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**Hitler's "Watch On The Rhine":  
The Battle Of The Bulge**

**Thomas W. Dworschak**

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**by**

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**The Institute of Land Warfare**

**ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES ARMY**

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### **LAND WARFARE PAPER NO. 12, SEPTEMBER 1992**

#### **HITLER'S "WATCH ON THE RHINE": THE BATTLE OF THE BULGE**

by Thomas W. Dworschak

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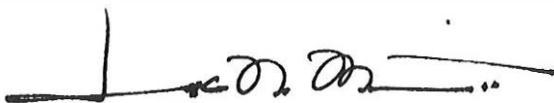
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## FOREWORD

The Department of Defense is sponsoring a four-year program to commemorate the World War II era. The commemoration began in June 1991 and continues through Veterans' Day 1995, to reacquaint Americans with the lessons and history of what many historians refer to as the central event of the 20th century.

In support of this worthwhile endeavor, it is appropriate for AUSA to publish a research paper which focuses on one of the pivotal battles of World War II, the Battle of the Bulge. This thoroughly researched paper portrays vividly the German plans and conduct of the "*Wacht am Rhein*" counteroffensive and the successful Allied reaction. As the official history, published by the Center of Military History, points out: "The U.S. Army was carrying on highly successful offensive operations. As a consequence, the American soldier was buoyed with success, imbued with the idea that his enemy could not strike him a really heavy blow and sustained by the conviction that the war was nearly over. Then, unbelievably, and under the goad of Hitler's fanaticism, the German Army launched its powerful counteroffensive in the Ardennes in December 1944 with the design of knifing through the Allied armies and forcing a negotiated peace."

There are some universal lessons which can be learned from the Bulge, for the battle highlights some time-honored maxims of military history: the twin dangers of overconfidence and underestimating your enemy, the Achilles' heel of logistics which plagues every army, and that in the final analysis victory is won not by the tank or the airplane but by the ordinary soldier.



JACK N. MERRITT  
General, USA Ret.  
President

September 1992

## HITLER'S "WATCH ON THE RHINE":

### THE BATTLE OF THE BULGE

Soldiers of the West Front! Your great hour has arrived. Large attacking armies have started against the Anglo-Americans. I do not have to tell you anything more than that. You feel it yourselves: WE GAMBLE EVERYTHING! You carry with you the holy obligation to give everything to achieve things beyond human possibilities for our Fatherland and our *Fuehrer*!<sup>1</sup>

So read the December 16, 1944, Order of the Day of *Generalfeldmarschall* Gerd von Rundstedt, commander in chief of the German army in the west. On this day, over 300,000 German soldiers lashed out of the Ardennes forest, and the ensuing crisis threatened to reverse the course of the Second World War.

## INTRODUCTION

In December 1944, everyone assumed that World War II was about to go down in history as a resounding American victory. Everyone, that is, except Adolph Hitler, who instead had marshalled his forces for one last offensive that would defeat the Allies. Hitler gambled all on a single card: an attack in the dead of winter through the thinly-held U.S. lines in the Ardennes forest and across the Meuse River, to be culminated by the capture of Antwerp, Europe's biggest port. Defeat on the battlefield would set the Allies squabbling amongst themselves, severing their alliance, and would compel the Americans, French and British to end the war.

This paper discusses the measures taken by both sides in the days and months preceding the Battle of the Bulge, and the rationale behind these measures, that gave the Germans the opportunity to change the outcome of World War II. The paper also analyzes the sources and extent of the Allies' overconfidence which, combined with effective German deception and husbanding of materiel, presented Hitler with conditions that gave his offensive a reasonable chance of success. The paper describes the steadfastness displayed in the early days of the attack by the outnumbered American defenders, and the flexibility and responsiveness exerted by Allied commanders, resulting in a crushing German defeat. Finally, the paper points out how the Battle of the Bulge underscores several universal military maxims.

**“We stake our last card ...”**

## **THE MASTER STROKE — *WACHT AM RHEIN***

For Germany, December 1944 was a bleak time. The once-enormous Third *Reich* had been reduced to little more than its prewar boundaries, and all of Germany’s allies except Hungary had surrendered or joined the Allied effort. Converging enemy armies were poised to crush the Fatherland. In the east, the Russians had overrun the Balkans and Poland and were preparing for the final thrust into East Prussia and the heart of Germany; in the west, the Anglo-Americans had conquered Italy, liberated France, Belgium and Luxembourg, and reached the German border. U.S. forces had punctured sections of the vaunted West Wall, advancing into Germany proper and seizing the German city of Aachen. On both the Eastern and Western Fronts, the Allies had been halted more by their own logistical problems than by German resistance; once these temporary supply shortages were rectified, the only question remaining would be whether the Russians or the Americans would reach Berlin first.

At least one man had not resigned Germany to defeat. Adolph Hitler, president, chancellor, minister of war, commander in chief of the army, supreme commander of the armed forces (the *Wehrmacht*), and *fuehrer* of the German people, was still determined to win the war or reduce Germany to ruins in the attempt. Although his spirit was strong, his body was weak: By 1944 Hitler’s abuse of a variety of drugs, combined with the wounds he had suffered in the July 20 assassination plot, had ruined his health.<sup>2</sup> This attempt on his life had accelerated Hitler’s growing distrust of the German officer corps, and by fall of 1944 he had reduced the members of the General Staff to little more than bystanders; von Runstedt, the 70-year-old field marshal who was Germany’s premier soldier and nominal military commander in the west, complained that the only troops he was allowed to move “were the guards in front of my own headquarters.”<sup>3</sup>

With Hitler in complete personal control of his nation’s war effort, the Third *Reich*’s military situation had deteriorated alarmingly on all fronts. This led the *fuehrer* to conclude that unless Germany could pull off a decisive victory, defeat was inevitable. So while most German generals advocated a retreat and defensive battle inside Germany, the German dictator sought a solution which would turn the war around in one lightning blow.

He found his answer on the Western Front. On August 19, 1944, as the American and British armies were beginning their race across France and the Russians were storming into East Prussia, Hitler ordered a new reserve to be formed for a November offensive in the west. A month later he chose the location for the attack — the Ardennes. This heavily wooded area had served as an invasion route for the Germans in both world wars, the most recent use leading to the spectacular fall of France in 1940. Since September 1944, the region had been a quiet sector where both sides rebuilt shattered units and bloodied green divisions.

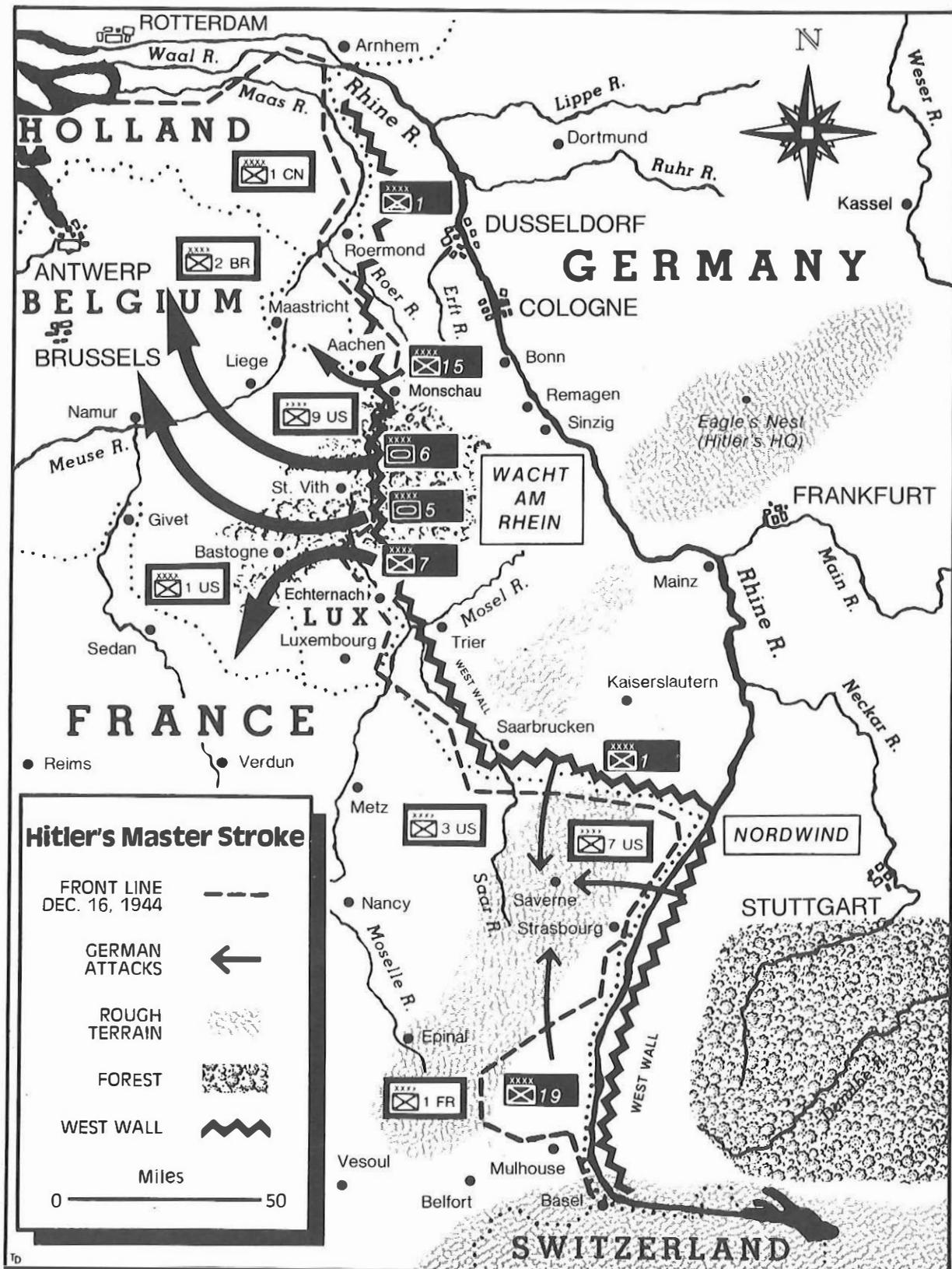
Consequently, the American lines in the Ardennes were lightly held, creating exactly the kind of weakness Hitler sought to exploit. The area’s dense forests could also conceal

the buildup of German troops prior to the attack, while bad winter weather, accurately forecast to be Europe's worst in 50 years, grounded the powerful U.S. and British air forces.<sup>4</sup> Hitler believed that his secretly massed *panzer* columns could lunge out of the Ardennes, slice through the thinly-manned American positions and, as the surprised Allies bickered amongst themselves, cross the Meuse and descend upon their ultimate objective: Antwerp. The seizure of the biggest port in Europe would strike a devastating blow at the Allies' Achilles' heel — supply — as well as cap the encirclement and destruction of three Anglo-American armies, nearly half the Allied force. "If all goes well," the *fuehrer* promised, "the offensive will set the stage for the annihilation of the bulk of twenty to thirty divisions. It will be another Dunkirk."<sup>5</sup>

Yet it was the political ramifications of the triumph which Hitler counted on to be truly decisive. Convinced that a military catastrophe of this magnitude would shatter the American-British-Canadian-French alliance, Hitler prophesied that "a great victory on the Western Front will bring down this artificial coalition with a crash."<sup>6</sup> The withdrawal of the Western Allies from the war would allow the entire *Wehrmacht* to concentrate against the Russians; fighting on a single front, the Germans could then turn back the Red Army and bring the enemy to the bargaining table.

Hitler's master stroke, code-named *Wacht am Rhein* or "Watch on the Rhine," would amount to nothing without the troops, equipment and supplies to execute it, and by the fall of 1944 the German armed forces were showing the strain of five years of war. The *Wehrmacht* was stretched all over Europe, with German divisions fighting in France, Italy, the Low Countries, Russia, Scandinavia and the Balkans. Total military casualties were approaching four million soldiers, including the 1.2 million men lost between June and August 1944 alone. By September, Germany's finest divisions were little more than skeletons. *Panzer Lehr* had shrunk from 17,200 men and 260 tanks to less than 1,000 soldiers and five tanks; the 1st SS *Panzer* Division "*Liebstandarte* Adolph Hitler" had lost over 21,000 of its 21,386 troops and more than 100 of its 133 tanks, and the 2nd SS *Panzer* Division "*Das Reich*" had been reduced from 20,000 men and 238 tanks to 2,650 soldiers and a single tank.<sup>7</sup> After losing over 2,000 armored fighting vehicles in its recent calamitous defeat in France, the *Wehrmacht* now fielded a mere 130 tanks and assault guns on the entire Western Front, and the German forces facing the Anglo-Americans were outnumbered 2-to-1 in manpower, 15-to-1 in aircraft and 20-to-1 in tanks. Moreover, each day as many as 5,000 U.S. and British heavy bombers pounded Germany around the clock, creating crippling shortages in such indispensable commodities as oil while simultaneously fragmenting Germany's transportation network. Between an unbroken string of military disasters in both the east and the west and the destruction wrought by the Allied bombers, Germany seemed incapable of either raising the fresh formations needed to launch an attack or concentrating them for an offensive.

Hitler overcame these difficulties by adopting some drastic measures. For example, in September 1944 the *Wehrmacht* lost almost 27,000 machine guns, yet less than 1,500 replacements for these weapons arrived at the front while 24,000 were set aside for *Wacht am Rhein*. Similarly, 300 mortars replaced the 2,000 which had been destroyed in



September while over 1,900 mortars found their way into newly organizing units that were being held in reserve for Hitler's offensive. From October on, not one new Tiger or Panther tank went to Russia. More than 70 percent of the tanks and assault guns which rolled off German production lines or out of repair shops in the last two months of 1944, including 1,349 in November and another 1,000 in December, were sent to the west.<sup>8</sup> Manpower for the new formations was scraped together by lowering the draft age to 16 and raising it to 60; taking men from the *Luftwaffe*, *Kriegsmarine*, factories, universities and the government bureaucracy and turning them into infantry; transferring garrison troops from as far away as Norway, Italy and Austria to the Western Front; forcibly recruiting Nazi collaborators from Belgium, Holland and France; and drafting the so-called *Volksdeutsche* — Rumanians, Hungarians, Yugoslavs and other non-German speaking ethnic groups from occupied lands — into the *Wehrmacht*.<sup>9</sup> Germany's railroad system undertook the gargantuan task of assembling the men and materiel for the offensive. Over 2,000 trains carrying 145,000 tons of supplies and 4.6 million gallons of scarce fuel were routed to the Ardennes under cover of darkness, and 66 divisions were shuttled by rail prior to the offensive.<sup>10</sup>

These massive preparations took time, more time that Hitler had anticipated, forcing him to postpone the attack on five separate occasions between November 25 and mid-December before settling for December 16. Hitler meanwhile dictated every detail of *Wacht am Rhein*, rejecting his generals' suggestions for a smaller, more limited offensive. To guarantee compliance with his wishes, Hitler attached a handwritten note to the attack plan which read "not to be altered." *Generalfeldmarschall* Walther Model, a dedicated Nazi whom Hitler called "*mein bester feldmarschall*," would command Army Group B as it attacked along a 60-mile front between Monschau, Germany, and Echternach, Luxembourg.<sup>11</sup> The main thrust would be delivered in the north by the nine divisions and 800 tanks of *Oberstgruppenfuehrer* Josef "Sepp" Dietrich's Sixth *Panzer* Army. Like Model, Dietrich was a loyal Nazi who had once served as Hitler's personal bodyguard, and he had risen from a World War I sergeant and professional meat cutter to become the highest ranking officer in Hitler's private political army, known as the *Waffen SS*. The heavy-drinking Dietrich was held in low esteem by the majority of the other German generals, and although most military men considered him to be an individual of limited talent whose promotions stemmed solely from his political reliability, Dietrich was given the most important role in *Wacht am Rhein*: to breach the American lines along a 25-mile front and then, as he put it, "hold the reins loose" as four completely refitted crack *SS panzer* divisions raced 26 miles to the Meuse and a further 65 miles to Antwerp. Hitler had handpicked both the man and the divisions to allow his trustworthy *SS* to garner the most glory in the victory.

Dietrich's left flank would be covered by General Hasso von Manteuffel's Fifth *Panzer* Army, a seven-division, 600-tank force which was also to cross the Meuse, pass west of Antwerp and reach the English Channel. The third major formation was the Seventh Army under General Erich Brandenburger. A modest collection of four infantry divisions with a mere 40 assault guns in support, the Seventh Army was to protect the offensive's southern flank as Dietrich's and Manteuffel's *panzers* streaked for Antwerp.

Over 300,000 German combat soldiers, 1,400 *panzers* and 1,900 artillery pieces and rocket launchers were eventually massed in the Ardennes for the *fuehrer's* master stroke. Hitler had succeeded in either rebuilding or raising from scratch 20 divisions, including seven *panzer* divisions, for the initial attack; another six divisions, along with a pair of reinforced elite mechanized brigades, were held in reserve, furnishing another 300 tanks to exploit the breakthrough.

Hitler also planned a series of smaller offensives to support *Wacht am Rhein*. On December 19, as American units rushed to deal with the German spearheads advancing through the Ardennes, six divisions and 700 tanks of the 15th Army would assault the weakened U.S. lines and retake Aachen. Then in late December the First and Nineteenth Armies would recapture Strasbourg. Code-named "*Nordwind*," this operation would complete the collapse of the Western Allies by seizing a major French city and isolating the French First Army from the rest of the Anglo-American forces.

Hitler expected the potent forces gathered for *Wacht am Rhein*, the most powerful concentration of German military might outside Russia since 1940, to achieve a victory as stunning as the *blitzkrieg* of France four years earlier. Speed was the key: The American lines had to be shattered on the first day of the attack, with the lead columns reaching the Meuse on the evening of the third day, crossing the next morning and taking Antwerp four days later. Hitler believed this to be feasible, for in 1940 Erwin Rommel had led his *panzer* division along this very same route and had reached the Meuse in 72 hours. The advance had to be rapid enough to prevent the Allies from recovering from the initial blow and bringing their overall numerical advantage to bear; Dietrich and Manteuffel had to also pass through the Ardennes quickly to avoid being bogged down in miserable terrain in the dead of winter. Although the Ardennes was no more than one-third forest, the numerous sheer-banked streams and rivers, steep hills and ridges, and narrow ravines and valleys which cut through the region made cross-country movement difficult in the best of seasons; in winter, with six inches of snow on the ground, Model's *panzer* forces would largely be confined to the area's narrow, winding and often unpaved roads until they neared the Meuse.<sup>12</sup> Winter also meant that the Germans would have little more than eight hours of sunlight each day, and the heavy ground fog which often lingered until late in the morning would reduce the available daylight even more.

In conjunction with *Wacht am Rhein*, the *Luftwaffe* assembled 350 planes, including 80 of the new jets, to provide air cover if the weather permitted, and another 575 aircraft would be transferred to the Ardennes after the offensive began.<sup>13</sup> The German air force would further aid the attack by dropping a battalion of paratroopers behind American lines which, after landing at night amidst heavily wooded hills, was to hold open a vital road junction for the Sixth *Panzer* Army. Known as Operation *Stosser*, this parachute jump was hardly more than an afterthought. The plan was concocted by Hitler a mere eight days before the offensive was to begin, and its execution was assigned to a hastily-thrown-together formation made up of individuals drawn from other paratroop battalions. Predictably, the men sent to this new unit were the soldiers whom other commanders were relieved to be rid of, including many who had never received any parachute instruction

whatsoever.<sup>14</sup> Of those who had been to parachute school, no more than half had been trained to jump with weapons; fewer still knew how to jump at night or into rough terrain.<sup>15</sup> *Oberst* Friedrich von der Heydte, the leader of this newly formed airborne battalion, complained that “never during my entire career had I been in command of a unit with less fighting spirit.”<sup>16</sup> Only because 250 experienced paratroopers, including 200 veterans of the 1941 airborne assault on Crete, disobeyed orders and deserted from the elite 6th Parachute Regiment to join von der Heydte’s 1,250-man battalion was a respectable unit fielded.<sup>17</sup>

Another Hitler brainchild was Operation *Greif*, a scheme which called for the formation of a brigade of English-speaking Germans outfitted with American uniforms and equipment. Its mission: to fan out behind U.S. lines on *Wacht am Rhein*’s first day to spread confusion in the American rear and seize three key bridges across the Meuse for Dietrich’s advancing panzer forces.<sup>18</sup> *Obersturmbannfuehrer* Otto Skorzeny, the man Hitler personally selected to organize Operation *Greif*, had previously undertaken several bold commando missions including the liberation of Italian dictator Benito Mussolini, a feat which prompted Allied intelligence to brand Skorzeny “the most dangerous man in Europe.”

Skorzeny soon discovered that the task given him was fraught with monumental difficulties. Ten ex-merchant marine sailors were the only men he found who could speak English fluently and had a working knowledge of slang. When it turned out that most of the men recruited for Operation *Greif* could say nothing more than “yes” and “no,” he grumbled that he commanded “a brigade of deaf-mutes.”<sup>19</sup> Obtaining captured American equipment proved to be almost impossible. Skorzeny was supplied with exactly two U.S. tanks, one of which broke down prior to the attack, forcing him to disguise 12 German Panther tanks to look like their American counterparts. Although Skorzeny himself believed these poor impostors could “deceive only young American troops, viewed at night from very far away,” he used them anyway, along with four U.S. armored cars, 15 Ford two-and-a-half-ton trucks and 30 jeeps.<sup>20</sup> To add to his problems, Skorzeny could round up only an odd assortment of American uniforms and enough U.S. small arms to equip one company. Even with these handicaps, Skorzeny predicted that if a decisive breakthrough could be made on the offensive’s opening day, the 3,300 men and 70 tanks of his 150th *Panzer* Brigade could sow chaos behind U.S. lines.

Despite Skorzeny’s commandos, despite the promise of extensive *Luftwaffe* support, and despite the impressive collection of troops, equipment and supplies, the German commanders involved with the attack did not share Hitler’s enthusiasm for *Wacht am Rhein*. Von Rundstedt complained that “all, absolutely all conditions for the possible success of such an offensive were lacking,” and he was convinced that taking Antwerp was simply beyond the *Wehrmacht*’s capabilities.<sup>21</sup> “Antwerp!” he cried. “If we reach the Meuse we should get down on our knees and thank God — let alone trying to reach Antwerp!” Model lamented that “this plan hasn’t got a damn leg to stand on. ... The whole operation has less than a ten percent chance of success.”<sup>22</sup> Dietrich, whose Sixth *Panzer* Army was to lead the offensive, was more detailed in his criticism:

All I had to do was cross a river, capture Brussels, and then go on and take the port of Antwerp. And all this in December, January, and February, the three coldest months of the year; through the Ardennes where the snow was waist-deep and there wasn't enough room to deploy four tanks abreast, let alone six *panzer* divisions; where it didn't get light until eight in the morning and was dark again at four in the afternoon and my tanks couldn't fight at night; with divisions that had just been reformed and were comprised chiefly of raw untrained recruits; and at Christmas time.<sup>23</sup>

"I can't do it!" he exclaimed. "It's impossible!"

Hitler shunted their pessimism aside. "This battle is to decide whether we shall live or die. ... The enemy must be defeated — now or never," he exhorted to his generals, and even von Rundstedt had to echo the *fuehrer*: "We stake our last card — we cannot fail."<sup>24</sup>

**"If the other fellow would only hit us now ..."**

#### **THE ALLIED CAMP PRIOR TO *WACHT AM RHEIN***

The Western powers were disappointed as 1944 came to a close. The destruction of the German army in Normandy and the ensuing swift drive across France in the summer had given way to bloody, inconclusive slugging along the German frontier in the fall; talk of victory by Christmas had faded away. The Second British and First Canadian Armies of Field Marshal Sir Bernard L. Montgomery's Twenty-First Army Group had failed to gain a bridgehead across the Rhine, and the three U.S. armies in Lieutenant General Omar N. Bradley's Twelfth Army Group were deadlocked along the Franco-German border. Further south, the Seventh U.S. and First French Armies advancing from the Mediterranean coast of France had linked up with the rest of the Allied forces but were now also stalled before the West Wall.

Although stiffening German resistance and the steadily worsening weather had contributed to the stalemate, the biggest obstacle to Allied success was logistics. Each of the 65 Allied divisions on the continent consumed an average of 700 tons of supplies a day, almost every pound of which had to be trucked nearly 350 miles from Cherbourg harbor to the front.<sup>25</sup> With cargo space at a premium, important items such as winter clothing had to be left behind on the docks to make room for the one million gallons of gasoline and 2,000 tons of artillery ammunition used daily at the front.<sup>26</sup> The capture of Antwerp's port facilities intact on September 4 was supposed to end this logistical nightmare, but the continued German interdiction and mining of Antwerp's approaches prevented the first American cargo ships from unloading at Europe's biggest port until November 28. In the meantime, 95 percent of all supplies that had been shipped to France remained stacked upon wharves and beaches far to the rear.<sup>27</sup>

With Antwerp alone expected to supply 50 divisions and ease the logistical bottleneck, in December 1944 General Dwight D. Eisenhower, the supreme commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force, made a crucial decision: Supply problems notwithstanding, the Allied offensive would continue into the winter across the entire front.<sup>28</sup> Montgomery, with the addition of Lieutenant General William H. Simpson's Ninth Army, would cross the Rhine north of Dusseldorf. Bradley's Twelfth Army Group would aid Montgomery's attack with a pincer operation. Lieutenant General Courtney H. Hodges' First Army would push across the Roer River toward Bonn in preparation for an advance to the Rhine, while further south Lieutenant General George S. Patton and his Third Army would begin an offensive on December 19 to punch through the West Wall and drive on Frankfurt.<sup>29</sup>

In order to concentrate forces for these front-wide attacks, the entire Allied reserve in Europe had to be reduced to only two understrength U.S. airborne divisions, and other parts of the 500-mile line had to be stripped of troops. By far the weakest area was the 100-mile sector along the Ardennes forest, which by December had become so quiet that soldiers stationed there called it the "Ghost Front." One mechanized cavalry regiment and six untried or battleweary divisions, some newly assigned to the region and all defending fronts up to five times wider than normal, were the only Allied forces in the Ardennes:

**99th Infantry Division:** A completely green division, the 99th had landed in France in November; upon arriving in the Ardennes it was strung out along a 19-mile front, much of which was defended only by a series of strongpoints separated by large gaps. As the men of the 99th slowly learned the ways of war, they looked forward to December 16 when movie star Marlene Dietrich and her USO show were scheduled to perform on their behalf.

**2nd Infantry Division:** The 2nd, a crack outfit, had begun attacking through the 99th's lines along a two-mile corridor on December 13 to seize two key dams on the Roer River before Bradley's main offensive kicked off. Aided by two battalions of the 99th, by the evening of December 15 the 2nd Division had slugged forward barely one mile, at a cost of 700 infantrymen.

**14th Cavalry Group:** Although mechanized cavalry formations were trained and equipped to perform mobile reconnaissance missions, the 14th Cavalry Group was assigned to fixed defensive positions when it arrived in the Ardennes on December 11. Half of the unit was deployed 25 miles behind the front, while the remainder of the group moved into the strategic five-mile-wide Losheim Gap. The line in the Losheim Gap was nothing more than a series of six village strongpoints stretching across five miles, a deployment which left the northern two miles and southern mile-and-a-half of the gap unmanned and undefended.

**106th Infantry Division:** The first American division manned with 18-year-old draftees, the 106th landed on the European continent on December 2, making it the newest U.S. formation in Europe. It was also the youngest U.S. formation in Europe: The average soldier in the division was 22 years old. The 106th had been sent to the Ardennes to get

its first taste of combat in a quiet sector, and on December 11 it took up 21 miles of front along rugged terrain known as the *Schnee Eifel* ("Snow Mountains"). This precarious salient, although difficult to defend, was jealously guarded since it represented one of the Allies' few penetrations into Germany. Within four days 20 percent of the men in the 106th, unprepared and ill-equipped for the harsh winter, were suffering from trenchfoot.

**28th Infantry Division:** The 28th was a veteran outfit which had been decimated in the bitter fighting for Aachen in November. In two weeks of bloody combat, the 28th had sustained over 6,100 casualties and, while most of these losses had been made good by December 15, the replacements were raw recruits untested in battle. As the 28th moved into its 30 miles of Ardennes front, the men looked forward to a period of rest.

**4th Infantry Division:** Another experienced unit, the 4th had landed at Normandy on D-Day and had been in almost constant action for six months. This division, too, had been battered in the Aachen fighting, losing more than 7,500 soldiers. By mid-December, the 4th was still short 2,000 infantrymen, leaving many rifle companies at half-strength, and only a fifth of the division's tanks were operational. The 4th completed its transfer into the Ardennes on December 13, and all along the division's 20-mile front GIs settled back for what they were told would be a break from the war.

**9th Armored Division:** The 9th, a green formation which had never seen combat, had been assigned to the Ardennes to see some light action before its first major operation. The thinness of the front mandated that part of the division, ostensibly the reserve for the Ardennes sector, hold down a portion of the line. Another element of the 9th was ordered to support the 2nd Infantry Division's drive on the Roer dams, leaving very little of the 9th Armored left over to form a reserve.

These formations, totalling some 83,000 men, 242 tanks, 182 self-propelled guns and 504 artillery pieces, manned the overextended American lines in the Ardennes. The lack of manpower meant that the U.S. defense essentially consisted of an immobile collection of unconnected positions with no depth and backed up by few reserves.<sup>30</sup>

In spite of the weakness of the Ardennes front, the Allied high command was blissfully unconcerned with the possibility of a German offensive there or anywhere else in the west. The stunning victories of the summer had produced a dangerous degree of overconfidence in the Allied camp; the autumn stalemate was frustrating, but few British or U.S. generals denied that victory was in sight. And the Americans in particular were certain that the war had already been decided. Bradley openly wished for a German counteroffensive: "If the other fellow would only hit us now," he said in November, "I'd welcome a German counterattack. We could kill many more Germans with a good deal less effort if they would only come out of their holes and come after us for a change."<sup>31</sup> Bradley's intelligence section was equally optimistic, stating on December 12: "It's now certain that attrition is steadily sapping the strength of German forces on the Western Front and that the crust of defenses is thinner, more brittle, and more vulnerable than it appears."<sup>32</sup>

The Allied overoptimism was so pervasive that even the excellent clues uncovered by various intelligence efforts were disregarded. Over 500 Allied reconnaissance sorties flown over German concentration areas in the Ardennes during late November and early December revealed much heavier than normal rail traffic — some 10,000 carloads — in the area. Dietrich's newly formed Sixth *Panzer* Army with its four *SS Panzer* divisions had been located and identified at its assembly points west of the Rhine near Cologne; in early December an enemy radio transmission ordering the *Luftwaffe* to reconnoiter bridges across the Meuse was intercepted and decoded; and even a copy of the German message requesting English-speaking soldiers and captured American equipment for Skorzeny's 150th *Panzer* Brigade had fallen into U.S. hands in late November. But Allied intelligence was convinced that the cautious von Rundstedt was neither willing nor able to do more than respond to Anglo-American attacks or at most launch a limited offensive toward Aachen to, as one captured German said, retake the city "as a Christmas present for the *fuehrer*."<sup>33</sup> The Americans had so misread the *Wehrmacht*'s capabilities and intentions that in December a "rubber duck" operation was undertaken in the Ardennes. Special intelligence units equipped with inflatable rubber replicas of tanks, self-propelled artillery pieces and other vehicles were moved into the Ardennes in an attempt to trick the Germans into reinforcing the region with forces which might otherwise face Bradley's upcoming attacks.<sup>34</sup>

One American was not deceived. Colonel Benjamin Dickson, the top intelligence officer for the U.S. First Army, predicted on December 14 that a German attack in the Ardennes was imminent.<sup>35</sup> Unfortunately for the Allies, Dickson had an undeservedly poor reputation with certain key superiors as an alarmist; a portrait of Hitler hung at Bradley's headquarters with the inscription, "He fools some of the people some of the time but he fools Dickson all of the time." For his astute diagnosis of *Wacht am Rhein*, Dickson was told that he was overworked and was shipped off to Paris with a four-day pass.

Hitler, in ordering the tightest security precautions of the war, did everything possible to encourage the Allies to believe that Germany was beaten. He had first of all deliberately used the passive-sounding code name *Wacht am Rhein* to give Allied intelligence the impression that his master stroke was merely a defensive operation. All information about the attack was delivered by courier, depriving the Allies of the fruits of their ULTRA code-breaking section, which on so many other occasions had given the Allied high command crucial advance notice of German operations. Only a handful of high-ranking German officers whom Hitler needed to help plan the attack were briefed on the offensive and, under penalty of death, they were told to keep all information secret and to do their own mapmaking and secretarial work.<sup>36</sup> As units were pulled out of the front line and sent to the Ardennes, token elements were left in place to keep the Allies from detecting any redeployments. Charcoal was issued to German troops to prevent tell-tale campfire smoke from disclosing their locations, and strict camouflage procedures were employed to conceal German positions from Allied aircraft. To prevent desertions, all patrolling was cancelled, roll calls were taken as often as six times a day, and soldiers with homes or relatives behind enemy lines were transferred to the rear.<sup>37</sup> (These measures were effective — only five German soldiers on the Western Front deserted during the first 12 days of



December.) Ammunition was moved forward only by hand, arriving artillery batteries were prohibited from firing any rounds to register their guns, and radio silence was maintained except for dummy messages passed to mislead the Allies. Straw was laid on highways to help muffle the noise of thousands of vehicles moving into the Ardennes while the *Luftwaffe* flew low over the Americans to mask the sounds of the traffic. Movement took place only at night; to enforce this rule, Fifth *Panzer* Army commander Manteuffel ordered that any vehicle found on a road during daylight was to have its tires shot out.<sup>38</sup>

The German deception combined with the Allies' self-assuredness to preserve *Wacht am Rhein*'s secrecy. When Major General Alan Jones, the commanding general of the recently arrived 106th Infantry Division, reported to higher headquarters that he heard "heavy armored movement" across his portion of the Ardennes line, he was told, "Don't be so jumpy — the Krauts are just playing phonograph records to scare you newcomers."<sup>39</sup> By December 15 the Allies had identified only seven of the 17 German divisions massed for *Wacht am Rhein*; at that evening's situation briefing, Eisenhower's operations officer made an unequivocal assertion:

"There is nothing to report in the Ardennes."

**"Just where the hell did this son of a bitch get all this strength?"**

#### **THE OPENING DAYS OF *WACHT AM RHEIN***

In the words of more than one American soldier, "all hell broke loose" along the Ghost Front on Saturday, December 16, 1944.<sup>40</sup>

Up and down the 89 miles of the Ardennes line, German artillery pieces and rocket launchers opened up at 5:30 a.m., shattering the morning calm with a 45-minute barrage; experienced soldiers on both sides called it the heaviest they had ever seen. Although the dug-in Americans suffered few losses, the shelling cut telephone lines to the rear and, since the Germans jammed American radios by broadcasting martial music over the airwaves, communications ceased. Overhead, 150 *Luftwaffe* aircraft braved murky skies to strafe American positions as V-1 flying bombs warbled towards Liege and Antwerp. Then out of the fog and drizzle the German infantry advanced, the predawn darkness illuminated in many places by "artificial moonlight" — searchlight beams bounced off low-hanging clouds to produce light equal to a three-quarter moon.<sup>41</sup> In the rear, the German *panzer* columns waited for the infantry to open the roads so they could begin their dash for Antwerp. Hitler's order was on everyone's lips: "Forward to and over the Meuse!"

But throughout the Ardennes the story was the same: American platoons and companies quickly recovered from their initial surprise to turn back German battalions and regiments, and the anticipated disintegration of the entire U.S. line failed to occur. Small American formations stymied the German advance by clinging to vital crossroads and

villages even though in most cases they were surrounded, greatly outnumbered, out of contact with neighboring units and deprived of air support by the bad weather.

The intelligence and reconnaissance platoon of the 394th Regiment, 99th Infantry Division, an 18-man outfit led by a 20-year-old lieutenant named Lyle Bouck, was one example of the kind of dedicated stand which sidetracked the German offensive on December 16. This handful of soldiers was positioned outside a tiny nine-house village in the northernmost part of the Losheim Gap, and even after a heavy artillery bombardment and a retreat by a nearby friendly tank destroyer section, Bouck's men obeyed their orders to hold at all costs. For 18 hours the Americans held off an entire enemy parachute battalion; not until their ammunition was exhausted, their radio had been destroyed, and Bouck himself and most of his men had been wounded did the GIs capitulate. But the men of the I&R platoon, each of whom was later decorated for valor, had left an estimated 400 German bodies strewn in front of their position.<sup>42</sup>

Along with the fierce American resistance, part of the explanation for the Germans' lack of progress lay in the lack of skill of the attacking troops. Scraping the bottom of the manpower barrel had brought units up to strength, but the quality of these raw recruits proved to be scarcely short of abysmal. Most of the soldiers in the green *Volksgranadier* infantry divisions were enthusiastic but had never been in battle, and some had as little as two weeks of military instruction. More importantly, many of the partially trained and inexperienced sergeants and junior officers above them were sorely unqualified to command soldiers in combat.<sup>43</sup> Led by men seemingly ignorant of even the fundamentals of small unit tactics, numerous German platoons and companies were decimated because they tended to remain fully erect and to bunch together when attacking; these veritable human wave assaults made the Germans easy targets for American gunners. Even many veteran formations, which after years of defensive action had become rusty at attacking, struggled to gain ground. In the broken terrain of the Ardennes, the *Wehrmacht* needed good infantry to breach U.S. strongpoints and clear roads for the mechanized columns; in the absence of such infantry, the German panzers were stuck.

Other combat arms of the *Wehrmacht* suffered as well. The artillery was manned chiefly by *Luftwaffe* personnel who could fire anti-aircraft weapons but were unfamiliar with field pieces. Gunners in many batteries were incapable of firing rolling barrages in front of advancing infantry; besides, it was feared that if a couple of friendly rounds fell short into the ranks, the green German troops might panic and run. Those occasional rounds which did land amongst U.S. positions destroyed communication wire but killed few Americans, for the GIs had dug in deep to fend off the cold. Most German tank drivers were also inexperienced, for almost all of the veteran *panzer* crewmen had served as and often died as infantry in the fall when few tanks were available, and the shortage of fuel hampered training of new drivers.<sup>44</sup> Even the privileged SS, which had the first pick of recruits, felt the effects of the manpower squeeze: The average age of the men in Dietrich's four SS *panzer* divisions was 18.

The excessive secrecy ordered by Hitler also contributed to German difficulties on the first day. Some divisional commanders knew nothing of *Wacht am Rhein* until December 10; regimental commanders were not briefed until December 13, battalion commanders until the 14th and company commanders until the 15th, the day before the offensive was to begin. Since many units had just recently entered the Ardennes and were unfamiliar with the terrain, and the prohibition on patrolling prevented them from obtaining information about the ground they would be advancing across or the location of the U.S. units they would be fighting, many assault companies groped forward in the early-morning darkness grossly unprepared for battle.

All three German armies fell far short of Hitler's initial grandiose expectations. Even though Dietrich sent some of his tanks forward, the Sixth *Panzer* Army made little headway against the men of the U.S. 2nd and 99th Infantry Divisions, whose thoughts of December 16 had abruptly switched from Marlene Dietrich's USO show to Sepp Dietrich's infantry battalions. Manteuffel's Fifth *Panzer* Army captured less than half the ground it had been assigned to gain on the first day. Inexperienced engineers had trouble erecting bridges across the Our, preventing most of the German armor from reaching the west bank of the river.<sup>45</sup> And the soldiers of Brandenburger's Seventh Army had advanced no more than four miles on the initial day of *Wacht am Rhein*. None of this discouraged Hitler: "Everything has changed in the West. ... Success — complete success — is now in our grasp," he declared while ordering the German navy to see to it that none of the Allied ships docked at Antwerp escaped out to sea before Dietrich's *panzers* arrived.<sup>46</sup>

Only in one location did the Germans taste victory. At the Losheim Gap, the junction between the Fifth and Sixth *Panzer* Armies, an entire division crushed the 900 men of the U.S. 14th Cavalry Group. German tanks poured through the gap, threatening the American 106th Infantry Division on the *Schnee Eifel* with encirclement. Yet this one breakthrough was far less than the total collapse which had been anticipated, throwing chaos into a timetable which had left little margin for error. Over 20,000 motorized and horsedrawn vehicles stacked up along the roads behind the front, ensnaring traffic for countless miles while they waited for the American lines to crumble.

One German commander benefitted from this delay. Von der Heydte and his paratroopers were to have dropped 15 miles in front of the Sixth *Panzer* Army early on the morning of December 16 to seize a key crossroads for Dietrich's *panzers*, but the trucks needed to take the parachutists from their barracks to the airfield 30 miles away never arrived. The jump was rescheduled for before dawn on the 17th, even though the *Wacht am Rhein* schedule indicated that by then the Sixth *Panzer* Army would be well past the drop zone even before the transport planes took off.

Von der Heydte's paratroopers executed their operation on the morning of December 17, but things soon went askew. The pilots of the 106 JU-52 transport aircraft, half of whom were just out of flight school and had never seen action, were unable to stay in formation.<sup>47</sup> Only 11 planes successfully negotiated U.S. anti-aircraft fire and found their way through the darkness and strong wind gusts to reach the marshy, heavily-wooded

landing zone; some men came down in Holland, and 200 of the paratroopers were actually dropped 30 miles to the east behind *German* lines by hopelessly disoriented pilots.<sup>48</sup> Many of the untrained paratroopers who landed in the proper location were killed or injured by the high winds or rough ground; von der Heydte, who already had a broken arm, was knocked unconscious upon landing.<sup>49</sup> Less than 350 of the 1,250 men who jumped managed to assemble near the drop zone, an occurrence which did lead the Americans to believe that the landing was much stronger than it was but also rendered it impotent. This tiny German force, out of contact with the rest of the army because none of its radios had survived the drop, wandered about aimlessly for days without food, water or blankets, watching helplessly as U.S. reinforcements rushed past to the Ardennes. On December 22, the parachutists broke into groups of two or three to make their way back to friendly lines, and though some 240 of the paratroopers eventually reached safety, von der Heydte was not among them.

Throughout the Ardennes, the Germans' failure to make progress on *Wacht am Rhein*'s first day unhinged the entire offensive. The American-clad commandos of Skorzeny's 150th *Panzer* Brigade, who like most of the men in the Sixth *Panzer* Army were stuck far to the rear of the fighting, found few holes to exploit or panicked columns to mix with; Skorzeny himself had to walk six miles along roads jammed with bumper-to-bumper traffic just to reach the front. Although seven jeep-loads of Germans posing as GIs did manage to get behind American lines on the 16th, including two teams which reached the Meuse before midnight, their accomplishments were largely confined to changing signs, cutting telegraph wires and misdirecting a couple of U.S. units.

Operation *Greif*'s biggest contribution was made by 18 commandos who were captured by the Americans near Liege in the early days of *Wacht am Rhein*. By greatly exaggerating the size and intentions of Operation *Greif*, the talkative POWs gave the impression that Germans disguised as Americans were everywhere. Rumors circulated that von der Heydte's parachute drop was part of Operation *Greif* and included spies and saboteurs, and stories spread that assassins dressed as priests and nuns had landed outside Paris to kill Eisenhower. To root out these impostors, suspicious GIs all over the Western Front stuck their rifles into the bellies of strangers and told them to name Mickey Mouse's girlfriend or the capital of Missouri; one U.S. general was jailed for five hours because he insisted that the Chicago Cubs were in the American League.<sup>50</sup> But aside from creating these minor inconveniences, Operation *Greif* failed miserably, and on the evening of the 17th the men of the 150th *Panzer* Brigade discarded their American uniforms and joined Dietrich's army as a conventional unit.

Most importantly of all, the failure of the Germans to achieve a front-wide breakthrough gave the Allies time to react. And react is exactly what Eisenhower did: Before sunset of the 16th he had ordered the 7th Armored Division from Simpson's Ninth Army in the north and the 10th Armored Division from Patton's Third Army in the south to the Ardennes.<sup>51</sup> The next day the entire Allied reserve on the Western Front, the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions, was sent to the Ardennes even though both units were still refitting from their autumn battle in Holland and were not expected to regain full

operational status until mid-January. By midnight, 60,000 men and 11,000 vehicles from the First Army alone were on the way to the Ardennes. There was still some debate as to whether or not these reinforcements were necessary. Although Bradley was baffled by the size of the German offensive — “Just where the hell did this son of a bitch get all this strength?” he asked — he believed that the Germans had launched nothing more than “a local spoiling attack” designed to delay Patton’s scheduled offensive toward Frankfurt.<sup>52</sup> Patton’s opinion was similar but more forceful. “Goddamit,” he bellowed to Eisenhower, “that’s no major threat up there! That’s just a goddamn little spoiling attack! They want to throw us off balance down here — make me stop my offensive! If you take the 10th { Armored Division } from me, you’ll be playing into the hands of the Hun!”<sup>53</sup>

However, events were soon to prove that these reinforcements and more would be needed in the upcoming days, for on December 17 the Germans began to achieve the kind of success which had eluded them the day the offensive began. The immense German advantage in numbers started to tell; many isolated American outposts, cut off for almost 24 hours, lacking reserves, low on ammunition and unable to communicate with other units, were forced from the key positions which they had so staunchly been defending. Their demise was hastened by German infantry who had infiltrated through the overstretched U.S. lines and had pushed back or captured American artillery batteries, depriving the surrounded garrisons of desperately needed fire support.

By the morning of the 17th, the German breakthrough in the Losheim Gap was complete. Dietrich’s attacks in the north continued fruitlessly, for American resistance there stiffened as the 1st Infantry Division reinforced the 99th, the 2nd Infantry Division called off its attack on the Roer dams and reverted to the defensive, and the entire force withdrew to some high ground near the village of Elsenborn to dig into positions backed by strong artillery.<sup>54</sup> The Germans compensated for this failure by exploiting the Losheim penetration. About an hour after sunrise on the 17th, Schonberg fell, sealing 9,000 men of the 106th Infantry Division (including the division commander’s son) and several other smaller formations in the *Schnee Eifel*.<sup>55</sup> The way was now open to a vital road center: St. Vith.

Once again the steadfastness of the American troops in the front line made the difference. On the morning of December 17, St. Vith was defended by only 500 engineers, one infantry platoon and three antitank guns. If the Germans moved quickly, this important road junction would easily fall; however, the determined opposition offered by the outnumbered Americans further to the east delayed the Germans long enough to allow the Ninth Army’s 7th Armored Division to reach St. Vith. Driving along icy roads cluttered with fleeing civilians and the disorganized remnants of broken U.S. formations, the 7th took 12 hours to move 60 miles, including two-and-a-half hours to travel the last three miles to St. Vith. Lead elements of the division arrived at 4 p.m., an hour after German attacks erupted a mile east of the town square; throughout the evening, additional units of the 7th Armored were thrown into the fighting as they drove in. Now that reinforcements allowed a defensive line to gradually take shape, St. Vith would not fall without a fight.

Another German formation was taking advantage of the breakthrough at Losheim Gap. *Obersturmbannführer* Joachim Peiper, commander of a *kampfgruppe* (battle group) of 5,000 men and over 130 tanks drawn from the elite 1st *SS Panzer* Division, headed for the Losheim Gap to begin a determined dash for the Meuse. Peiper was a devout Nazi who had been in the *SS* since he was 19; his service to the *fuehrer* included working as a personal aide to *SS* chief Heinrich Himmler and as a *panzer* commander in Russia. Although only 29, Peiper's exploits on the Eastern Front had already earned him Germany's highest award for valor, the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross, and in the process he had made quite a name for himself. Peiper's previous unit had been nicknamed the "Blowtorch Battalion" for its vicious razing of two Russian villages with flamethrowers and the slaughter of their inhabitants, and he often kept his attacks moving by placing two vehicles in the lead with orders to keep going until fired upon.<sup>56</sup>

In the Ardennes, Peiper would do much to enhance his reputation for both bravado and ruthlessness. He was told that his route to the Meuse would be clear by dawn on the 16th, but when the hours passed and the word to advance failed to arrive, at 4 p.m. Peiper personally led his unit forward, forcing a friendly horsedrawn artillery regiment into the ditch in the process. Crowded roads continued to delay *Kampfgruppe* Peiper's progress, so the Nazi colonel actually ordered that minefields would be cleared by driving through them.<sup>57</sup> In the attempt to link up with the leading German assault columns, five tanks and five halftracks were disabled by mines.

Undaunted by these losses, Peiper and his men crawled six miles in eight hours to reach the front. Here he met the 3rd Parachute Division, one of the units which was to have shredded the American lines for the German armor but was halted by the suspected presence of strong U.S. forces ahead. The entire front "had gone to bed instead of waging war," a disbelieving Peiper grumbled, so at 4 a.m. he commandeered a parachute battalion, put two of his Panthers in the lead and began pushing forward.<sup>58</sup> Encountering no resistance whatsoever, the Germans advanced unhindered and in the dark surprised and overwhelmed part of the U.S. 14th Cavalry Group, capturing a detachment of GIs, 16 antitank guns and over 50 vehicles.<sup>59</sup>

His path unblocked, Peiper bolted for the Meuse. At Bullingen, after destroying some observation planes on the ground, he took another 50 Americans prisoner and forced them to refuel his tanks with 50,000 gallons of U.S. gasoline.<sup>60</sup> (Because two fuel trains had not arrived prior to the offensive, this would not be the last time German units in the Ardennes would have to scrounge for gasoline.)<sup>61</sup> Peiper continued west until he ran into Battery B of the lightly armed 285th Field Artillery Observation Battalion at a small crossroads near Malmedy, Belgium, quickly capturing 130 startled GIs after a brief firefight.

"The 1st *SS Panzer* Division welcomes you to Belgium, gentlemen," one of Peiper's men jeered at the prisoners. Then there was bloodshed: The Germans herded the Americans into a field and for 15 minutes proceeded to blast away into the crowded ranks. One survivor said, "Machine guns opened fire at point-blank range, first killing those who

did not fall to the ground quickly enough, then began raking back and forth over the prostrate forms. ... Gradually the groans and moans ceased.” When the machine guns finished, several Germans walked among the bodies laughing and “shooting in the head those who still showed signs of life. When doubtful they kicked a man in the face to see if he winced.” In one instance a wounded American was dragged to his feet, stripped of his shoes, pants and field jacket, and then told “you can go back to sleep now” as a bullet was fired into his head.<sup>62</sup> Amazingly, over 40 Americans escaped death by running to some nearby woods after the firing subsided and then fleeing to the nearby town of Malmedy, branding the shooting the “Malmedy Massacre.” This most famous of the Ardennes atrocities was only one of a dozen different war crimes committed by *Kampfgruppe* Peiper which overall claimed the lives of 111 Belgian civilians and 353 U.S. soldiers in December 1944.<sup>63</sup>

Following the Malmedy Massacre, the Germans pushed further west down narrow roads which Peiper complained “were fit not for tanks but for bicycles,” reaching Stavelot at dusk on the 17th. Peiper, having covered some 30 miles in the past 12 hours and now only 42 miles from the Meuse, paused to give his men their first sleep in three days. Stavelot fell the next morning in a sharp two-hour fight, enabling Peiper to seize a vital bridge across the Ambleve River and continue his drive westward for the Meuse.

In the center, five divisions of Manteuffel’s Fifth *Panzer* Army overwhelmed the outnumbered 28th Infantry Division and poured across the Our; by dusk on the 17th, a bridgehead across the Clerf had been formed north of Clervaux. By dawn, U.S. resistance, stiffened by clerks, cooks, musicians and other noncombat personnel, finally collapsed in Consthum, Clervaux and Hosingen. By sunset of December 18, strong German armored columns had crushed several American roadblocks to close within six miles of the key road center of Bastogne.<sup>64</sup>

For three hours, lead elements of the seasoned *Panzer Lehr* Division, including division commander *Generalleutnant* Fritz Bayerlein, struggled down dismal roads to advance toward Bastogne. By 6:30 p.m. the Germans were approaching the outskirts of the town, and even though it took over five hours on the muddy, narrow roads to cover the next three miles, by 2 a.m. on the 19th Bayerlein was within two miles of an undefended Bastogne.

But here he stopped. A Belgian civilian told Bayerlein that an American force of 50 tanks, 25 self-propelled guns and 40 armored cars led by a major general had just passed heading east, but the Belgian had actually seen only 27 tanks led by a lieutenant colonel. (Since the identity of this individual has never been discovered, it is not known whether he deliberately exaggerated his report to aid the Americans or if he was truly a German sympathizer who, in heat of battle, couldn’t count so well.)<sup>65</sup> Bayerlein, with a mere 15 tanks, four companies of infantry and a single artillery battery, began to worry about becoming surrounded. The German general hesitated and then decided to halt to plant mines, set up roadblocks and allow his men to rest while the majority of his *Panzer Lehr* moved up. The advance resumed at 5:30 a.m., but after gaining another mile the lead tank



hit a mine and blew up. Once more Bayerlein grew cautious: He nervously listened to the sound of engines to his rear, although what he heard were elements of his own division rushing to join him. Again he halted, deciding to delay his march toward Bastogne for a few more hours until the sun came up.<sup>66</sup>

As *Wacht am Rhein* entered its fourth day, commanders on both sides had cause for concern. The Germans were dissatisfied that their *panzer* columns had not yet crossed the Meuse as scheduled; the Allies were alarmed at the 30-mile gap between St. Vith and Diekirch which had been ripped in their lines. The opposing generals paused to reform their plans.

**“We must not give Bastogne time to defend itself.”**  
**THE TURNING POINT OF WACHT AM RHEIN**

On the morning of December 19, Eisenhower, Bradley, Patton and several other top Allied commanders assembled at Verdun to discuss the crisis in the Ardennes. Meeting in an enormous old French army barracks heated by a single potbellied stove, the generals studied the situation map where dozens of red arrows, marking the German advances, had formed a sizeable bulge in the Allied line which later gave the battle its name. Eisenhower opened on a positive note by stating that “the present situation is to be regarded as one of opportunity for us and not disaster. There will only be cheerful faces at this conference table.”<sup>67</sup> Patton could not have agreed more:

“Hell, General Ike,” he roared, “let’s have the guts to let the sons of bitches go all the way to Paris! Then we’ll cut ‘em off and chew ‘em up!”<sup>68</sup>

Eisenhower liked the enthusiasm but he emphasized that the Germans must not be allowed to reach the Meuse. Much had already been done to prevent them from doing so: 11 U.S. and British divisions had either reached the Meuse or were en route to the Ardennes from both above and below the German penetration. The Supreme Allied Commander announced that “the general plan is to plug the holes in the north and launch coordinated attacks from the south,” a decision which meant that Patton’s Third Army would lead the counteroffensive.

“When can you start?” Eisenhower questioned Patton.

“As soon as you’re through with me.”

“When can you attack?” Ike asked.

“The morning of the 21st,” Patton replied, a bold prediction which sent a ripple of astonishment through the room.<sup>69</sup>

Patton was giving himself less than 48 hours to cancel his previously planned offensive towards the Rhine, disengage from the enemy and wheel almost 50,000 men nearly 70 miles over icy, narrow roads to launch an impromptu attack into enemy positions of unknown strength and whereabouts. Ike ordered three divisions to jump off on their new mission on the 22nd and three more to follow the next day; Patton could hardly wait to begin. He said to Bradley, "This time the Kraut has stuck his head in the meat grinder and," turning his fist while he continued, "I've got a hold of the handle."<sup>70</sup>

Eisenhower was also concerned that the Allied counteroffensive might be hampered by communications problems. Hodges' First Army, which had borne the brunt of the attack, Simpson's Ninth Army directly north of the breakthrough and Patton's Third Army immediately south of the penetration all belonged to Bradley's Twelfth Army Group. Unfortunately, Bradley's headquarters was in Luxembourg, so now the lead German columns were threatening to overrun several vital radio repeater stations and cut buried cable lines, thereby severing his communications with U.S. forces in the northern part of the Bulge battlefield. To counter this danger, on December 20 Eisenhower placed the American Ninth and First Armies under control of Britain's Field Marshal Montgomery for the duration of the crisis, a change which Bradley only briefly and halfheartedly protested.<sup>71</sup>

At the Verdun conference the Allies had demonstrated exactly the kind of flexibility which Hitler believed they did not possess. Not only had Eisenhower quickly shifted British and U.S. units to the Ardennes, an event Hitler thought would be delayed by time-consuming consultations with President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill, but as the transfer of American troops to British control indicated, the Allied commanders were cooperating more than they were quarrelling.

While Eisenhower was reshaping the Ardennes battlefield, the German General Staff met on the 18th at Hitler's "Eagle's Nest" headquarters to assess *Wacht am Rhein's* progress. There was little to be positive about. The majority of Dietrich's army, which was supposed to be across the Meuse by this time, had barely advanced five miles, and even Model's most successful panzer thrusts had only covered half the distance to the river. Several armored formations were already complaining of ammunition and fuel shortages, and though overcast skies continued to conceal most German units from air attack, an accompanying thaw had turned many of the overcrowded roads into barely traversable quagmires, further limiting the *panzers'* mobility. The Americans still held St. Vith and Bastogne, two important road centers which were to have fallen on December 17, and both the northern and southern flanks of the attack were stalled, leaving the Germans with only a narrow breakthrough. After sarcastically ordering his commanders to make sure that their tanks kept up with the infantry, von Rundstedt made his recommendation to Hitler: "We should abandon the offensive and prepare to defend the area we have gained." Model was more optimistic, arguing that the offensive should proceed provided that the main weight of the attack was shifted to Manteuffel's Fifth *Panzer* Army in the center, where the biggest gains had been achieved.

Hitler agreed to none of this, talking instead only of *Wacht am Rhein*'s successes and disregarding the setbacks. The offensive, he declared, would continue. The *fuehrer* agreed to move two of Dietrich's *SS panzer* divisions south to exploit Manteuffel's breakthrough, but the Sixth *Panzer* Army would continue to spearhead the attack. The Fifteenth Army's attack near Aachen planned for the next day was cancelled, releasing two more mechanized divisions for employment in the Ardennes, and another *panzer* division was also on the way from Holland. "On to the Meuse, on to the Meuse," Hitler commanded. "We must not give Bastogne time to defend itself."

But move quickly against Bastogne is exactly what the Germans did not do. Bayerlein's failure to drive into the town with the lead elements of *Panzer Lehr* in the early morning hours of December 19 had given the Americans what they needed most: time. On the evening of December 17, the U.S. 101st Airborne Division, which had been refitting near Rheims, France, had been ordered to Bastogne. Over 11,000 soldiers loaded up into 380 open-air cattle trucks late the next day and began a treacherous night journey along 100 miles of icy, snow-covered roads; only because the drivers disobeyed blackout regulations and kept their headlights on for most of the trip did the 101st reach Bastogne before the Germans.<sup>72</sup> The first trucks arrived at their destination shortly after midnight on December 19 and moved into Bastogne's eastern fringes at 6 a.m. as Bayerlein's *Panzer Lehr* began stepping up its attack on the town. By 9:30 a.m. all four of the 101st's infantry regiments were in place, joining 11 artillery battalions, elements of two armored divisions, a tank destroyer battalion and 600 stragglers from various shattered units organized into Team SNAFU (Situation Normal — All Fouled Up) to become the Battered Bastards of the Bastion of Bastogne. As at St. Vith, the German attempt to take a vital road junction without a pitched battle had been thwarted by a matter of minutes.

Just such a pitched battle had developed at St. Vith. By December 20, over 22,000 U.S. soldiers and nearly 200 tanks had taken up positions along a 25-mile, horseshoe-shaped line east of the town. To hasten St. Vith's capture, Model had reinforced Manteuffel's Fifth *Panzer* Army with the elite *Fuehrer* Escort Brigade, yet there were so many German vehicles jamming the roads leading to the front that Manteuffel could not launch a concentrated attack on the town until 11 a.m. on the 21st. Within nine hours the American lines had been pierced in three places, and St. Vith itself fell shortly after noon on December 22. Montgomery, now in command of the St. Vith battle, fired off a message to the town's defenders:

You have accomplished your mission — a mission well done.  
It is time to withdraw.<sup>74</sup>

The next morning, 15,000 U.S. troops retreated from the salient and formed a new line behind the Salm River. Their defense of St. Vith had been crucial: For six days the bulk of Manteuffel's army had been tied down in a fight for a town 12 miles from the German border rather than racing for Antwerp.

The belated German success at St. Vith had been preceded by the capture of almost 9,000 surrounded American soldiers of the 106th Infantry Division on the *Schnee Eifel*. The December 19 capitulation of the 106th was the largest mass surrender of American troops since the fall of Bataan in the spring of 1942, but even this triumph failed to get the German attack back on schedule. Dietrich's forces had inflicted over 3,000 casualties on the green 99th Division and another 1,400 on the veteran 2nd Division during the past five days but had failed to break either one. He continued to batter vainly against the American lines in front of Elsenborn, and between December 20 and 22 the Germans lost another 100 tanks while gaining no ground.<sup>75</sup> The Sixth *Panzer* Army's one successful thrust—*Kampfgruppe* Peiper—remained unsupported and exposed.

And now Peiper was in trouble. American engineers, some of whom were normally assigned tree-cutting and quarrying missions, weathered enemy fire to dynamite two key bridges across the Salm at Trois Ponts on December 18 before Peiper could cross the river, blocking his path to the Meuse. That same afternoon U.S. P-47 Thunderbolt fighter-bombers sighted Peiper's 15-mile column through a break in the clouds, allowing two squadrons of aircraft to strafe the German formation for over an hour, destroying three tanks and seven other vehicles while also pinpointing the enemy's location. When Peiper swung north to try to reach the Meuse by an alternate route, U.S. demolition teams blew another bridge in his face.

"Those damned engineers," Peiper cursed. "Those damned engineers."<sup>76</sup>

Peiper's situation continued to worsen, for not only was he becoming increasingly hemmed in by the terrain but he was also running out of fuel. An element of his *kampfgruppe* had almost stumbled upon two million gallons of U.S. gasoline stored near Spa on December 18, and German tanks had gotten to within 400 yards of the dump before American guards blocked their advance by pouring 124,000 gallons of fuel across the road and igniting it.<sup>77</sup> Peiper's freedom of movement was again reduced when the American formations stabbing at his flanks recaptured Stavelot on the 19th, leaving him surrounded. By dusk, *Kampfgruppe* Peiper was completely cut off from the rest of the Sixth *Panzer* Army as well as low on fuel and ammunition. On December 23, after air drops failed to deliver enough supplies to maintain his unit, Peiper blew up 30 of his tanks and more than 100 of his halftracks, abandoned another 28 tanks, 25 self-propelled guns and 70 halftracks in perfect working order along with 300 wounded German soldiers and 170 U.S. prisoners, and fled on foot with his 800 remaining men towards friendly lines.<sup>78</sup>

The fuel shortage which had plagued *Kampfgruppe* Peiper had become epidemic throughout Model's entire Army Group. Tanks laboring in low gear as they crawled along the Ardennes' winding roads or idling their engines as they sat motionless in horrendous traffic jams devoured gasoline at a prodigious rate, five times faster than *Wacht am Rhein*'s planners had calculated. The fuel situation rapidly deteriorated as the *panzers* moved west, for they swiftly outdistanced the supply columns which had become hopelessly bogged down on the vehicle-choked roads.<sup>79</sup> As a result, much of the gasoline so painstakingly hoarded for the offensive never got out of Germany, let alone into the fuel tanks of the advancing armored vehicles.<sup>80</sup>

Those units which could get petrol found that terrain was still a formidable problem. The road-bound *panzers* struggled to keep up the momentum of the offensive on the few good thoroughfares in the Ardennes, but the highway net funneled movement southwest while *Wacht am Rhein*'s objectives lay to northwest. Forced to use secondary routes, the Germans churned the region's numerous unpaved roads into mud, and some tanks sank up to their turrets in the mire. The traffic situation worsened as old, worn German vehicles and new, improperly broken-in tanks and trucks developed mechanical problems at an alarming rate, further clogging the roads. Since only six maintenance companies had been assigned to all of Army Group B and spare parts were in short supply, before long disabled German vehicles were littering roadside ditches throughout the Ardennes.

Only if Bastogne fell did the Germans have any hope of easing the traffic congestion. But Manteuffel, already well behind schedule, could ill afford to stop his drive for the Meuse to reduce Bastogne, so he left a blocking force to besiege the town while his three *panzer* divisions drove west. Manteuffel's lead columns crossed the Ourthe on the 20th, and by dawn on Christmas Eve, German armor, although low on fuel, was within five miles of the Meuse.

Further to the rear, the Germans had completely surrounded Bastogne during the night of December 20-21, and since they lacked the strength to overwhelm the U.S. 101st Airborne Division, they resorted to bluff. Shortly before noon on December 22, four German soldiers waving a white flag approached the American positions around Bastogne, carrying the following message for Brigadier General Anthony McAuliffe, the American commander:

To the U.S.A. Commander in the encircled town of Bastogne:

The fortune of war is changing. This time, the U.S. forces in and near Bastogne have been encircled by strong German armored units. ...

There is only one possibility of saving the encircled U.S.A. troops from annihilation. That is the honorable surrender of the encircled town. In order to think it over, a term of two hours will be granted, beginning with the presentation of this note. If this proposal should be rejected, one German artillery corps and six heavy anti-aircraft batteries are ready to annihilate the U.S.A. troops in and near Bastogne. The order for firing will be given immediately after the two hours' term.

All serious civilian losses caused by this artillery fire would not correspond with the well-known American humanity.

The German Commander

McAuliffe's reply:

To the German Commander:

Nuts!

The American Commander<sup>81</sup>

The Germans were dumbfounded. "Is this reply negative or affirmative?" they asked.

"If you don't understand what 'nuts' means," an American colonel, Bud Harper, explained, "in plain English it is the same as 'go to hell.' And I'll tell you something else — if you continue to attack, we will kill every goddam German who tries to break into this city."

"We will kill many Americans," the German replied. "This is war."<sup>82</sup>

McAuliffe's indignant response masked the growing desperation of Bastogne's defenders. Inside the 16-mile perimeter, 18,000 GIs grimly held on even though stocks of small arms ammunition were nearly depleted and the field guns were down to 10 shells apiece. All antiseptic and painkiller had been exhausted — brandy was used in their stead — and gasoline was so scarce that vehicles were filled up only immediately before being dispatched so fuel loss would be minimized if the vehicles were destroyed.<sup>83</sup> After McAuliffe refused the surrender demands, four heavy German assaults were repulsed on the 22nd; before the sun rose on the 23rd, many of the Battered Bastards of the Bastion of Bastogne grimly shook hands, fearing that this would be their last day if help did not come soon.

And Patton's relief attack was already late. His counteroffensive, a three-division assault along a 20-mile front supported by 1,500 artillery pieces, had started as promised on the morning of December 22, and the attack continued day and night in accordance with Patton's order: "Drive like hell!" Merely overcoming the vast logistical problems was a major accomplishment — thousands of tons of supplies had to be moved and more than 20,000 miles of communications wire had to be relaid — but stiff enemy resistance bolstered by minefields, blown bridges, cratered roads and soggy ground halted Patton's men nine miles from Bastogne.<sup>84</sup> Overcast skies mixed with rain, sleet and snow which deprived Patton of much-needed air support also denied the Bastogne defenders aerial resupply; meteorologists forecast no improvement in the weather before December 26.

But Patton was determined to personally do something about the weather. Back on December 11 he had ordered the Third Army chaplain, Colonel James O'Neill, to write a prayer for good weather. O'Neill replied, "Sir, it's going to take a pretty thick rug for that kind of praying."

“I don’t care if it takes a flying carpet!” Patton barked back. “I want you to get up a prayer for good weather!”<sup>85</sup>

Even though this heavenly plea had originally been intended for his now cancelled offensive toward the Rhine, Patton decided to use it to aid his push to Bastogne. “The Lord won’t mind,” Patton explained. “He knows we’re too busy killing Germans to print another prayer.”<sup>86</sup> The invocation for divine assistance put together by a reluctant O’Neill was issued to Patton’s troops on December 22:

Almighty and most merciful God, we humbly beseech thee, of thy great goodness, to restrain these immoderate rains with which we have had to contend. Grant us fair weather for battle. Graciously harken unto us as soldiers who call upon thee that, armed with thy power, we may advance from victory to victory, and crush the oppression and wickedness of our enemies and establish thy justice among men and nations. Amen.<sup>87</sup>

The very next day this prayer was literally answered.

### **“We’ve got the bastards in the bag!” THE DEMISE OF *WACHT AM RHEIN***

December 23 dawned clear and sunny—“visibility unlimited” was the weatherman’s verdict—and cold temperatures dropped the mercury to ten degrees Fahrenheit, freezing the ground solid for Patton’s tanks.

“God damn!” an ecstatic Patton screamed. “Look at that weather! O’Neill sure did some potent praying. ... I guess I’ll have another 100,000 of those prayers printed. The Lord is on our side and we’ve got to keep Him informed of what we need.”<sup>88</sup>

By noon, the aerial resupply of Bastogne was well underway. For four hours 260 C-47 transport planes, escorted by 96 P-47 fighter-bombers, flew through heavy German anti-aircraft fire to deliver 1,446 bundles containing 344 tons of supplies to Bastogne’s defenders; the men of the 101st, dodging German sniper fire, retrieved over 95 percent of the airdropped cargo.<sup>89</sup> Especially valuable was the ammunition, some of which was already being fired at the Germans while the last packages were still floating down to earth. The next day, another 160 planes delivered an additional 159 tons of supplies, and by December 27 over 1,000 tons of materiel, including 700 tons of ammunition, 48 tons of rations, 26 tons of medicine and 7,800 gallons of gasoline had been sent by parachute or glider to the men encircled in Bastogne.



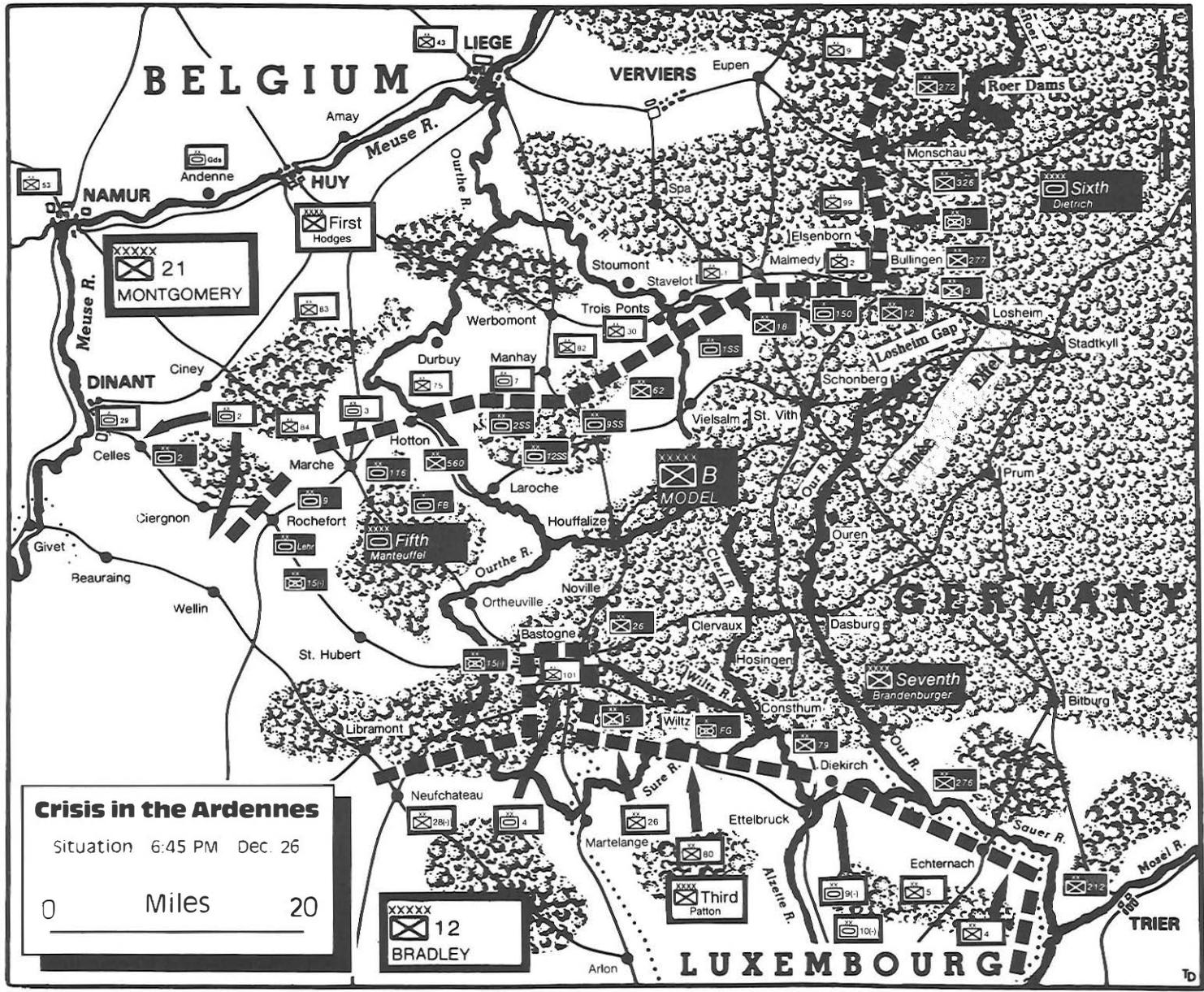
Clear skies also meant that the Allied fighter-bombers could finally fly. Because of the bad weather, the Ninth Air Force's 1,500 aircraft had flown an average of less than two sorties apiece between the 16th and 22nd, and many of these missions were spent dogfighting German fighters rather than supporting the troops on the ground. With good flying weather, the entire realm of Allied airpower could be unleashed against the German offensive. A total of 465 medium and 417 heavy bombers, accompanied by 433 fighters, dropped over 2,000 tons of bombs on bridges, railheads, marshalling yards and road centers west of the Rhine. These attacks, combined with the damage inflicted Christmas Eve by an additional 2,000-plane raid which dropped a further 5,000 tons, were so destructive that von Rundstedt later said that the attacks "decisively contributed to the halting of the Ardennes offensive. Traffic was hopelessly clogged up and caused repair columns long delays in arriving at destroyed bridges."

After repulsing the feeble efforts of the *Luftwaffe* to contest the skies over the Ardennes, on December 23 nearly 700 fighter-bombers roamed at will over the battlefield, strafing German combat formations and supply columns; by the end of the month, over 10,000 such sorties had been flown. Allied pilots reported that the cratered roads were so packed with enemy tanks and trucks that they enjoyed the best hunting of the war. A German general outside Bastogne confirmed that "when night fell, a glow could be seen stretching back to the West Wall. The roads were marked by lines of flaming vehicles." Those vehicles which escaped destruction could, as one German officer explained, "get through only by going from cover to cover," prompting Model to issue an order prohibiting all major movements during daylight hours.

Allied aircraft played their most influential role by flying close support missions for troops on the ground. Aided by five squadrons of fighter-bombers, 11 groups of medium bombers and one division of heavy bombers, Patton's efforts to relieve the surrounded 101st Airborne Division continued but could still average only a mile a day, in what proved to be the Third Army's bloodiest campaign of the war; by Christmas the Americans were still six miles from Bastogne. While enemy pressure against the 101st persisted, on the 26th a detachment led by Lieutenant Colonel Creighton Abrams detoured west, found a weak spot in the German lines and raced for Bastogne. At 6:45 p.m., Americans manning the southern portion of Bastogne's defenses reported the approach of "three light tanks, believed friendly."

Patton had arrived.

McAuliffe rushed out to welcome the men of the 4th Armored Division, greeting Abrams with classic understatement: "Gee, I am mighty glad to see you."<sup>90</sup> Through this precarious 300-yard-wide lifeline — one tanker said the corridor to Bastogne was "so narrow you could spit across it" — 40 supply trucks rolled into the town while 70 ambulances evacuated 964 soldiers and 700 German POWs. Patton's 4th Armored had lost 200 of its 242 tanks, almost 3,500 Americans inside the perimeter had been killed, wounded or captured defending Bastogne, and over half of the town's 1,250 homes had been destroyed or left uninhabitable by the fighting. But Bastogne had been held.



**Crisis in the Ardennes**  
 Situation 6:45 PM Dec. 26

0 Miles 20

XXXXX 12 BRADLEY

XXXXX 21 MONTGOMERY

XXXXX 12 BRADLEY

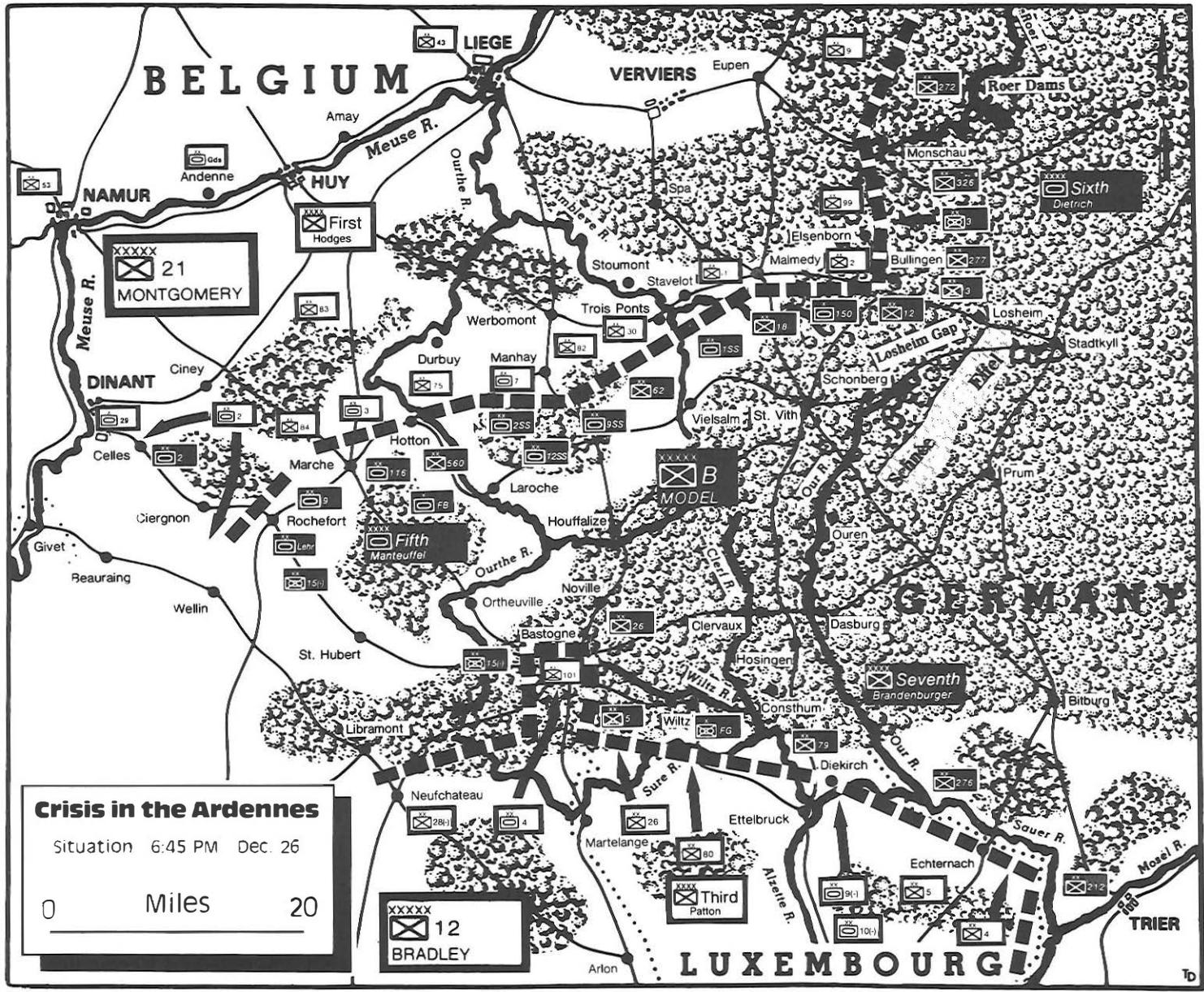
XXXX Third Patton

Seventh Brandenburger

XXXX Fifth Manteuffel

XXXX B MODEL

XXXX Sixth Dietrich



Meanwhile, Manteuffel's armored columns, which had bypassed Bastogne to pull within five miles of the Meuse, were halted by their two nemeses: Allied fighter-bombers and empty fuel tanks. As the 2nd *Panzer* Division lay immobilized between Celles and Dinant, Major General Ernest Harmon's 2nd U.S. Armored Division counterattacked and cut off the 2nd *Panzer* from the rest of Manteuffel's army, prompting Harmon to chortle, "We've got the bastards in the bag!"<sup>91</sup> For two days, beginning on Christmas morning, the 2nd Armored Division pounded its German counterpart. By dusk on December 26, as Patton's relief column rolled into Bastogne, the 2nd *Panzer* Division had been annihilated. Eighty-two tanks, 83 field guns and 441 vehicles had been captured or destroyed, 1,200 prisoners had been taken and an estimated 2,500 enemy soldiers had been killed or wounded.<sup>92</sup> With his spearhead decapitated, Manteuffel withdrew his other *panzer* divisions back to Rochefort and St. Hubert. The crisis in the Ardennes had passed.

### **"Stalingrad number two"**

#### **THE RESULTS OF *WACHT AM RHEIN***

Following the relief of Bastogne and the destruction of the 2nd *Panzer* Division on December 26, the German offensive had been declared defeated by everyone except Hitler. As usual the *fuehrer* blamed his generals: "We have encountered setbacks, but only because my plan was not followed to the letter."<sup>93</sup> Vowing to fight on, Hitler declared, "I have never in my life learned the meaning of the word capitulation," and he ordered the attacks on Bastogne to be stepped up, eventually concentrating 45,000 German soldiers outside the town. Hitler also planned two more offensives to again throw the Allies off balance and regain the initiative in the west: *Nordwind*, a nine-division attack along the southernmost part of the German-French border to capture Strasbourg, and *Bodenplatte*, a surprise dawn air strike by the *Luftwaffe* on New Year's Day to destroy the Allied air force on the ground.

*Nordwind* commenced at 11 p.m. on New Year's Eve. Hitler had high hopes for the attack: "It will compel Patton to withdraw the mass of his forces, which are now seeking to relieve Bastogne. ... With this, pressure on the southern flank of the Ardennes Offensive will relax and we shall have a free hand for a drive northwards again." But the understrength German divisions managed to advance only 15 miles during the next two weeks, and these gains were largely the result of voluntary withdrawals made by the Americans to shorten their lines.<sup>94</sup> The Germans failed to get closer than eight miles to Strasbourg, and the goal of creating a major political and military split between the French and the Americans never materialized. *Bodenplatte* did not fare much better. At 8 a.m. on New Year's Day, 1,035 *Luftwaffe* fighters took off from eight aerodromes, flying in four waves at tree-top level below Allied radar to strike 16 U.S. and British airfields in Holland and Belgium. The Allies were caught by surprise and 206 aircraft were destroyed, but the *Luftwaffe* lost 277 planes (two-thirds of which were accidentally shot down by their own anti-aircraft gunners) and 253 irreplaceable pilots.<sup>95</sup>

Neither *Nordwind* nor *Bodenplatte* lessened Allied efforts to reduce the Bulge. In the south, the Third Army's corridor to Bastogne had been widened to over a mile by December 29 — Patton himself entered the town the next day — while Montgomery's attack from the north began on January 3. Both offensives were hampered by a raging blizzard which limited gains to a matter of yards and allowed the Germans to retreat gradually rather than be encircled.

Only slowly did Hitler resign *Wacht am Rhein* to failure. On the day Montgomery's offensive commenced, Hitler euphemistically commented that "the originally planned operation is no longer promising of success."<sup>96</sup> On January 5, the *fuehrer* suspended the attacks against Bastogne; four days later he withdrew the four SS panzer divisions from the fighting. Hitler's attention shifted to the Eastern Front on January 12 when the Soviet winter offensive jumped off. The Russians immediately ripped a gaping hole in the German lines and covered over 200 miles in 11 days, prompting Hitler to shift Dietrich's entire Sixth *Panzer* Army from the Ardennes to the east.<sup>97</sup>

In the west, the Allied counteroffensive against the German penetration continued to grind forward, with snowstorms and overcast skies limiting the advance to a mile or two a day. One by one the German gains were retaken. Houffalize fell on the 16th as Patton's Third Army and Hodges' First Army linked up exactly one month after the German offensive kicked off, St. Vith was recaptured by the 7th Armored on the 23rd, and by January 28 the Germans were back to where they were on *Wacht am Rhein*'s first day.

In the final analysis, *Wacht am Rhein* appears to have been a bloody draw. Over 81,000 German soldiers were killed, wounded or taken prisoner in the Ardennes, while the Americans suffered almost 77,000 casualties, including 8,600 killed in action and 21,000 missing or taken prisoner, and the British lost some 1,500 men; *Nordwind* produced another 15,000 U.S. and 25,000 German casualties.<sup>98</sup> Over 700 American tanks, 300 artillery pieces and 592 planes were destroyed, while over 800 German *panzers* and approximately 1,000 of the *Luftwaffe*'s combat aircraft were lost.<sup>99</sup> But these cold numbers do not tell the entire story. The American losses, although serious, were more than offset by the nine fresh divisions which landed in France while the battle raged. So even counting the Ardennes casualties, the Allied forces on the continent were stronger at the end of January than they were the day before the Battle of the Bulge began.

The same cannot be said of the *Wehrmacht*. With an army overextended along several fronts and a war industry straining under around-the-clock aerial bombardment, Germany was incapable of making good its losses. The necessary manpower was simply not there: For example, even though Dietrich's Sixth *Panzer* Army had top priority for replacements after the battle, only 22,000 soldiers could be scraped together to make up for the 37,000 who fell in the Ardennes. And so much scarce fuel had been consumed that German air and ground operations were affected for the rest of the war; the German General Staff found that even for local operations "it first had to be determined if adequate supplies of gas and diesel oil were available, and whether they could be procured at the right time." Germany's top military leaders wrote obituaries for their armed forces after *Wacht*

*am Rhein*. The chief of the *Luftwaffe*'s fighters, *Generalleutnant* Adolph Galland, said that "the *Luftwaffe* received its death blow in the Ardennes," and von Rundstedt called the offensive "Stalingrad number two."<sup>100</sup> The only benefit the Germans could boast from Hitler's master stroke was time, yet even this was a hollow claim. The Ardennes offensive did delay for six weeks the Allied drive into Germany, but once the Anglo-Americans resumed the offensive they gained ground much faster because of the dilapidated state of the German forces.

So in the Ardennes lay the German Army, irreparably shattered. But it all could have turned out much differently. Were it not for the swift, decisive reactions of the Allied high command in the opening days of *Wacht am Rhein*, Hitler's dream of reaching Antwerp and pulling off another Dunkirk might have come about. More importantly, because of the indomitable courage of American soldiers doggedly fighting from frozen foxholes against enormous odds at Bastogne, St. Vith and countless unnamed crossroads and forests, the Battle of the Bulge has gone down in history not as a cataclysmic U.S. defeat but as a magnificent American victory.

## CONCLUSION

The Battle of the Bulge highlights some basic tenets of military strategy, tenets which future commanders would do well to heed. No string of victories, not even those as remarkable as the Allies' thorough thrashing of the German Army in the course of liberating France, justifies an assumption of victory before the enemy actually lays down his arms. The Allies' overconfidence led them first to invite a German attack by stripping the Ardennes front, then to dismiss even the possibility that the Germans could launch an offensive and, finally, to ignore the warnings that an attack was imminent. The Bulge also reemphasizes the age-old maxim "Amateurs talk strategy; generals talk logistics." Hitler chose the port of Antwerp as the objective because of its significance to the Allied supply effort, and logistical problems eventually played a significant role in the stalling of the German attack.

Most importantly of all, the Battle of the Bulge illustrates that it is the ordinary soldier who determines the outcome of war. In the crucial opening days of the offensive, American troops were outnumbered and outgunned, a most unusual occurrence for soldiers who in almost every previous campaign had benefitted from numerical superiority and massive air support. Despite these disadvantages, U.S. fighting men acquitted themselves superbly, delaying enemy advances and limiting enemy breakthroughs until help could arrive to tip the balance. It makes one wonder what would have happened if Saddam Hussein, after crushing Kuwait in the early days of August 1990, had continued south and attacked the handful of U.S. units defending Saudi Arabia. If the Bulge is any indicator, in all likelihood the Iraqi dictator would have been in for a most rude surprise once he tackled the sons and daughters of the American fighting men who had stopped Hitler in the winter of 1944.

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100. Ibid., p. 608.

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