to a German foe. Bulgaria, like Rumania, had entered the Soviet "sphere of influence."⁴

The Russians by mid-September had trapped and virtually destroyed two German armies of Army Group South

²Alexander Werth, Russia at War 1941-1945 (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1964), p. 902.

³Walter Warlimont, Inside Hitler's Headquarters: 1939-1945 (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1964), p. 467.

⁴Alexander Werth, Russia at War 1941-1945 (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1964), p. 902.

Ukraine and poised a serious threat to Hungary.⁵

In the North the Russians had successfully cut off Army Group North. The Finns, at first, refused to be pushed into submission; but when the Russians attacked Estonia, they feared a Russian landing in the most vital parts of Finland. In the beginning of September, Finland, too, declared that its "comradeship-in-arms" was at an end and sought an armistice with the Soviet Union.⁶

Without a doubt, the German losses in the East were catastrophic. The overall military situation had deteriorated so rapidly that it was difficult to determine at which front the losses in combat strength, morale and prestige had been the greatest.⁷ The summer war of 1944 saw more than seven million men lost to the Germans in dead, wounded or missing.

After landing in Normandy in June, the Allies by mid-September had liberated most of France, Belgium and Luxembourg and were threatening the all important Ruhr area,

⁵Charles V. von Luttichau, The Ardennes Offensive: Germany's Situation in the Fall of 1944, Part One: The Political Situation; (Washington, D. C.: Officer of Chief of Military History, [March, 1963]), p. 3.

⁶Walter Warlimont, Inside Hitler's Headquarters: 1939-1945 (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1964), p. 467.

⁷Charles V. von Luttichau, The Ardennes Offensive: Germany's Situation in the Fall of 1944, Part One: The Political Situation; (Washington, D. C.: Officer of Chief of Military History, [March, 1963]), p. 2.

the industrial heart of Germany.⁸ The Allies had succeeded in pinning down another quarter of a million of German manpower and a countless amount of German equipment. The Allies had also taken possession of the important harbor of Antwerp. Although the Allies had yet to make the harbor operative, it was generally considered by both sides an absolute necessity if the Allies were to drive into Germany itself.⁹

It was only when Hitler and his generals viewed the military situation on the Southern Front that they had little cause of alarm. Army Group South in Italy had managed to build another stable front after its retreat from middle Italy, a front still in advance of the Apennines positions. Thus, time was available further to construct the main fortified lines, and to reorganize and recuperate the troops.¹⁰

What Hitler really needed now was time. At this point in the war, he hoped to gain enough time to bring out his wonder weapons, refine atomic energy to a point where it could be used in Germany's favor, perfect the V-weapons, and increase submarine warfare. He hoped to

⁹John S. D. Eisenhower, The Bitter Woods (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1969), p. 73.

¹⁰Robert E. Merriam, Dark December (Chicago: Zeff-Davis Publishing Co., 1947), p. 5.

employ all new methods simultaneously with the utmost effect.¹¹

The Fatal Decision

On September 16, 1944, the daily Fuhrer Conference had just ended. Hitler sat with his top military staff listening to General Jodl review the relative strength of the Allies. Suddenly Hitler cut Jodl short and after a few minutes of uncomfortable silence Hitler announced, "I have just made a momentous decision. I shall go over to the counter-attack, that is to say here, out of the Ardennes, with objective - Antwerp."¹²

The generals sat stunned as none could quite believe the pronouncement for it came at a time when professional soldiers on both sides dispassionately had weighed all the factors and decided that it only remained for Germany to accept the "unconditional surrender."¹³ Unfortunately, the man sitting before the situation maps at Wolf's Lair (Hitler's East Prussian Headquarters) was not a professional soldier.

The war years had had a devastating effect on Adolf

¹¹R. von Gersdorff, Results of the Ardennes Offensive Historical Division United States Army, Europe, (n.d.), p. 1.

¹²Hugh M. Cole, The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, Washington, D. C., [1965], p. 2.

¹³Peter Elstob, Hitler's Last Offensive (New York: Macmillian Co., 1971), p. 3.

Hitler's health. Living as he had from one underground bunker to another, eating little and sleeping less, he was plagued with a series of possible non-existent illnesses that were being treated by the quack, Doctor Morrell.

Then on July 20, 1944 came the assassination attempt by the generals. Although the bomb had left Hitler with but superficial wounds the psychological damages were far reaching. Those members of the High Command who had not seen Hitler for months were shocked at the picture he presented at a September conference. His left arm continually twitched and could only be restrained by gripping it with his right hand. He walked in a slumped posture, almost shuffling. Even if he appeared to be listening, no one could be sure he had heard what had been said.¹⁴ A side effect of his bad health was the deterioration of his remarkable memory. He had always been able to glance at a long document and repeat it word for word; now he had difficulty remembering names.¹⁵ General Manteuffel, one of the Ardennes commanders, described him as an old and broken man.¹⁶

Somewhere in the deep, dark reaches of Adolf Hitler's

¹⁴Jacques Nobecourt, Hitler's Last Gamble (New York: Schochen Books, 1967), p. 32.

¹⁵John Toland, Adolf Hitler (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1976), p. 822.

¹⁶John Strawson, The Battle for the Ardennes (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972), p. 9.

mind was born the dream of a great counter-offensive. Whether he was overly optimistic, simply miscalculating or a man who had lost touch with reality or perhaps all three is something we shall really never know.

The commanders on both fronts were well aware that the most that they could hope for was a delaying action before peace was to finally come. But if there was to be a counter-offensive why in the West and not in the East? And if they were to launch a counter-offensive in the West, why the Ardennes Forest?

Chapter 2

VIEW TO THE WEST

To Hitler the key to victory or at least a turn around of current military events lay in the West for several reasons. First, he put no stock in the revived French Army of Charles De Gaulle. They had been beaten once by Germany and, as Hitler saw it, the French were the weakest link in the Allied chain.¹ Secondly, Hitler believed that his enemies were uneasy bedpartners, disliking and distrusting each other.² He believed his counter-offensive would exploit these differences and that England would prefer to fight Communist Russia rather than Nazi Germany. He also badly underestimated the fighting ability of the Americans whom he believed to be soft and unable to stand up to combat. He did not believe in their

¹Stephen B. Patrick, "The Ardennes Offensive," Strategy and Tactics (New York: Simulation Publications, March/April, 1973), p. 5.

²Peter Elstob, Hitler's Last Offensive (New York: Macmillan Co., 1971), p. 12.

capacity to take set-backs and then recover.³

But what was really going on in Hitler's mind? From the beginning of the first military setbacks, Hitler had found a parallel to his situation in the events that had faced Frederick the Great in the Seven Years' War. He admired Frederick's ability never to admit defeat and to stand up against a coalition. He believed that, like Frederick, if he could just hold out long enough, he would win. No coalition in history had ever lasted and his enemies had no common ties except their desire to destroy Germany.

Hitler knew that among the British and American commanders there existed great divisions and he believed that a defeat in the West would only aid in bringing disillusionment and eventual break-up of the western coalition. Differences may have existed but the Allies were firmly united on one basic principle, the absolute necessity to carry the war into the heart of Germany and to destroy completely her armed forces and her ability to make war.⁴

Apart from the political motivations, selection of a favorable terrain for the counter-offensive was a necessary prerequisite. Hitler chose the Ardennes Forest

³Hasso von Manteuffel, The Battle of the Ardennes 1944-5 Decisive Battles of W. W. II: The German View, ed., H. A. Jacobsen and J. Rohwer; (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, [1965]), p. 418.

⁴Peter Elstob, Hitler's Last Offensive (New York: Macmillan Co., 1971), p. 3.

because it was the most difficult terrain on the entire front and well known by the German commanders. They had advanced across it in 1940 and retreated through it only a few months before the scheduled counter-offensive.

The Germans knew the Ardennes' narrow, twisting roads and the difficulties and the dangers these roads could cause an attacking force, particularly in winter during bad weather conditions.⁵ The German move through the Ardennes in 1940 proved that modern mechanized forces could move speedily through the restricted area. However, what history could not demonstrate, and the lesson yet to be learned, was whether modern mechanized armies could attack through the Ardennes and overcome a combination of stubborn enemy defense, difficult terrain, and extremely poor weather conditions.⁶

The Ardennes area has three somewhat distinct terrain compartments. The Low Ardennes in the North, and the High Ardennes in the South, and the Famenne Depression in between. The Low Ardennes is made up of open, rolling hills with several plateaus and is more easily crossed than either of the two other areas. The Famenne Depression is a massif of long, narrow depressions which originate in the North

⁵K. J. Necessary, Surprise in the Ardennes (Ft. Knox, Ky.: Armor School Library March, [1967]), p. 2.

⁶Hugh M. Cole, The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge, Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, Washington, D. C., [1965], p. 40.

Ardennes and extends into the Southern Ardennes. The High Ardennes of which about one-third is covered with forests, is the most rugged of the three areas. It is relatively narrow and is constricted by deeply eroded winding rivers and streams which create deep depressions with steep walls several feet high.⁷

It is most important to point out that there were no roads crossing the Ardennes from straight east to west. The few roads that did exist in the area at the time followed the narrow ridges or the wider valley floor and twisted and turned in and out of the deep ravines.

The climate of the Ardennes during the time of the planned counter-offensive was to assist the German forces. During the month of December, the Ardennes was usually subjected to much rain, snow and freezing temperatures. Hitler believed and correctly that this period of inclement weather would provide the necessary concealment needed for security while he moved and built-up his attack forces. He also believed and again correctly that Allied reconnaissance by air would be grounded and allow the Germans great freedom of movement towards their planned objective.

On selecting the Ardennes Forest, with its challenging winter terrain Hitler told his commanders:

⁷Hugh M. Cole, The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge, Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, Washington, D. C., [1965], p. 42.

The enemy line is thin, nor does he expect the Germans to attack anywhere, least of all in this sector. Therefore, by full exploitation of the element of surprise, in weather conditions which will keep his air force grounded, we can reckon on achieving a rapid breakthrough.⁸

Hitler's selection of the Ardennes Forest as the sector in which to launch the counter-offensive was thus based not only on terrain but also on the obvious advantage of attacking where the enemy forces were the weakest.

In early December 1944, Allied commanders were focusing their main attention to areas north and south of the Ardennes where major offensive actions were underway. To the south, the Third U. S. Army was conducting an offensive campaign along the Saar River. To the north, the British were preparing an attack into the Heensburg salient and the Ninth U. S. Army was conducting extensive offensive operations in the Aachen sector.⁹

The First U. S. Army, which had just arrived in the Ardennes sector, was still suffering from the bloody Hürtgen Forest battle fought early in November. The First U. S. Army's VIII Corps was responsible for most of the Ardennes and for tieing in with the Third U. S. Army on its

⁸Seymour Freedan and Wm. Richardson, The Fatal Decision (New York: Berkley Publishing Corporation, 1956), p. 241.

⁹John Freeland, The Ardennes, 1944 (Fort Knox, Ky: Armor School Library, 1966), p. 10.

southern flank. The VIII Corps' three divisions were to receive the brunt of the German attack. They were the 28th Infantry, 4th Infantry, and 106th Infantry Divisions. The 28th and the 4th Infantry Divisions had distinguished themselves in the Hürtgen Forest and together had sustained some 9,000 battle casualties. The 106th Infantry Division had just arrived from the United States and was lacking combat experience. The VIII Corps' mission was to train, re-equip, and observe the enemy. The three Infantry Divisions were responsible for a front of about eighty-five miles, an area approximately three times that normally assigned an equivalent force by service school doctrine.¹⁰

Allied commanders had discussed the possibility of a counter-offensive in the Ardennes sector but had quickly agreed that such a move would be unprofitable for the Germans. It was felt that Allied strength should be concentrated in the areas where offensive action was underway and where a decision might be reached. The Ardennes sector presented no special risks and had been quiet for weeks. It was believed the Ardennes terrain offered no special attraction to the German forces and there was no indication of German forces outnumbering Allied forces in that sector.¹¹

¹⁰Hugh M. Cole, The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge, Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, Washington, D. C., [1965], p. 55.

¹¹Omar N. Bradley, A Soldier's Story (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1951), p. 453.

While the Allies believed the Germans incapable of launching another offensive, Hitler and his top commanders planned and prepared for what would become Germany's last, desperate bid for victory in the West.

Chapter 3

WACHT AM RHEIN

The German counter-offensive which so startled the world on December 16, 1944, did so not only because it was done so surprisingly but also because it was launched with such powerful energy by what was considered an already exhausted nation whose resources and military machine had been stretched to their very limits.

The Allies believed that Germany would surrender after the tremendous losses she had suffered during the Normandy invasion and the Russian summer offensive. Winston Churchill, on the other hand, believed that if Hitler were to behave logically, he would pull back inside Germany his forces, which were considerable, from Italy, the Balkans and the Scandinavian countries and form a tight circle of defense in depth and therefore make the invasion of Germany, itself, a most difficult and most costly operation.¹

Later critics who believed that this course of action would have been the wisest for Hitler to follow tend to forget that he was not interested in simply winning

¹Peter Elstob, Hitler's Last Offensive (New York: Macmillan Co., 1971), p. 3.

one battle. He needed time. Time with which he believed he could change the whole course of the war. If this counter-offensive gained him six months, his new and deadly weapons would be perfected and Germany would rise like a phoenix out of its ashes.

Hitler began to draw broad plans for his counter-offensive. Simply stated, his plan called for a surprise attack, a quick breakthrough in weak enemy positions, and a quick thrust to the rear areas, all during a period of unfavorable air weather.²

Although Hitler applied himself thoroughly to the planning of the counter-offensive, he left the detailing and executing of the plan in the hands of the Chief of the Wehrmacht Operations Staff, Genobst Alfred Jodl. Next to the Fuhrer, Jodl was the most important person engaged in the preparations.³

Jodl, although outranked by men like Keitel, was Hitler's chief advisor on all strategic questions. Jodl's function went beyond preparing and executing Hitler's plans. It was Jodl with whom Hitler discussed and dissected all new military plans that were conceived. It was Jodl who

²Siegfried Westphal, The German Army in the West (London, England: Cassell and Company, 1951), pp. 178-9.

³Percy Ernst Schramm, The Preparation for the Offensive in the Ardennes, (Sept 16-Dec., 44), Historical Division, Headquarters, United States Army, Europe, [n.d.], p. 44.

turned vague ideas into working operations. Jodl raised the objections, whether his own or others, on various military strategy with Hitler. Jodl was Hitler's sounding board and played carpenter to the architect.

By October, Jodl submitted to Hitler the basic plan for the counter-offensive. The proposed operation would contain these major points:

- (a) the attack should be launched sometime between 20 and 30 November
- (b) it should be made through the Ardennes in the Monschau-Echternach sector
- (c) the initial object would be the seizure of bridge-heads over the Meuse River between Liège and Namur
- (d) Antwerp would be the objective
- (e) a battle to annihilate the British and Canadians would ultimately be fought north of the line Antwerp-Liège-Bastogne
- (f) a minimum of thirty divisions would be available, ten of which would be armored
- (g) support would be given by an unprecedented concentration of artillery and rocket projector units
- (h) operational combat would be vested in four armies - two panzer armies abreast in the lead, two armies composed largely of infantry divisions to cover flanks
- (i) the Luftwaffe would be prepared to support the operation
- (j) all planning would aim at securing tactical surprise and speed

- (k) secrecy would be maintained at all costs and only a limited number of individuals would be made privy to the plan.⁴

It is important to note that the success of this preliminary plan hinged on the utmost secrecy and the ability of Germany to muster a new war machine capable of completing its objectives. The Operation Staff, headed by Jodl, developed security instructions so strict that they were not allowed to follow normal procedures.⁵ The Commander-in-Chief in the West and all other senior commanders who would carry out the counter-offensive were kept in the dark as to the true nature of the operation. Even the code name of the operation, "Wacht am Rhein" (Watch on the Rhine) was meant to confuse the enemy, if he should hear of it, and insured that lower ranking German officers would believe that the plan called for a limited operation.

The first order of business was the allocation of forces. Hitler decided, from the outset, that all other theaters of operation in the West would be stripped to the bare minimum. He would later in the planning draw many men and tanks from the Eastern front much to the chagrin of General Guderian (Commander in the East). He did this in

⁴Hugh M. Cole, The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge (Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1965), p. 19.

⁵Walter Warlimont, Inside Hitler's Headquarters (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1964), p. 480.

the belief that the enemy would immediately relinquish an intended attack of his own and would take up the defensive of all sectors of the front in order to assemble the force needed for commitment in the breakthrough area.⁶

Not only were thousands called back from battle front areas, but thousands upon thousands of men who had been exempt from military service suddenly found themselves being called up for duty. It is during this period that the home guard was formed. Along with very young boys and old men, males with various eye or stomach ailments who had been deemed unfit for front line duty were recalled up to bear arms. Factories were systematically stripped of men who had been exempt, because of their vital use in industry. These men would be thrown into battle for the first time with very little training. The German countryside was scoured for farm workers, who like factory workers, had been exempt because it was felt they were needed more in the jobs they held rather than in the Army. Both the Luftwaffe and the navy, which had now become inoperative, were called upon to fill in the ranks of the infantry. The result was that the Germans massed a quarter of a million men but they could not measure up to the quality of the original Wehrmacht.⁷

⁶Percy Ernst Schramm, The Preparation for the Offensive in the Ardennes, (Sept-16 Dec., 44), Historical Division, Headquarters, United States Army, Europe, [n.d.], p. 63.

⁷Ronald Herferman, World War II, (Secaucus, N. J.: Derby Books, 1973), p. 230.

The army was still a sizable unit reinforced by seasoned S. S. troops. The heart of this new army would be the Fifth Panzer Army commanded by General Hasso von Manteuffel. Manteuffel was considered the best tank tactician of the war and had just capped a brilliant military career by a successful counter attack against the Russians in Latvia.⁸ He was also one of the few aristocratic regular Prussian officers that Hitler would listen to. He was also one of the very few who would listen to Hitler and if he disagreed would quietly express his own point of view.

Adolf Hitler had decided to use two panzer armies as spearheads to this offensive. The other panzer army would be the newly created Sixth S. S. Panzer led by Josef "Sepp" Dietrich. If Hitler had deliberately searched his entire command staff for two commanders who stood poles apart, he could not have found two opposites such as Manteuffel and Dietrich.

The Sixth S. S. Panzer Army which was formed specifically for this offensive from the remaining armor units in the West, was led by a former Bavarian butcher-boy. "Sepp" Dietrich joined the National Socialist Party in 1928 and became the leader of public meeting strong arm squads which had formed the original core of the S. S.⁹ He had

⁸Peter Elstob, Hitler's Last Offensive (New York: Macmillan Co., 1971), p. 17.

⁹Jacques Nobencourt, Hitler's Last Gamble (New York: Sckochen Books, 1967), p. 104.

been in command of the S. S. guard battalion during the "night of the long knives" and was personally responsible for the murder of six leaders of the S. A. (Storm Troops). Goebbels' propaganda machine had continually built up Dietrich's ability as a tank commander. Although Hitler was aware of Dietrich's shortcomings and mistakes, particularly after the Normandy invasion, he was also aware that Dietrich was a loyal Nazi. After the assassination attempt by the generals, Hitler believed it was necessary that only a loyal Nazi could be counted on to command in this great counter-offensive. Manteuffel, on the other hand, was a most capable officer with a Prussian sense of loyalty to his oath of allegiance to the Fatherland.

By November, Hitler had divided his army into two separate commands. The East was left in the very capable hands of Heinz Guderian, the undisputed tank expert within the German High Command. The West was now given to Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt. Von Rundstedt was chosen not because he was the best possible choice for command in the field,¹⁰ but for the sake of appearances. It would be good for the soldiers' morale to have the old, but much respected, Field Marshal in nominal command.¹¹ A nominal command it was to be, as von Rundstedt was quickly to discover.

¹⁰Alan Moorehead, Eclipse (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1945), p. 218.

¹¹Peter Elstob, Hitler's Last Offensive (New York: Macmillan Co., 1971), p. 16.

Von Rundstedt like Manteuffel had come from an old military family. At the time of the offensive, he was the oldest officer in the Army and one of the most respected. He had distinguished himself both in World War I, as well as, World War II. Following the debacle of Normandy, von Rundstedt had been relieved as Commander-in-Chief of the West and had been placed in virtual retirement. When Hitler tapped him once again for position of Commander-in-Chief West, von Rundstedt was more than eager to take supreme command but only on the condition that Hitler grant him far-reaching powers. Hitler agreed but it soon became apparent that von Rundstedt possessed no freedom of action. As von Rundstedt became more and more aware of the specific plans for the offensive, he urged for a more "limited" solution, just as Manteuffel, Jodl, Model and Dietrich would do, and each time his warnings and suggestions would be swept aside. He soon became aware of the fact that he was a mere figure-head and all that knew him well knew how much suffering this caused him. He had to stand by, impotent with rage, while blunder was piled on blunder, while Germany's last powers of aggressive action were wasted in an offensive with the wrong objectives.¹²

The question arises as to why a man like von Rundstedt did not resign. The obvious answer appears to be

¹²Siegfried Westphal, The German Army in the West, (London, England: Cassell and Company, 1951), p. 191.

that, like Manteuffel, von Rundstedt was a professional soldier, a loyal German, who had kept himself out of politics and for whom military mutiny was beyond the realm of possibility.

One of the most important prerequisites for a successful offensive was the Luftwaffe's ability to get 5,000 planes in the air during the battle and annihilate the enemy airforce on their bases.¹³ The Luftwaffe was to destroy any enemy air power during the actual attack and was to provide cover for ground troops.

Hitler counted on a speed up in production of a new rocket propelled fighter plane that could climb to high altitudes very quickly and was faster than any aircraft the Allies possessed. Unfortunately, the production of these planes fell far behind schedule and those produced were committed piecemeal. As a result, only a small portion promised by the Luftwaffe was ever committed during the actual battle.

One of the most daring but least effective ideas conceived by Hitler for this counter-offensive was the formation of the 150th Panzer Brigade led by Otto Skorzeny. From the earliest planning stages, Hitler had wanted to seize the bridges behind the American and British lines intact. He refused to commit airborne troops because he

¹³R. V. Gersdorff, The Ardennes Offensive, Historical Division, Headquarters, United States Army, Europe, [n.d.], p. 8.

was convinced that their employment would not be successful.¹⁴ Finally, after several weeks, Hitler struck on the idea of using Otto Skorzeny.

Skorzeny was the German ideal of what a hero should look like, tall, blond and extremely handsome. He had made a name for himself as something of a dare-devil. He had electrified the world in 1944 by his daring commando rescue of Mussolini from his Italian captors in the Alps. With a group of 108 men, he had snatched the Fascist dictator from the Albergo Campo Imperatore Hotel, a veritable fortress manned by superior numbers of Italian guards.¹⁵

Hitler believed that, with a special group of hand picked commandoes, Skorzeny would be capable of advancing far ahead of the regular troops and be able to sieze these bridges before the Americans would be able to react.

In October, Hitler called a surprised Skorzeny into his headquarters and personally discussed the details of the mission. He gave Skorzeny a freehand to form a special commando unit and to equip it with captured uniforms, weapons and vehicles.

The problem of dressing up as Americans or British greatly distressed Skorzeny. The Russians had dressed as

¹⁴Percy Ernst Schramm, The Preparation for the Offensive in the Ardennes, (Sept 16-Dec., 44), Historical Division, Headquarters, United States Army, Europe, [n.d.], p. 97.

¹⁵John S. D. Eisenhower, The Bitter Woods (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1969), p. 122.

German soldiers during several attacks on the eastern front but Skorzeny believed that such an action was in direct violation of the Hague Convention. Skorzeny consulted several legal experts and decided that as long as they did not open fire while in Allied uniforms there would be no violation.¹⁶

Operation Greif, as the plan came to be known, was in trouble before it got underway. Calling for volunteers for such a mission meant that any secrecy surrounding its formation was impossible. Rumors as to the unit's true mission ran wild and it was decided to deliberately encourage and even multiply them. [This is how the rumor that the commandoes' real objective was to either kill or capture General Eisenhower began.] As to the actual mission, Skorzeny only disclosed its true objectives to his top officers. His men were merely told that their mission was to create as much confusion as possible behind enemy lines. In the end, that was about all they really accomplished.

Skorzeny was greatly discouraged by the quality of English speaking Germans who volunteered. Most of the German soldiers could speak text book English but little else. The uniforms that he was given proved to be a mixed bag and very few soldiers had complete Allied uniforms. German tanks and jeeps were made up to look like American

¹⁶Stephen B. Patrick, "The Ardennes Offensive", Strategy and Tactics, (New York: Simulation Publications, March/April, 1973), p. 13.

and British ones'. The whole affair took on the makings of a great comic opera. In the end, only the special commando unit dropped behind enemy lines, saw any action and its effect was negligible.

The men and equipment had been gathered from all fronts, the commanders had been chosen and the battle plans drawn by the German Supreme Command but it would have no chance for success unless complete surprise of the Allied forces was achieved. It was therefore of the utmost necessity that as few people as possible knew of the actual plans and preparations, which when no longer could be concealed, should be disguised in a way that they could not be interpreted as an initial phase of an offensive.¹⁷

Security regulations were strictly followed during the entire planning period for the German attack. Those who were informed of the attack plans were forced to sign a secrecy pledge.¹⁸ They were warned that if the pledge was broken the penalty would be death. Hitler himself laid down a careful schedule outlining when the various echelons of

¹⁷R. V. Gersdorff, The Ardennes Offensive, Historical Division, Headquarters, United States Army, Europe, [n.d.], p. 16.

¹⁸Percy Ernst Schramm, The Preparation for the Offensive in the Ardennes, (Sept 16-Dec., 44), Historical Division, Headquarters, United States Army, Europe, [n.d.], p. 224.

command should be notified of the plan,¹⁹ and each commander was informed of only his particular role.

All orders and instructions and also corresponding messages were handled by special officers.²⁰ Neither telephone nor teletype were to be used for type communication since the lifting of the secret was to be anticipated, in spite of the scrambling of telephone conversations and the use of cryptograms.²¹

The most important steps for camouflage were taken to conceal the build up of forces and the enormous store of supplies that had been gathered. The very code name given to the operation, "Watch on the Rhine," was chosen to give the Allies the impression that if a counter-offensive came, it would be directed against an enemy breakthrough on the Rhine. For this reason assault divisions were to be brought up into the attack areas on the last day. Daylight movement of troops was forbidden. No scouts were allowed to make reconnaissance of the land over which the attack was to be made. Combat planes were to be held deep inside

¹⁹Siegfried Westphal, The German Army in the West (London, England: Cassell and Company, 1951), p. 182.

²⁰Alfred Jodl and Wilhelm Keitel, Questionnaire on the Ardennes Offensive, Historical Division, Headquarters, United States Army, Europe, [n.d.] , p. 8.

²¹Percy Ernst Schramm, The Preparation for the Offensive in the Ardennes, (Sept 16-Dec., 44), Historical Division, Headquarters, United States Army, Europe, [n.d.] , p. 225.

Germany until the day of the attack. All army units were required to retain their existing command posts.²²

In order to stop the danger of deserters, who might give the Allies vital information, no troops coming from Alsace, Lorraine or Luxembourg were committed along the front.²³ Front line troops were told that the new divisions were being assembled to relieve battle units. Fake radio messages were given out.

Although the Allies were aware of the movements of the Sixth Panzer Army, it was believed that its objective was Cologne. A dummy army group was set up north of Cologne to confuse the Allies. Hitler ordered total radio silence, a rounding-up of civilians from the battle area and, in a nutshell, allowed the Allies no hard intelligence information indicating either the intention of the Germans to launch a counter-offensive, or the time and place of the attack.²⁴

As the troops moved into their assembly areas, immediately prior to the attack, motor vehicles were prohibited nearer than five miles from the front line at night

²²Robert E. Merriam, The Battle of the Bulge, (New York: Ballantine Books, Inc., 1947), p. 14.

²³Percy Ernst Schramm, The Preparation for the Offensive in the Ardennes, (Sept-16 Dec., 44), Historical Division, Headquarters, United States Army, Europe, [n.d.], p. 229.

²⁴Lyman B. Kirkpatrick, Captains Without Eyes (London: Collier-Mac Millan, Ltd., 1969), p. 256.

and planes flew up and down the front to drown out any possible vehicle noises.²⁵ Even the horses that were used to bring up supplies had their hooves covered.

Artillery pieces being moved up were stopped during the daylight hours and placed in wooded areas near roads. Bridging equipment, a sure sign of an offensive action, was carefully hidden. Most important high officers, at this point, were encouraged to spread false rumors concerning their mission.²⁶

Throughout World War II the German Army conducted numerous offensive and counter-offensive operations in which they depended heavily on the principle of surprise for initial success. This basic element of the secrecy plan was perhaps the most effective during the Ardennes Offensive because it corresponded so well with the Allied frame of mind.

²⁵Robert E. Merriam, The Battle of the Bulge (New York: Ballantine Books, Inc., 1947), pp. 14-15.

²⁶Ibid., p. 15.

Chapter 4

THE PEARL HARBOR OF EUROPE

On the evening of December 15, 1944, twenty divisions, 250,000 men and thousands of machines, completed their last move to the line of departure. Shortly after midnight all German soldiers about to take part in the Ardennes offensive were assembled at their assault posts. They were then read the following message from Field Marshall von Rundstedt:

Soldiers of the Western Front!
Your great hour has come. Large
attacking armies have started
against the Anglo-Americans. I
do not have to tell you more
than that. You feel it your-
self. We gamble everything.
You carry with you the holy
obligation to give all to
achieve superhuman objectives
for all our Fatherland and our
Führer!¹

The men became tense as they listened in anticipation of the impending attack. Suddenly it was past midnight on December 16, 1944, and all was quiet along the eighty-eight mile front.

At 0530 hours roaring German tank guns served notice

¹John Toland, Battle - The Story of the Bulge (New York: Randon House, 1959), p. 22.

on startled American troops that one of the greatest pitched battles ever fought by the United States or its Allies had begun. The attack came as a total surprise to the Allies, for many of their highest commanders had been confidently saying that the Germans would never be capable of launching another offensive.² The battle area soon became a scene of chaos and confusion, as the Germans were able, in the first forty-eight hours, to penetrate fifteen miles into Allied lines and threatened to sever the Allied armies. Alarm spread behind the front, and worse still in Allied capitols, it was like a nightmare come true.³ Fears were voiced that the Germans might reach the channel coast and produce a second Dunkirk.⁴ It was Hitler's last big gamble and the boldest of all.

The Germans had scored the major prerequisite for a successful attack; complete and utter surprise. The question then arises as to why, in the light of the considerable amount of information available to the Allies, did they not predict more accurately not only the time, but the nature of the German offensive.

The warnings were apparent months before the German attack was launched. The intelligence information was

²John North, North West Europe 1944-45 (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1953), p. 158.

³Jacques Nobencourt, Hitler's Last Gamble (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), p. 17.

⁴B. H. Liddell Hart, The German Generals Talk (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1948), p. 272.

evaluated correctly on countless occasions but the commanders failed to believe it.

Without a doubt the Allied position in the Ardennes Sector prior to the counter-offensive played an important role in determining the nature of the German attack.

The sector was a wide open invitation to attack. Held by VIII Corps, under First Army, it had been a semi-rest area for months. Three Divisions, 4th, 28th and 106th, the last without battle experience, were disposed on an 88 mile front, with 9th Armored Division, minus Combat Command, in reserve.

Further, not only were the divisions spread paper-thin over this long line, but they kept only a portion of their troops in position. The remainder were in rear areas, engaged chiefly in pig and deer-hunting and pursuing amatory objectives. In some localities the holiday attitude had reached a point where patrolling to maintain contact with the enemy had practically ceased.

It was this lack of control that enabled the Germans to sideslip an Infantry division from in front of VIII Corps to Third Army's zone, without the former knowing of it.

Further, despite the great length of the front they were holding and their wide dispersion, the Infantry divisions were not permitted to organize their positions. They were prohibited from constructing defenses in depth to strengthen their tenuous lines.⁵

⁵Robert S. Allen, Lucky Forward - The History of General George Patton's Third U. S. Army (New York: Mac Fadden - Bartell, 1965), p. 159.

It is not difficult then to understand why the Germans might launch an attack along this front and why such an attack would cause such panic within Allied lines. It was the weakest and thinnest sector of the Allied front and everybody knew it. But no one seemed overly concerned, not even when on numerous occasions various G-2 reports warned the commanders of the dangers that could and eventually would be faced.

Part of the answer as to why the Allies were so taken by surprise lies in the tremendous victories the Anglo-American forces had achieved. They had performed the unheard of feat of landing on a hostile shore and of building up its supplies. They had attacked what was considered to be the greatest army in the world, routed that army, chased it across the breadth of France, destroyed thousands upon thousands of its tanks, guns, planes and other equipment. They had liberated four European countries and charged to the very border of the enemy himself. No one believed that the Germans were in any condition to strike back with a vicious blow that would rock the Allies on their heels.

The Allies, at this point, were on the offensive and General Patton was preparing to renew his attack against the Saar within three days.⁶

⁶Dwight David Eisenhower, Crusade in Europe (Garden City, N.Y.: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1948), p. 344.

Optimism characterized the Allied frame of mind. Exhilarated at their tremendous victories in France, overconfident, and anxious to end the war with a final blow, they became obsessed with achieving this goal almost to the exclusion of all other possibilities.

Intelligence officers of all commands seemed to enter into a deliberate contest to see who could find the most amount of humor in the critical German situation. Wisecracks and serious reports alike, led one to only one conclusion. The Germans were on their last leg even if they did not act like it.

The cleverness, camouflage, deception, and secrecy of the German plan was a masterpiece of military planning and preparation.⁷ Without a doubt, the attack was carefully and craftily planned but for the Allies the clues had been there.

The first isolated clues to the German intentions dripped through the Allied lines more than two months before the attack. On October 3, Twelfth Army Group's Weekly Intelligence Summary read:

The most significant occurrence in enemy dispositions during the past period is the apparent withdrawal of the majority of the enemy's armored units for regrouping

⁷B. H. Liddell Hart, The German Generals Talk (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1948), p. 273.

and reforming in Germany, thus supplying him with a sizeable mobile reserve.⁸

Although more clues came in dribblets rather than bucketsfull, many other more specific and emphatic warnings appeared in G-2 reports within the next two months.

On November 23, the G-2 Daily Periodic Report of Headquarter Third Army stated:

The fine re-formed Panzer divisions, though not yet contacted on any Front, appear to have moved from their Westphalia concentration area. This powerful striking force with an estimated 500 tanks, is still an untouched strategic reserve for coordinated counter-offensive employment. Also, the constantly expanding Corps Volksgrenadier divisions incapable of commitment in the West by December 1.⁹

Of particular interest are the last two sentences which note that the enemy was still capable of a co-ordinated counter-offensive in the West which would include the Ardennes sector by December 1, 1944.

On December 7, the same publication went on to stress the menace that the German reserves presented:

The most important factor regarding the enemy's reserves continues to be the large Panzer concentration west of

⁸Robert S. Allen, Lucky Forward - The History of General George Patton's Third U. S. Army (New York: Mac Fadden - Bartell, 1965), p. 162.

⁹Ibid., p. 162.

the Rhine northern portion
of Twelfth Army Group's zone
of advance.¹⁰

On December 11, the G-2 Daily Periodic Report was even more blunt in its cry of alarm:

Overall, the initiative still rests with the Allies. But the massive Armored force the enemy has built up in reserve gives him the definite capability of launching a spoiling offensive to disrupt allied plans.¹¹

So while the G-2's of the Third and First Armies and VIII Corps were becoming increasingly apprehensive, SHAEF, Headquarters Twelfth Army Group, and Headquarters Twenty-First Army Group, British, were calmly dismissing these warnings without a second thought.

During the weeks prior to the offensive certain significant facts were recorded in various weekly intelligence reports. The Third Army's Weekly G-2 Report of December 11, 1944 stated:

Despite the drain of large losses, the enemy continues to maintain a cohesive line along the entire front without drawing heavily on his Panzer reserves. During the week, the enemy actually withdrew two Panzer divisions from contact and although committing the 719 Infantry Division against the

¹⁰Robert S. Allen, Lucky Forward - The History of General George Patton's Third U. S. Army (New York: Mac Fadden - Bartell, 1965), p. 162.

¹¹Ibid., p. 163.

Third United States Army, his only major reinforcement in the West during the week, the enemy continues to hold the bulk of his infantry reserve out of the line.¹²

The report went on to note that although the Germans had suffered heavy losses, they were able to control their defenses with a minimum of armor.

Admittedly, some of the intelligence media was not working at full strength. Combat patrolling by the divisions occupying General Middleton's sector was at a minimum.¹³ Then too, the Germans began to react violently to American patrol activity, but this should have been an indication that something unusual was in the wind.

Six days before the attack was launched, a First Army intelligence staff officer issued a report stating that a concentration of infantry and armor behind the Siegfried Line indicated an all out counter-offensive was coming. Furthermore, by December 10, American Intelligence was aware that five German divisions had left Holland for an unknown destination.¹⁴ Unfortunately, these important clues failed to impress the right people.

¹²Brigadier General Oscar W. Kock, G-2: Intelligence For Patton (Philadelphia, Penn.: Whitmore Publishing Co., 1971), p. 87.

¹³Robert E. Merriam, The Battle of the Bulge (New York: Ballantine Books, Inc., 1947), p. 73.

¹⁴Chester Wilmot, The Struggle for Europe (New York: Harper and Brothers Publisher, 1952), p. 575.

Various commanders disagreed or simply disregarded these reports. They believed that von Rundstedt was far too professional a field commander and too wise a man to throw away his strategic reserves on a gamble which was bound to fail. This became the most basic of their miscalculations. Allied intelligence made the mistake of assuming that since such a counter-offensive would obviously end in failure, it would never be tried. But German strategy was no longer governed by purely military considerations or being planned by German military professionals.

Up until the very day of the battle, reports drifted through the lines mentioning large concentrations of German troops in various villages.¹⁵ Despite careful German precautions, heavy vehicle movements were heard. A woman who had escaped behind Allied lines told of the woods near Bitbury being jammed with German equipment. By the time she was taken to First Army Headquarters, the attack had begun. All of these clues might have been taken seriously were it not for the Allied frame of mind and the inability of the intelligence officers to collect, evaluate, and disseminate this information.

On December 12, Groups' Weekly Intelligence Summary gives some indication as to how badly the Allies predicted the German commitment:

¹⁵Chester Wilmot, The Struggle for Europe (New York: Harper and Brothers Publisher, 1952), pp. 547-5.

It is now certain that attrition is steadily sapping the strength of German Forces on the Western front and the crust of defense is thinner, more brittle, and more vulnerable than it appears on our G-2 maps or to the troops in the line. Two outstanding facts support this unqualified statement:

The first is that there is ample evidence that the strength of the Infantry divisions that have been in the line on active sectors since the beginning of our offensive has been cut at least 50 percent and several other divisions are known to have been virtually destroyed. The second fact is that while the enemy's minimum replacement need in the face of our offensive is 20 divisions a month, the intimated total available to him from all sources, for the foreseeable future, is 15 divisions a month.

These two basic facts - the deadly weakness of the individual Infantry division in the line, plus the inevitability of the enemy falling still further in replacement arrears - make it certain that before long he will not only fail in his current attempt to withdraw and rest his tactical reserve, but he will be forced to commit at least part of his Panzer Army to the line.¹⁶

The Germans did commit their Panzer Army to the line but not quite as Group had predicted. They committed it just four days later in full strength and in deadly surprise.

¹⁶Robert S. Allen, Lucky Forward - The History of General George Patton's Third U. S. Army (New York: Mac Fadden - Bartell, 1965), p. 163.

Just one day before the Germans hurled two great Armies through the surprised line of VIII Corps, Field Marshal Montgomery's operation order of the day read:

The enemy is at present fighting a defensive campaign on all fronts; his situation is such that he cannot stage major offensive operations. Furthermore, at all costs he has not the transport or the petrol that would be necessary for mobile operations, nor could his tanks compete with ours in the mobile battle.¹⁷

It is not known whether the view held by Field Marshal Montgomery affected the decisions of the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces or Headquarters Twelfth Army Group but without a doubt, somewhere, the meeting of the top level commanders resulted in a tragic failure of command.

After the counter-offensive, General Eisenhower in his report admitted that numerous reports indicated an impending German offensive but that he simply could not believe the Germans would be foolish enough to strike during the hard winter months.

My Headquarters and Twelfth Army Group had felt for some time that a counter-attack through the Ardennes was a possibility, since American forces were stretched very thinly there

¹⁷Lyman B. Kirkpatrick, Jr., Captains Without Eyes (London: The Macmillan Company, Collier Macmillan Ltd., 1969), p. 250.

in order to provide troops for attack elsewhere and because Field Marshal von Rundstedt had gradually placed in this quiet sector six infantry divisions, a larger number than he required for reasonable security. However, we did not consider it highly probable that Von Rundstedt would in winter, try to use that region in which to stage a counter-offensive on a large scale, feeling certain that we could deal with such an effort, and that the results would ultimately be disastrous to Germany.¹⁸

The lack of aerial reconnaissance seriously added to the breakdown of the intelligence system and the failure of command by commanders. The weather in the weeks immediately preceding the German attack precluded much of the aerial reconnaissance on which Allied intelligence officers relied so heavily.¹⁹ Because bad weather prevented flying or photographing, Allied intelligence was greatly reduced. Although bad weather put a stop to Allied air reconnaissance it did not stop the nightly movements of German men and equipment.

There can be no argument in that the Allies did not know of the attack plans. They suspected some sort of an attack, but not in the Ardennes and had no real knowledge of the strength that the Germans possessed. They had

¹⁸Milton Shulman, Defeat in the West (New York: Dutton and Company, 1948), p. 224.

¹⁹Chester Wilmot, The Struggle for Europe (New York: Harper and Brothers Publisher, 1952), pp. 574-5.

numerous pieces of the puzzle which could have been pieced together to fit the picture of the German attack. Unfortunately, the frame of mind to make that possible did not exist. The Allies were without a doubt derelict in their interpretation of the information that had been gathered.

The Germans denied the Allies much of the hard intelligence often gathered by civilians in the battle area by evacuating these areas. Surprise was achieved mainly because of the extreme secrecy with which the plan was devised and initiated. It is equally true that the Allies had yet to learn not to underestimate Hitler's evil genius.

The Americans had been fighting an irrational Hitler for three years and had been watching their Allies fight him for two years prior to that. They had followed his pattern of conquest and surprise through Poland, France, Russia, Norway, the Balkans and Italy, yet they had not learned that they were dealing with a driven genius. The Americans had been subjected to the mastermind's intuition before, first at Mortain when he attempted to rally his forces to bite off Patton's fast moving armored columns,²⁰ and later by a series of three sudden, unexpected attacks at various points, along their west wall line. So astonishing were these attacks, that they prompted an alert intelligence

²⁰ Brenton G. Wallace, Patton and His Third Army (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Military Service Publishing Company, 1946), p. 137.

officer of the XIX Corps to report and conclude,

The German's selection of the swamps west of the Meuse as a spot to employ two of his best mobile divisions against the 7th Armored Division in southern Holland, where the Germans massed two divisions without American knowledge, alerts us to the fact that the enemy cannot be trusted always to attack according to the book. He remains a clever, aggressive foe.²¹

Perhaps, had the Americans taken heed of this warning, they could have foreseen the danger and avoided their near defeat in the Ardennes. As it was, the Germans scored the major prerequisite for a successful attack -- complete tactical surprise.

Foiled though the Allies were, Hitler's dream of a quick and easy victory soon faded. Within ten days the counter-offensive began to disintegrate. The German's bold plan that had been so reminiscent of earlier Wehrmacht victories crumbled and was scattered like so many ashes in the wind.

²¹Robert E. Merriam, The Battle of the Bulge (New York: Ballantine Books, Inc., 1947), p. 76.

Chapter 5

A BRIEF COURSE OF EVENTS OF THE BATTLE

On December 16, 1944, the Germans launched their biggest offensive since the beginning of their campaign in the West. By taking full advantage of bad weather conditions and by maintaining rigid radio silence, the Germans skillfully regrouped their forces. Attacks were simultaneously launched at five places along an eighty-eight mile front. The skill with which the regrouping and launching of these attacks took place achieved a stunning degree of surprise. The element of surprise was heightened by the enemy's disregard of terrain in selecting the points of attack, and he threw armored forces into sectors considered ill-adapted for the use of tanks.¹ The Germans' intelligence concerning the Allies situation was excellent. The attack was directed at a part of the line held in the north by two divisions seeing action for the first time and in the south against two divisions that had seen bloody action in the Hürtgen Forest and were in a quiet area for rest and rehabilitation.

¹Destruction of the German Armies in Western Europe, June 6th 1944 - May 9th 1945, p. 19.

To maintain surprise as long as possible, the German attacks were initially light and had the appearance of reconnaissance in force.² It was not until the night of December 16 that the Allies realized the real intent of the Germans.

The Germans offensive into the Ardennes was launched along two principal routes. In the north "Sepp" Dietrich's newly formed Sixth S. S. Panzer Army was given the mission of driving through Malmédy to Liège, to cut off the First and Ninth American Armies from the Armies to the South and to secure a position along the Meuse.³ Once this was done, the German plan called for a drive towards Antwerp to take this vital port from the Allies and to cut off the British and Canadian forces in Holland from the rest of the Allied forces. The southern drive was made by Manteuffel's Fifth Panzer Army. Its mission was to drive straight through to the Meuse at Dinant and Namur.⁴ On the extreme south of the drive the German Seventh Army was to attack into Luxembourg and to recapture the capital.

On December 18, the Germans continued to try to get

²Otto Hitzfeld, The Ardennes Offensive, Historical Division, Headquarters, United States Army, Europe, [1954], p. 4.

³Gunther Blumentritt, The Ardennes Offensive, Historical Division, Headquarters, United States Army, [1966], p. 11.

⁴Donald Grey Brownlow, Panzer Baron (North Quincy, Massachusetts: The Christopher Publishing House, 1975), p. 123.

through to Malmédy but were repeatedly thrown back by the First United States Army. To the south, advance units of the First S. S. Panzer Division managed to get through to Stavelot. The Germans gained considerable ground around St. Vith but were unable to capture this important road junction as quickly as they would have liked because of stubborn American resistance. To the south the Germans succeeded in getting as far west as Bastogne and cutting it off. By December 21, the German Panzer units had been frustrated in their attempts to capture Malmédy. Heavy attacks launched against Bastogne were repulsed by the 101st United States Airborne Division with heavy losses to the Germans.

In Luxembourg the Germans got as far as Ettlebruch and no further. On December 22, the Germans made a push on Bastogne but it failed to budge. By this time the German Armies were having problems everywhere. Then on December 23, the weather cleared and the Germans began sustaining tremendous casualties as the Allied Air Forces began to sweep the area for all daylight movement. The Germans turned to night attacks, particularly, around Bastogne where the frenzy of the effort to take the city was stepped up as the Fourth United States Armored Division started its drive toward the encircled city.⁵

⁵Destruction of the German Armies in Western Europe, June 6th 1944 - May 9th 1945, p. 20.

Throughout the month of December, the Germans continued to pour more men and equipment into the battle. All reserves that had been held back were, by December 24, beginning a concentrated attempt to get west and to Antwerp. Then began an all out attack on the city of Bastogne. Those elements of the German Army that pressed westward met staunch resistance from British and Americans who had recovered from their initial shock. They began smashing into the Germans and killed, wounded or captured thousands.

The fighting was particularly bitter around Bastogne on Christmas Day and the 101st United States Airborne Division inflicted heavy losses on the 15th Panzer Grenadier, Panzer Lehr and the 26th Infantry Divisions.⁶ For the next four days the Germans tried to continue the drive west, but, by then, their way was blocked and stopped. By December 30, the German Army was on the defensive.

During the first two weeks in January, von Rundstedt, realizing his position was hopeless, began trying to salvage as much as possible of the Fifth and Sixth S. S. Panzer Armies. This effort was carried out under the most difficult conditions because, by this time, the Allied air forces were giving the Germans no breathing space. The Germans lacked the freedom of maneuver because of the constant Allied pressure. In the East, a new menace to the Reich

⁶After Action Report. Third U.S. Army, August 1944 - 9 May 1945; Vol. I, Operations, 3rd U.S. Army, [n.d.], p. 633.

loomed as the Russians launched their winter offensive. On January 12, 1945, Stalin launched his greatest offensive of the war and within two weeks after starting their offensive the Russians were on German soil.⁷ The increasing demands on the Germans to transfer Panzer divisions to the east resulted in a complete breakdown and withdrawal from the Ardennes.

Hitler had gambled away his last reserves and had lost. His army was in retreat and the walls were crumbling around Germany. His generals had from the beginning foreseen defeat of his plan. But what a bold and brilliant one it had been, if it had succeeded! In the end, Hitler blamed his commanders for the debacle; yet failure of command was not the primary cause for the failure of his grandiose scheme.

⁷John Strawson, Hitler's Battles for Europe (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), p. 217.

Chapter 6

FAILURE IN THE ARDENNES

At the beginning of the offensive, success for the operation seemed almost a certainty. The Allies, taken completely by surprise, had their forward positions nearly overrun everywhere. The American's resistance crumbled more from hour to hour and the battle scene was one of complete enemy disorganization. The whole German estimation of the enemy and the area was correct. The Allied air forces had been grounded because of weather conditions. The fates it seemed were once more on the German side. In spite of all this, success was to be denied the Germans.

The Ardennes offensive, as far as the original German plan was concerned, was over within ten days of the actual engagement of forces. Military historians and military men on both sides have given various views as to what went wrong. On a whole almost all reasons that have been proposed are valid.

Undoubtedly the resources that were available to the Reich in no manner, shape or form, matched up to Hitler's grand design. The Germans were under an absolute and

ruthless command which consolidated all available resources for this offensive with an iron hand and a blind eye.¹ After the troops had been gathered, their training, because of limited time, was mostly insufficient. [Hitler, on the whole, did not believe in much training.] Although the troops were willing and aggressive, they were also tired. No amount of amateurish wishful thinking would transform these armies into a sound military machine. Still the consensus of opinion, within Germany, was that all available means and men for the prosecution of the war had not yet been exploited. While this opinion prevailed, Hitler was able to maintain his fanatical belief of victory in the Ardennes.² Unfortunately, sound military operations cannot be put into execution through fanatical faith alone. While the preparations for the offensive were incomplete and the troop commitment for the operation was too weak and disproportionate to the task, the plan was further doomed to failure because of the complete breakdown of co-ordination of all armies involved.³ Each separate command had always moved together in an attack as one body, but the co-ordination of these commands was no longer common by December, 1944.

¹Gunther Blumentritt, The Ardennes Offensive, tran., Theodore Klein, Historical Divison, Headquarters, United States Army, Europe, [1966], p. 9.

²A. D. Reichhelm, Summary of Army Group B. Engagements, tran., Ernest W. Matti, [1947], p. 3.

³Ibid., p. 3.

Numbers, precise calculations and the requirements of the situation were completely disregarded.⁴

From the outset the aims of the offensive were too far fetched to compare with the actual number of men and supplies Hitler had at his disposal. Over and over again Hitler refused to believe that the supplies for such a large scale offensive were not available. As a result of the inadequacies of supplies and ammunition, the various elements of the armies were farther separated from supply depots than ordinarily.⁵

Perhaps the main cause for the failure in the Ardennes lies with Hitler's hope that the Allies, the Americans in particular, would make mistakes. He believed that the Americans would be unable to muster a quick reaction to the German assault. He should have assumed that the Americans would react exactly as they did.

Bradley quickly moved his reserve units up to the front. Eisenhower called off Patton's planned offensive into the Saar Valley and had Patton wheel his army to attack the German left flank. He then put units of Bradley's command, that had been cut off, under Montgomery. As a result, these

⁴Gunther Blumentritt, The Ardennes Offensive, tran., Theodore Klein, Historical Division, Headquarters, United States Army, Europe, [1966], p. 11.

⁵Carl Wagener, Main Reasons for the Failure of the Ardennes Offensive, Historical Division, Headquarters, United States Army, Europe, [n.d.], p. 1.

units became a part of a co-ordinated defense.⁶ This completely exploded Hitler's belief that the Americans and British could not launch a co-ordinated effort.

The quick reaction of the American command following the German assault, coupled with the seemingly limitless number of reserves the Allies threw into the battle, shifted the balance of the assault.

Hitler had counted on a quick breakthrough because of the chaos and confusion the attack would have on an unprepared enemy. Unfortunately, for as many American troops that turned tail and ran, there were scores more that held their ground and fought. The American units in the midst of the German assault, being without orders or information, simply took matters into their own hands and fought back.⁷ This is one of the imponderables of war. It was impossible for the Germans to know that their enemy would suddenly stand and fight. There developed a strange air of competition among the various units to see which group could tally up more individual acts of bravery. Little is known as to the effect that the massacre at Malmédy had on the American soldier, but once it was known that the Germans were not taking prisoners the vast majority of Americans fought in what might just be called their bravest hour.

⁶Stephen B. Patrick, "The Ardennes Offensive," Strategy and Tactics (New York: Simulation Publications, March/April, 1973), p. 23.

⁷Alan Moorehead, Eclipse (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1945), p. 224.

The Germans' greatest failure in the Ardennes was their inability to commit troops against the rest of the western front. Once the Americans began to react and pull out troops from other positions, the Germans found themselves no match for such massed enemy divisions.⁸ The goals of the entire operation were becoming more and more utopian due to loss of time, rugged terrain, bad weather conditions, and the inability of the Germans to acquire sufficient mobility.⁹

As the situation began to deteriorate, each battle area commander waited, in vain, for new instructions. Unfortunately all appeals to Hitler were dismissed. Hitler was determined to adhere to his previous intentions and to reopen the offensive against the Meuse.¹⁰

The goal of the attack had been the Meuse River and, eventually, Antwerp. To achieve this goal, loss of time had to be avoided before the enemy got a chance to organize. The German High Command ordered all stubborn enemy resistance by-passed.¹¹

⁸The German Ardennes Offensive, Historical Division Headquarters, United States Army, Europe, Foreign Military Studies Branch; MS A-937, [n.d.], p. 8.

⁹Carl Wagener, Main Reasons for the Failure of the Ardennes Offensive, Historical Division, Headquarters, United States Army, Europe, [n.d.], p. 9.

¹⁰Hasso von Manteuffel, The Battle of the Ardennes 1944-5, Decisive Battles of W. W. II: The German View, ed., H. A. Jacobsen and J. Rohwer; (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, [1965]), p. 409.

¹¹Carl Wagener, Main Reasons for the Failure of the Ardennes Offensive, Historical Division, Headquarters, United States Army, Europe, [n.d.], p. 10.

The Germans could not afford to engage in heavy fighting at any point along the way, but that is exactly what occurred. Both at St. Vith and Bastogne, the Germans encountered heavy resistance and instead of going around both towns, they chose to stay and fight. The Americans began to throw additional forces into these areas and the result was decisive. The German reserves that were brought up to Bastogne and St. Vith arrived too late. In any case, Bastogne tied up so many German troops and St. Vith brought such a loss of time that the Germans' main objective failed. They spent too much time in these areas; time that should have been spent trying to get clear of the Ardennes.¹²

Another problem the Germans faced was that they possessed a limited number of motorized vehicles, therefore making a quick operation difficult. Horse drawn troops were no match for a fully motorized enemy. The vehicles on hand were so old that, in difficult terrain, on small, steep roads and on mountain roads, covered with ice, they constantly broke down. Repairs could not be completed because the Germans lacked spare parts. Horse-driven units were constantly plagued by sickness and death.¹³

¹²Stephen B. Patrick, "The Ardennes Offensive," Strategy and Tactics (New York: Simulation Publications, March/April, 1973), p. 24.

¹³Hugh M. Cole, The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge, Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, [1965], p. 665.

The Germans had chosen December to fight because of the relative certainty of inclement weather in the Ardennes. Snow, ice, and freezing rain all turned the battle area into a nightmare for both the attacker and the attacked. While the low clouds and lack of visibility kept the American and British bombers on the ground, the elements were to have an equally devastating effect on the German army. Especially so, when one considers that the German soldier was no longer so well provided for as he had been in previous winter campaigns.

The weather also added to the problem of tactics. This battle was an infantry battle. But no one on the German side seemed to realize this in their planning.¹⁴ The whole of the German battle plan had revolved around their elite Panzer units who were met and stopped by American infantry. No where in the planning had the Germans taken precautions against the inevitable mud and slush these tanks were to face. The hope for a rapid movement through the Ardennes was quickly squashed. So, in the end, the two cornerstones of their planning, adverse weather conditions and an unsuitable, rugged terrain, became their enemy as well as their ally in the assault.

The insufficient training conditions of the S. S. units were also to blame for the failure of the offensive.

¹⁴Stephen B. Patrick, "The Ardennes Offensive," Strategy and Tactics (New York: Simulation Publications, March/April, 1973), p. 23.

Its motorized units, having no driving techniques and no road discipline, were soon hopelessly wedged into four columns.¹⁵ They clogged the northern roads while forcing their way deeper into areas of the 5th Panzer Army.

The S. S., by December 1944, lacked the discipline of the earlier S. S. units. In lacking discipline they also lacked obedience and the fanatical faith that led to the victories they had piled up early in the war.

Then, too, the S. S. were inept at reconnaissance. In general, if their reports came in, they were mostly incorrect and did not help the situation.

Lastly, one must consider what effect six years of war had upon the German soldier. By December 1944, the demands placed upon him had become too much. The German soldier, like any other soldier was prepared to do his duty, but by the end of 1944, he was tired. The whole game of preparedness and combat morale of the masses was missing; he avoided close combat, he slackened after a large effort, and his mood changed quickly after a reversal.¹⁶ The German soldier had lost his belief in his mission. He had ceased to believe in his ability to win. Eventually,

¹⁵The German Ardennes Offensive, Historical Division, Headquarters, United States Army, Europe; MS A-977 C. 2., [n.d.] , p. 11.

¹⁶Otto Hitzfeld, The Ardennes Offensive, Historical Division, Headquarters, United States Army, Europe, 1954 , p. 15.

he lost confidence in his commander, the High Command and, ultimately, Hitler. The German soldier is no more a war-monger than any other common soldier.

On January 19, 1945 Hitler began to withdraw troops from the Ardennes. The offensive was over. It had passed into the annals of history.

The last desperate attempt to alter the course of the war was a total failure. It was frustrated in the front lines by the expedient measures of the opposing force. The end for the German Reich was now only a question of time.

Chapter 7

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

In the light of its aftermath, the Ardennes offensive seems to have been doomed to failure from its inception. After the war ended, all the generals and staff officers to a man, who directly took part in either its planning or execution, were quick to disclaim any hopes for its success. General von Rundstedt was only the first of many to have claimed, rather justifiably, that he had little say in the actual planning and execution of the attack. Still the core question is why such an offensive was launched at all? Perhaps no one has given a better reason than General Jodl, who when under questioning by his American captors stated, "It was a desperate gamble, but we were in a desperate situation, and the only chance to save it was by a desperate decision. We had to stake everything."¹ And stake everything they did. But what was the cost to themselves, to their enemies and to the future of Germany?

The counter-offensive left 120,000 Germans killed, wounded or missing; over 1,000 planes and 500 tanks were

¹ Andrew A. Rooney, Four Great Battles of World War II (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1962), p. 199.

destroyed as well. The Americans sustained nearly 80,000 casualties.² These figures are simply a body count and do not tell the whole story.

In spite of the astonishingly quick reaction by the United States Command, the commitment of the American counter-attack did not achieve the destruction of the German offensive forces. The Germans, although severely hit, were able to pull back into Germany with the majority of their forces still intact. Had the Allies allowed the Germans to reach or cross the Meuse, then attacked with their stronger forces, they would have caused the destruction of Army Group "B".³ Once the German retreat began, the Allies stopped their attacks along the western front. This meant that once the fighting resumed, the Allies had to fight across areas they had formerly held.

The Germans were given a breathing spell. But the loss of men and materials was so great that the value of a six week gain before the Allies began their sweep into Germany was in reality negligible. Hitler had delayed the inevitable and allowed his people to suffer a short while longer.

²Ronald Heiferman, World War II (Secaucus, N. J.: Derby Books, 1973), p. 234.

³Carl Wagener, Main Reasons for the Failure of the Ardennes Offensive, Historical Division, Headquarters, United States Army, Europe, [n.d.] , p. 16.

The consequences of defeat in the Ardennes on Germany were that valuable, irreplaceable forces had suffered heavily and this meant the further weakening of the last defenses of the western front.⁴ Consequently any hope the Germans might have had of successfully resisting an Allied assault had disappeared.

Hitler had set all his hopes on this one last offensive. He had gambled everything. He had scrapped together all of Germany's last reserves for this desperate act. It was inevitable that a failure of his plan would result in an unavoidable catastrophe for the whole German war effort and affect all theaters of operation.

The quick success of the Russians on the eastern front can be directly connected to the launching and failure of the Ardennes offensive. Had Hitler listened to General Guderian's warnings of the critical situation building on the eastern front rather than insisting that all priorities must fall within the sphere of the western front, it is quite possible that the borders of present day Germany would not be what they are today.

Hitler vastly underestimated the superiority of his enemies. The entire history of the last six months of the war can be looked upon as a war of misjudgement of the enemy, especially, the final catastrophic underestimation of Russia.

⁴Gunther Blumentritt, Von Rundstedt (Long Acre, London: Odhams Press Limited, 1952), p. 272.

While Hitler squandered away vitally needed tanks, planes, gasoline, and men, Stalin was massing some 180 divisions for the greatest offensive launched in all of the war. There has been no greater example of overkill than the six to one superiority the Russians were to have over the Germans in January, 1945.

By the beginning of February, when Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin met at Yalta, the Russian armies had advanced 200 miles through Central Poland, past the German frontier, far into Upper Silesia, and were less than 100 miles from Berlin. The Russians had crossed the Vistula both north and south of Warsaw, captured the city, and were moving on toward the lower Oder River, Stettin and Danzig. Even further north the Russians had overrun East Prussia and were soon in control of all of it, with the exception of Koenigsberg.⁵ These victories all appeared to make it obvious that the eastern front would collapse long before the western front.

What this all meant was when Stalin faced Roosevelt and Churchill across the conference table at Yalta, he was able to recite a litany of tremendous victories to them; while the American President and English Prime Minister could only set before the Russian, their plan for the

⁵Herbert Feis, Churchill, Roosevelt, Stalin (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 484.

proposed invasion of "Fortress" Germany from the West. In effect, Marshal Zukov's victories in the East allowed Stalin to bargain from a position of strength. Had Hitler chosen to use his last reserves as a defensive force within the borders of Germany, this may not have occurred.

When Hitler finally withdrew the bulk of his forces from the west to the east, the damage in miscalculation had been done. It became a matter of too little, too late. Undoubtedly, Germany's last reserves were badly missed in the East for the continuation of the war in 1945.

Three decades after the Ardennes offensive, it is possible to trace the quick successes of the Russians on the eastern front directly to its launching. The Russians were able to reap the greatest benefits from the failure in the Ardennes. The launching of the offensive had a very great effect on where and which Allied armies invaded Germany. In the end, it was these armies that invaded Germany and linked up with the Russian armies that had the greatest effect on the political situation.

Lastly, the blow to morale among the troops and to the German population, once these troops retreated into Germany proper, must also be viewed as a negative result of the offensive. During the spring of 1945, the general decline in the faith of the German population to believe in their propaganda machine speeded up the collapse of the Reich.

The last desperate attempt by a dying war machine to alter fate must be considered a failure. It was a failure whose repercussions have been felt for a generation.

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