

Battle of the Bulge

The 16 December 1944 - 25 January 1945 Battle of the Bulge (also known as the Ardennes Offensive and the Von Rundstedt Offensive) was a major German offensive (die Ardennenoffensive), launched toward the end of World War II through the densely forested Ardennes Mountains region of Wallonia in Belgium, hence its French name (Bataille des Ardennes), and France and Luxembourg on the Western Front. The Wehrmacht's code name for the offensive was Unternehmen Wacht am Rhein ("Operation Watch on the Rhine"), after the German patriotic hymn Die Wacht am Rhein. This German offensive was officially named the Ardennes-Alsace campaign by the U.S. Army, but it is known to the English-speaking general public simply as the Battle of the Bulge, the "bulge" being the initial incursion the Germans put into the Allies' line of advance, as seen in maps presented in contemporary newspapers.

The German offensive was supported by several subordinate operations known as Unternehmen Bodenplatte, Greif, and Währung. Germany's goal for these operations was to split the British and American Allied line in half, capturing Antwerp, Belgium, and then proceed to encircle and destroy four Allied armies, forcing the Western Allies to negotiate a peace treaty in the Axis Powers' favor.

The offensive was planned with the utmost secrecy, minimizing radio traffic and moving troops and equipment under cover of darkness. Although ULTRA suggested a possible attack, and the Third U.S. Army's intelligence staff predicted a major German offensive, the Allies were still caught by surprise. This was achieved by a combination of Allied overconfidence, preoccupation with their own offensive plans, and poor aerial reconnaissance.

Near-complete surprise against a weakly-defended section of the Allied line was achieved during heavy overcast weather, which grounded the Allies' overwhelmingly superior air forces. Fierce resistance, particularly around the key town of Bastogne, and terrain favoring the defenders threw the German timetable behind schedule. Allied reinforcements, including General George Patton's Third Army, and improving weather conditions, which permitted air attacks on German forces and supply lines, sealed the failure of the offensive.

In the wake of the defeat, many experienced German units were left severely depleted of men and equipment as survivors retreated to the defenses of the Siegfried Line. For the Americans, with about 500,000 to 840,000 men committed and some 70,000 to 89,000 casualties, including 19,000 killed, the Battle of the Bulge was the single largest and bloodiest battle that they fought in World War II.

Background

After the breakout from Normandy at the end of July 1944, and the landings in southern France on 15 August 1944, the Allies advanced toward Germany more quickly than anticipated. Coupled with an initial lack of deep water ports, it presented the Allies with enormous supply problems. Over-the-beach supply operations using the Normandy landing areas and direct landing LSTs on the beaches exceeded planning expectations. The only deep water port the Allies had captured was Cherbourg, near the original invasion beaches, but the Germans had thoroughly wrecked and mined it before it could be taken. It took the Allies many months to build up its cargo-handling capability. The Allies captured the port of Antwerp, Belgium, fully intact in the first days of September, but it was not operational until 28 November when the estuary of the Scheldt River, which controls access to the port, was cleared of German troops. The delay was caused in part by differences between Dwight D. Eisenhower and Bernard Montgomery over whether Montgomery or American General George S. Patton in the south would get priority access to supplies.

German forces remained in control of several major ports on the English Channel coast until May 1945. The extensive destruction of the French railway system prior to D-Day, intended to hamper German movement, proved equally damaging to the Allies as it took time to repair the system of tracks and bridges. A trucking system known as the "Red Ball Express" made mainly up of African Americans, brought supplies to front line troops, but transportation took five times as much fuel to reach the front line near the Belgian border as was delivered. By early October, the Allies suspended major offensives to improve their supply lines and availability.

Generals Patton, Montgomery, and Omar N. Bradley each pressed for priority delivery of supplies to their respective armies so they could continue their individual lines of advance and maintain pressure on the Germans. General Eisenhower, however, preferred a broad-front strategy. He gave some priority to Montgomery's northern forces, who had the short-term goal of opening the urgently needed port of Antwerp and the long-term goal of capturing the Ruhr area, the industrial heart of Germany. With the Allies paused, Gerd von Rundstedt was able to reorganize the disrupted German armies into a coherent defense.

Field Marshal Montgomery's Operation Market Garden only achieved some of its objectives while its territorial gains left the Allied supply situation worse than before. In October, the Canadian First Army fought the Battle of the Scheldt, clearing the Westerschelde by taking Walcheren and opening the port of Antwerp to shipping. As a result, by the end of October, the supply situation had eased somewhat.

Despite a lull along the front after the Scheldt battles, the German situation remained dire. While operations continued in the autumn, notably the Lorraine Campaign, the Battle of Aachen, and the fighting in the Hürtgen Forest, the strategic situation in the west changed little. The Western Allies already had 96 divisions at or near the front with an estimated ten more divisions en route from the United Kingdom to the battle zone.

Additional Allied airborne units remained in England. The Germans could field a total of 55 divisions.

Hitler promised his generals a total of 18 infantry and 12 armored or mechanized divisions "for planning purposes." The plan was to pull 13 infantry divisions, two parachute divisions, and six panzer-type divisions from the Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (OKW) strategic reserve. On the Eastern Front, the Soviets' Operation Bagration during the summer had destroyed much of Germany's Army Group Center (Heeresgruppe Mitte). The extremely swift operation ended only when the advancing Red Army forces outran their supplies. By November, it was clear that Soviet forces were preparing for a winter offensive.

Meanwhile, the Allied air offensive of early 1944 had effectively grounded the Luftwaffe (German Air Force), leaving the German Army with little battlefield intelligence and no way to interdict Allied supplies. The converse was equally damaging; daytime movement of German forces was almost instantly noticed, and interdiction of supplies combined with the bombing of the Romanian oil fields starved Germany of oil and gasoline.

One of the few advantages held by the German forces in November 1944 was that they were no longer defending all of Western Europe. Their front lines in the west had considerably shortened and were much closer to the German heartland. This dramatically improved their supply problems despite Allied control of the air. Additionally, their extensive telephone and telegraph network meant that radios were no longer necessary for communications, which lessened the effectiveness of ULTRA intercepts. Nevertheless a prevailing "myth" is that ULTRA did not give the Allies sufficient warning. Some 40-50 decrypt messages were sent per day by ULTRA. They recorded the quadrupling of German fighter forces and noticed that the camouflaging name given to the German build up-Jägeraufmarsch-was synonymous with an offensive operation. ULTRA also picked up communiqués regarding extensive rail and road movements in the region. ULTRA also picked up German orders that movements should be made on time. The information reaching Allied Headquarters was sufficient to indicate something was afoot.

Drafting the offensive

German leader Adolf Hitler felt his armies still might be able to defend Germany successfully if they could find a way to neutralize the Western Front. Hitler believed he could split the Allied forces and force the Americans and British to settle for a separate peace, independent of the Soviet Union. Success in the West would give the Germans time to design and produce more advanced weapons (such as jet aircraft, new U-boat designs, and super-heavy tanks) and permit the concentration of forces in the East. After the war ended, this assessment was generally viewed as unrealistic, given Allied air superiority throughout Europe and the ability to continually disrupt German offensive operations.

Given the reduced manpower of German land forces at the time, the Germans believed the best way to seize the initiative would be to attack in the West against the smaller Allied forces, rather than against the vast Soviet armies. Even the encirclement and destruction of entire Soviet armies, an unlikely outcome, would still have left the Soviets with a numerical superiority.

Several senior German military officers including Walter Model and Gerd Von Rundstedt expressed concern as to whether the goals of the offensive could be realized. They offered alternative plans but Hitler would not listen. The plan banked on unfavorable weather including heavy fog and low-lying clouds which would minimize the Allied air advantage. Hitler originally set the offensive for later November, before the anticipated start of the Russian winter offensive.

In the West, supply problems began to significantly impede Allied operations, even though the opening of the Port of Antwerp in November 1944 slightly improved the situation. The Allied armies positions were stretched from southern France to the Netherlands. German planning for the counter offensive rested on the premise that a successful strike against thinly-manned stretches of the line would halt Allied advances on the entire Western Front.

Several plans for major Western offensives were put forward, but Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (High Command of the Armed Forces, or OKW) quickly concentrated on two. A first plan for an encirclement maneuver called for a two-pronged attack along the borders of the U.S. armies around Aachen, hoping to encircle the Ninth and Third Armies and leave the German forces back in control of the excellent defensive grounds where they had fought the U.S. to a standstill earlier in the year. A second plan called for a classic blitzkrieg attack through the weakly defended Ardennes Mountains, mirroring the successful German offensive there during the Battle of France in 1940, aimed at splitting the armies along the U.S.-British lines and capturing Antwerp. This plan was named *Wacht am Rhein* or "Watch on the Rhine", after a popular German patriotic song; this name also deceptively implied the Germans would be adopting a defensive posture in the Western Front. Hitler chose the second plan, believing a successful encirclement would have little impact on the overall situation and finding the prospect of splitting the Anglo-American armies more appealing. The disputes between Montgomery and Patton were well known, and Hitler hoped he could exploit this perceived disunity. If the attack were to succeed in capturing the port of Antwerp, four complete armies would be trapped without supplies behind German lines.

Both plans centered on attacks against the American forces. Hitler believed the Americans were incapable of fighting effectively, and that the American home front was likely to crack upon hearing of a decisive American loss.

Tasked with carrying out the operation were Generalfeldmarschall (Field Marshal) Walther Model, the commander of German Army Group B (Heeresgruppe B), and Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, the overall commander of the German Army Command in the West (Oberbefehlshaber West).

Model and von Rundstedt both believed aiming for Antwerp was too ambitious, given Germany's scarce resources in late 1944. At the same time, they felt maintaining a purely defensive posture (as had been the case since Normandy) would only delay defeat, not avert it. They thus developed alternative, less ambitious plans that did not aim to cross the Meuse River, Model's being Unternehmen Herbstnebel (Operation Autumn Mist) and von Rundstedt's Fall Martin ("Case Martin"). The two field marshals combined their plans to present a joint "small solution" to Hitler, who rejected it in favor of his "big solution".

Confusingly, Wacht am Rhein was renamed Herbstnebel after the operation was given the go-ahead in early December.

Planning

OKW decided by mid-September, at Hitler's insistence, that the offensive would be mounted in the Ardennes, as was done in 1940. Many German generals objected, but the offensive was planned and carried out anyway. In 1940, German forces had passed through the Ardennes in three days before engaging the enemy, but the 1944 plan called for battle in the forest. The main forces were to advance westward to the Meuse River, then turn northwest for Antwerp and Brussels. The close terrain of the Ardennes would make rapid movement difficult, though open ground beyond the Meuse offered the prospect of a successful dash to the coast.

Four armies were selected for the operation. The Sixth SS Panzer Army, under Sepp Dietrich. Newly created on 26 October 1944, it incorporated the senior formation of the Waffen-SS, the 1. SS Panzer Division Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler as well as the 12. SS Panzer Division Hitlerjugend. Sixth SS Panzer Army was designated the northernmost attack force, having its northernmost point on the pre-attack battlefront nearest the German town of Monschau. It was entrusted with the offensive's primary objective, capturing Antwerp.

The Fifth Panzer Army under Hasso von Manteuffel, was assigned to the middle attack route with the objective of capturing Brussels.

The Seventh Army, under Erich Brandenberger, was assigned to the southernmost attack, having its southernmost point on the pre-attack battlefront nearest the Luxembourg town of Echternach, with the task of protecting the flank. This Army was made up of only four infantry divisions, with no large scale armored formations to use as a spearhead unit. As a result, they made little progress throughout the battle. Also participating in a secondary role was the Fifteenth Army, under Gustav-Adolf von Zangen. Recently rebuilt after heavy fighting during Market Garden, it was located on the far north of the Ardennes battlefield and tasked with holding U.S. forces in place, with the possibility of launching its own attack given favorable conditions.

For the offensive to be successful, four criteria were deemed critical: the attack had to be a complete surprise; the weather conditions had to be poor to neutralize Allied air superiority and the damage it could inflict on the German offensive and its supply lines; the progress had to be rapid-the Meuse River, halfway to Antwerp, had to be reached by day 4; and allied fuel supplies would have to be captured intact along the way because the Wehrmacht was short on fuel. The General Staff estimated they only had enough fuel to cover one-third to one-half of the ground to Antwerp in heavy combat conditions.

The plan originally called for just under 45 divisions, including a dozen panzer and panzergrenadier divisions forming the armored spearhead and various infantry units to form a defensive line as the battle unfolded. By this time, however, the German Army suffered from an acute manpower shortage and the force had been reduced to around 30 divisions. Although it retained most of its armor, there were not enough infantry units because of the defensive needs in the East. These 30 newly rebuilt divisions used some of the last reserves of the German Army (Wehrmacht Heer). Among them were Volksgrenadier units formed from a mix of battle-hardened veterans and recruits formerly regarded as too young or too old to fight. Training time, equipment, and supplies were inadequate during the preparations. German fuel supplies were precarious-those materials and supplies that could not be directly transported by rail had to be horse-drawn to conserve fuel, and the mechanized and panzer divisions would depend heavily on captured fuel. As a result, the start of the offensive was delayed from 27 November to 16 December.

Before the offensive, the Allies were virtually blind to German troop movement. During the liberation of France, the extensive network of the French resistance had provided valuable intelligence about German dispositions. Once they reached the German border, this source dried up. In France, orders had been relayed within the German army using radio messages enciphered by the Enigma machine, and these could be picked up and decrypted by Allied code-breakers headquartered at Bletchley Park, to give the intelligence known as ULTRA. In Germany, such orders were typically transmitted using telephone and teleprinter, and a special radio silence order was imposed on all matters concerning the upcoming offensive. The major crackdown in the Wehrmacht after the 20 July plot resulted in much tighter security and fewer leaks. The foggy autumn weather also prevented Allied reconnaissance aircraft from correctly assessing the ground situation.

Thus, Allied High Command considered the Ardennes a quiet sector, relying on assessments from their intelligence services that the Germans were unable to launch any major offensive operations this late in the war. What little intelligence they had led the Allies to believe precisely what the Germans wanted them to believe-that preparations were being carried out only for defensive, not offensive operations. In fact, because of the Germans' efforts, the Allies were led to believe that a new defensive army was being formed around Düsseldorf in the northern Rhine, possibly to defend against British attack. This was done by increasing the number of flak batteries in the area and the artificial multiplication of radio transmissions in the area. The Allies at this

point thought the information was of no importance. All of this meant that the attack, when it came, completely surprised the Allied forces. Remarkably, the U.S. Third Army intelligence chief, Colonel Oscar Koch, the U.S. First Army intelligence chief, and the SHAEF intelligence officer all correctly predicted the German offensive capability and intention to strike the U.S. VIII Corps area. These predictions were largely dismissed by the U.S. 12th Army Group.

Because the Ardennes was considered a quiet sector, economy-of-force considerations led it to be used as a training ground for new units and a rest area for units that had seen hard fighting. The U.S. units deployed in the Ardennes thus were a mixture of inexperienced troops (such as the raw U.S. 99th and 106th "Golden Lions" Divisions), and battle-hardened troops sent to that sector to recuperate (the 2nd Infantry Division). Two major special operations were planned for the offensive. By October, it was decided Otto Skorzeny, the German commando who had rescued the former Italian dictator Benito Mussolini, was to lead a task force of English-speaking German soldiers in "Operation Greif". These soldiers were to be dressed in American and British uniforms and wear dog tags taken from corpses and POWs. Their job was to go behind American lines and change signposts, misdirect traffic, generally cause disruption and to seize bridges across the Meuse River between Liège and Namur. By late November, another ambitious special operation was added: Colonel Friedrich August von der Heydte was to lead a Fallschirmjäger (paratrooper) Kampfgruppe in Operation Stösser, a night-time paratroop drop behind the Allied lines aimed at capturing a vital road junction near Malmedy.

German intelligence had set 20 December as the expected date for the start of the upcoming Soviet offensive, aimed at crushing what was left of German resistance on the Eastern Front and thereby opening the way to Berlin. It was hoped that Stalin would delay the start of the operation once the German assault in the Ardennes had begun and wait for the outcome before continuing.

In the final stage of preparations, Hitler and his staff left their Wolf's Lair headquarters in East Prussia, in which they had coordinated much of the fighting on the Eastern Front. After a brief visit to Berlin, on 11 December, they came to the Eagle's Nest, Hitler's headquarters near Bad Nauheim in southern Germany, the site from which he had overseen the successful 1940 campaign against France and the Low Countries. In a personal conversation on 13 December with Friedrich von der Heydte, who was put in charge of Operation Stösser, Generalfeldmarschall Model gave the entire operation less than a 10% chance of succeeding. Model told him it was necessary to make the attempt. "It must be done because this offensive is the last chance to conclude the war favorably."

Initial German assault

On 16 December 1944, at 5:30 a.m., the Germans began the assault with a massive, 90-minute artillery barrage using 1,600 artillery pieces across an 80 miles (130 km) front on the Allied troops facing the Sixth SS Panzer Army. The Americans' initial impression was that this was the anticipated, localized counterattack resulting from the Allies' recent attack in the Wahlerscheid sector to the north where the 2nd Division had knocked a sizable dent into the Siegfried Line. In the northern sector Dietrich's Sixth SS Panzer Army assaulted Losheim Gap and Elsenborn Ridge in an effort to break through to Liège.

Heavy snowstorms engulfed parts of the Ardennes area. While having the desired effect of keeping the Allied aircraft grounded, the weather also proved troublesome for the Germans because poor road conditions hampered their advance. Poor traffic control led to massive traffic jams and fuel shortages in forward units.

In the center, von Manteuffel's Fifth Panzer Army attacked towards Bastogne and St. Vith, both road junctions of great strategic importance. In the south, Brandenberger's Seventh Army pushed towards Luxembourg in their efforts to secure the flank from Allied attacks. Only one month before 250 members of the Waffen-SS had unsuccessfully tried to recapture the town of Vianden with its castle from the Luxembourgish resistance during the Battle of Vianden

Attack on the northern shoulder

The battle for Elsenborn Ridge was a decisive component of the Battle of the Bulge, deflecting the strongest armored units of the German advance. The attack was led by one of the best equipped divisions on the western front, 1st SS Panzer Division (LSSAH). The division made up the lead unit for the entire German 6th Panzer Army. Kampfgruppe Peiper of the LSSAH division was selected its spearhead to lead the main effort and was commanded by then SS Obersturmbannführer Joachim Peiper.

The attacks by the Sixth SS Panzer Army's infantry units in the north fared badly because of unexpectedly fierce resistance by the U.S. 2nd and 99th Infantry Divisions. On the first day, an entire German battalion of 500 men was held up for 10 hours at Lanzerath, which controlled a key route through the Losheim Gap. To preserve the quantity of armor available, the infantry of the 9th Fallschirmjaeger Regiment, 3rd Fallschirmjaeger Division, had been ordered to clear the village first. A single 18-man Intelligence and Reconnaissance Platoon from the 99th Infantry Division along with four Forward Air Controllers held up the battalion of about 500 German paratroopers until sunset, about 4:00 p.m, causing 92 casualties among the Germans.

This created a bottleneck in the German advance. Kampfgruppe Peiper, at the head of the SS Oberstgruppenführer Sepp Dietrich's Sixth Panzer Army had been designated to take the Losheim-Losheimergraben road, but it was closed by two collapsed overpasses.

Once the Germans reached Bucholz Station, they quickly captured portions of the 3rd Battalion of the 394th Infantry Regiment. To Kampfgruppe Peiper's north, the 277th Volksgrenadier Division attempted to break through the defending line of the U.S. 99th Infantry Division and positions of 2nd Infantry Division. Their intention was to control the twin villages of Rocherath-Krinkelt which would clear a path to the high ground of Elsenborn ridge. Occupation of this dominating terrain would allow control of the roads to the south and west and ensure supply to Kampfgruppe Peiper's armored task force. The stiff American defense prevented the Germans from reaching the vast array of supplies near the cities of Liège and Spa, Belgium and the road network west of the Elsenborn Ridge leading to the Meuse River. Historian John S.D. Eisenhower wrote, "...the action of the 2nd and 99th Divisions on the northern shoulder could be considered the most decisive of the Ardennes campaign."

The 99th Infantry Division as a whole, outnumbered five to one, inflicted casualties in the ratio of eighteen to one. The division lost about 20% of its effective strength, including 465 killed and 2,524 evacuated due to wounds, injuries, fatigue, or trench foot. German losses were much higher. In the northern sector opposite the 99th, this included more than 4,000 deaths and the destruction of sixty tanks and big guns.

Driving south and east of Elsenborn, Kampfgruppe Peiper entered Honsfield, where they encountered one of the 99th Division's rest centers, clogged with confused American troops. They killed many and destroyed a number of American armored units and vehicles. Peiper easily captured the town and 50,000 US gallons (190,000 l; 42,000 imp gal) of fuel for his vehicles. Peiper then advanced towards Büllingen, keeping to the plan to move east, apparently unaware he had nearly taken the town and unknowingly bypassing an opportunity to flank and trap the entire 2nd and 99th Division. Peiper suddenly turned south to detour around Hünningen, interested only in getting back onto his assigned route. Kampfgruppe Peiper a few days later gained notoriety for their murder of U.S. prisoners of war in what became known as the Malmedy massacre.

Peiper entered Stavelot on 18 December but encountered fierce resistance from the American defenders. Unable to defeat them, he left a smaller support force in town and headed for the bridge at Trois-Ponts with the bulk of his strength, but by the time he reached it, retreating U.S. engineers had already destroyed it. Peiper pulled off and headed for the village of La Gleize and from there on to Stoumont. As Peiper approached, engineers blew up the bridge, and the American troops were entrenched and ready.

Peiper's troops were cut off from the main German force and supplies when the Americans recaptured Stavelot on 19 December. As their situation in Stoumont was becoming hopeless, Peiper decided to pull back to La Gleize, where he set up his defenses waiting for the German relief force. Since no relief force was able to penetrate

the Allied line, Peiper decided to break through back to the German lines on 23 December. The men of the Kampfgruppe were forced to abandon their vehicles and heavy equipment, although most of what remained of the unit was able to escape.

On 17 December, the 12th SS Panzer Division, reinforced by additional infantry (Panzergrenadier and Volksgenadier) divisions took the key road junction at Losheimergraben just north of Lanzerath and attacked the twin villages of Rocherath and Krinkelt. However, after more than ten days of intense battle, they were able to push the Americans out of the villages, but were unable to dislodge them from Elsenborn Ridge, where elements of the V Corps of the First U.S. Army prevented the German forces from reaching the road network to their west.

Operation Stösser

Operation Stösser was a paratroop drop into the American rear in the Hohes Veen area. Their objective was the "Baraque Michel" crossroads. It was led by Oberst Friedrich August Freiherr von der Heydte, hero of the legendary if ill-fated airborne assault on Crete.

It was the German paratroopers' only nighttime drop during WWII. Prior to the assault, von der Heydte was given only eight days to prepare. He was forbidden from using his own regiment because their movement might alert the Allies to the impending counterattack. Instead, he was provided with a Kampfgruppe of 800 men. The II Fallschirmkorps was tasked with contributing 100 men from each of its regiments. Instead of contributing their best men as ordered, the regiments sent their misfits and troublemakers. In loyalty to their command, 150 men from von der Hydte's own unit, the 6th Parachute Division, went against orders and joined him. They had little time to establish any unit cohesion or train together.

The parachute drop was a complete failure. Von der Heydte ended up with a total of around 300 troops. Too small and too weak to counter the Allies, they abandoned plans to take the crossroads and instead converted his mission to reconnaissance. With only enough ammunition for a single fight, they withdrew towards Germany and attacked the rear of the American lines. Only about 100 of his weary men finally reached the German rear.

The Malmedy massacre

In the north, the main armored spearhead of the Sixth SS Panzer Army, Kampfgruppe Peiper, consisted of 4,800 men and 600 vehicles of the 1st SS Panzer Division under the command of then Waffen-SS Obersturmbannführer (Lieutenant Colonel) Joachim Peiper. Bypassing the Elsenborn ridge, at 07:00 on 17 December, they seized a U.S. fuel depot at Büllingen, where they paused to refuel before continuing westward. At 12:30, near the hamlet of Baugnez, on the height halfway between the town of Malmedy

and Ligneuville, they encountered elements of the 285th Field Artillery Observation Battalion, U.S. 7th Armored Division. After a brief battle the Americans surrendered. They were disarmed and, with some other Americans captured earlier (approximately 150 men), sent to stand in a field near the crossroads where most were shot. News of the killings raced through Allied lines. Following the end of the war, captured SS soldiers who were part of Kampfgruppe Peiper along with several commanding officers including SS general, Sepp Dietrich and Joachim Peiper were tried for this massacre at the Malmedy massacre trial.

The fighting continued and, by the evening, the spearhead had pushed north to engage the U.S. 99th Infantry Division, and Kampfgruppe Peiper arrived in front of Stavelot. Peiper was already behind the timetable, because it had taken 36 hours to advance from Eifel to Stavelot; the same advance had taken just nine hours in 1940. As the Americans fell back, they blew up bridges and fuel dumps, denying the Germans critically needed fuel and further slowing the German progress.

Wereth 11

Another, much smaller massacre was committed in Wereth, Belgium, approximately a thousand yards northeast of Saint-Vith, on 17 December 1944. Eleven black soldiers, after surrendering, were tortured and then shot by men of the 1st SS Panzer Division, belonging to Kampfgruppe Hansen. The identities of the murderers remain unknown, and the perpetrators were never punished for this crime.

Attack in the center

The Germans fared better in the center (the 20 miles (32 km) Schnee Eifel sector) as the Fifth Panzer Army attacked positions held by the U.S. 28th and 106th Infantry Divisions. The Germans lacked the overwhelming strength as had been deployed in the north, but still possessed a marked numerical and material superiority over the very thinly spread 28th and 106th divisions. Thus, they succeeded in surrounding two largely intact regiments (422nd and 423rd) of the 106th Division in a pincer movement and forced their surrender, a tribute to the way Manteuffel's new tactics had been applied. The official U.S. Army history states: "At least seven thousand [men] were lost here and the figure probably is closer to eight or nine thousand. The amount lost in arms and equipment, of course, was very substantial. The Schnee Eifel battle, therefore, represents the most serious reverse suffered by American arms during the operations of 1944-45 in the European theater."

Battle for St. Vith

In the center, the town of St. Vith, a vital road junction, presented the main challenge for both von Manteuffel's and Dietrich's forces. The defenders, led by the 7th Armored Division, and including the remaining regiment of the 106th U.S. Infantry Division, with elements of the 9th Armored Division and 28th U.S. Infantry Division, all under the command of General Bruce C. Clarke, successfully resisted the German attacks, thereby significantly slowing the German advance. Under orders from Montgomery, St. Vith was given up on 21 December; U.S. troops fell back to entrenched positions in the area, presenting an imposing obstacle to a successful German advance. By 23 December, as the Germans shattered their flanks, the defenders' position became untenable, and U.S. troops were ordered to retreat west of the Salm River. As the German plan called for the capture of St. Vith by 18:00 on 17 December, the prolonged action in and around it presented a major blow to their timetable. To protect the river crossings on the Meuse at Givet, Dinant and Namur, Montgomery ordered those few units available to hold the bridges on 19 December. This led to a hastily assembled force including rear echelon troops, military police and Army Air Forces personnel. The British 29th Armored Brigade, which had turned in its tanks for re-equipping, was told to take back their tanks and head to the area. XXX Corps in Holland began their move to the area on 20 December.

The furthest westward penetration made by the German attack was by the 2nd Panzer Division of the Fifth Panzer Army, coming to less than ten miles (16 km) of the Meuse by 24 December.

Operation Greif and Operation Währung

For Operation Greif, Otto Skorzeny successfully infiltrated a small part of his battalion of disguised, English-speaking Germans behind the Allied lines. Although they failed to take the vital bridges over the Meuse, the battalion's presence produced confusion out of all proportion to their military activities, and rumors spread quickly.

Checkpoints were set up all over the Allied rear, greatly slowing the movement of soldiers and equipment. Military policemen drilled servicemen on things which every American was expected to know, such as the identity of Mickey Mouse's girlfriend, baseball scores, or the capital of a US State-though some could not remember or did not know.

The tightened security nonetheless made things very hard for the German infiltrators, and some of them were captured. Even during interrogation they continued their goal of spreading disinformation; when asked about their mission, some of them claimed they had been told to go to Paris to either kill or capture General Eisenhower. Security around the general was greatly increased, and he was confined to his headquarters. Because these prisoners had been captured in American uniform, they were later executed by firing squad. This was the standard practice of every army at the time,

although its legality was ambiguous under the Geneva Convention, which merely stated soldiers had to wear uniforms that distinguished them as combatants. In addition, Skorzeny deemed that such an operation would be well within the rules of warfare as long as his men were wearing their German uniforms when firing weapons. Skorzeny and his men were fully aware of their likely fate, and most wore their German uniforms underneath their Allied ones in case of capture. Skorzeny was tried by an American tribunal in 1947, but was acquitted and moved to Spain and later South America.

In Operation Währung, a small number of German agents infiltrated Allied lines in American uniforms. These agents were then to use an existing Nazi intelligence network to attempt to bribe rail and port workers to disrupt Allied supply operations. This operation was a failure.

Further south on Manteuffel's front, the main thrust was delivered by all attacking divisions crossing the River Our, then increasing the pressure on the key road centers of St. Vith and Bastogne. The more experienced 28th Infantry Division put up a much more dogged defense than the inexperienced (or "green") soldiers of the 106th infantry division. The 112th Infantry Regiment (the most northerly of the 28th Division's regiments), holding a continuous front east of the Our, kept German forces from seizing and using the Our river bridges around Ouren for two days, before withdrawing progressively westwards.

The 109th and 110th Regiments of the 28th Division, however, fared worse, as they were spread so thinly that their positions were easily bypassed. Both offered stubborn resistance in the face of superior forces, and threw the German schedule off by a matter of days. The 110th regiment's situation was by far the worst, as it was responsible for an eleven-mile front, while its 2nd battalion was withheld as the divisional reserve. Panzer columns took the outlying villages and widely separated strong points in bitter fighting, and advanced to points near Bastogne within four days. The struggle for the villages and American strong points, plus transport confusion on the German side, slowed the attack sufficiently to allow the 101st Airborne Division (reinforced by elements from the 9th and 10th Armored Divisions) to reach Bastogne by truck on the morning of 19 December. The fierce defense of Bastogne, in which American paratroopers particularly distinguished themselves, made it impossible for the Germans to take the town with its important road junctions. The panzer columns swung past on either side, cutting off Bastogne on 20 December but failing to secure the vital crossroads.

In the extreme south, Brandenberger's three infantry divisions were checked after an advance of 4 miles (6.4 km) by divisions of the U.S. VIII Corps; that front was then firmly held. Only the 5th Parachute Division of Brandenberger's command was able to thrust forward 12 miles (19 km) on the inner flank to partially fulfill its assigned role. Eisenhower and his principal commanders realized by 17 December that the fighting in the Ardennes was a major offensive and not a local counterattack, and they ordered vast reinforcements to the area. Within a week, 250,000 troops had been sent. General Gavin of the 82nd AB arrived on the scene first and ordered the 101st to hold Bastogne

while the 82nd would take the more difficult task of facing the SS Panzer Divisions, the 82nd Airborne Division was also thrown into the battle north of the bulge, near Elsenborn Ridge.

Siege of Bastogne

By the time the senior Allied commanders met in a bunker in Verdun on 19 December, the town of Bastogne and its network of eleven hard-topped roads leading through the mountainous terrain and boggy mud of the Ardennes region were to have been in German hands for several days. By the time of that meeting, two separate west-bound German columns that were to have bypassed the town to the south and north, the 2nd Panzer Division and Panzer-Lehr-Division of XLVII Panzer Corps, as well as the Corps' infantry (26th Volksgrenadier Division), coming due west had been engaged and much slowed and frustrated in outlying battles at defensive positions up to ten miles from the town proper and were gradually being forced back onto and into the hasty defenses built within the municipality. Moreover, the sole corridor that was open (to the southeast) was threatened and it had been sporadically closed as the front shifted, and there was more confidence it would be closed than it could be held open, giving every confidence the town would soon be surrounded.

Eisenhower, realizing the Allies could destroy German forces much more easily when they were out in the open and on the offensive than if they were on the defensive, told the generals, "The present situation is to be regarded as one of opportunity for us and not of disaster. There will be only cheerful faces at this table." Patton, realizing what Eisenhower implied, responded, "Hell, let's have the guts to let the bastards go all the way to Paris. Then, we'll really cut 'em off and chew 'em up." Eisenhower, after saying he was not that optimistic, asked Patton how long it would take to turn his Third Army (located in northeastern France) north to counterattack. He said he could attack with two divisions within 48 hours, to the disbelief of the other generals present. Before he had gone to the meeting, however, Patton had ordered his staff to prepare three contingency plans for a northward turn in at least corps strength. By the time Eisenhower asked him how long it would take, the movement was already underway. On 20 December, Eisenhower removed the First and Ninth U.S. Armies from Bradley's 12th Army Group and placed them under Montgomery's 21st Army Group.

By 21 December, the German forces had surrounded Bastogne, which was defended by the 101st Airborne and Combat Command B of the 10th Armored Division. Conditions inside the perimeter were tough-most of the medical supplies and medical personnel had been captured. Food was scarce, and by 22 December artillery ammunition was restricted to 10 rounds per gun per day. The weather cleared the next day, however, and supplies (primarily ammunition) were dropped over four of the next five days. Despite determined German attacks, however, the perimeter held. The German commander, Generalleutnant Heinrich Freiherr von Lüttwitz, requested Bastogne's surrender. When General Anthony McAuliffe, acting commander of the 101st, was told of the Nazi demand to surrender, a frustrated McAuliffe responded

"Nuts!" After turning to other pressing issues, his staff reminded him that they should reply to the German demand. One officer (Harry Kinnard, then a Lieutenant Colonel) recommended that McAuliffe's initial reply would be "tough to beat." Thus McAuliffe wrote on the paper delivered to the Germans the line he made famous and a morale booster to his troops: "NUTS!" That reply had to be explained, both to the Germans and to non-American Allies.

Both 2nd Panzer and Panzer Lehr moved forward from Bastogne after 21 December, leaving only Panzer Lehr's 901st Regiment to assist the 26th Volksgrenadier Division in attempting to capture the crossroads. The 26th VG received one panzergrenadier regiment from the 15th Panzergrenadier Division on Christmas Eve for its main assault the next day. Because it lacked sufficient troops and those of the 26th VG Division were near exhaustion, the XLVII Panzer Corps concentrated its assault on several individual locations on the west side of perimeter in sequence rather than launching one simultaneous attack on all sides. The assault, despite initial success by its tanks in penetrating the American line, was defeated and all the tanks destroyed. The next day, 26 December, the spearhead of the 4th Armored Division broke through and opened a corridor to Bastogne.

Allied counteroffensive

On 23 December, the weather conditions started improving, allowing the Allied air forces to attack. They launched devastating bombing raids on the German supply points in their rear, and P-47 Thunderbolts started attacking the German troops on the roads. Allied air forces also helped the defenders of Bastogne, dropping much-needed supplies-medicine, food, blankets, and ammunition. A team of volunteer surgeons flew in by military glider and began operating in a tool room.

By 24 December, the German advance was effectively stalled short of the Meuse. Units of the British XXX Corps were holding the bridges at Dinant, Givet, and Namur and U.S. units were about to take over. The Germans had outrun their supply lines, and shortages of fuel and ammunition were becoming critical. Up to this point the German losses had been light, notably in armor, which was almost untouched with the exception of Peiper's losses. On the evening of 24 December, General Hasso von Manteuffel recommended to Hitler's Military Adjutant a halt to all offensive operations and a withdrawal back to the West Wall. Hitler rejected this.

Patton's Third Army was battling to relieve Bastogne. At 16:50 on 26 December, the lead element, Company D, 1st Battalion, 37th Armor Regiment of the 4th Armored Division, reached Bastogne, ending the siege.

German counterattack

On 1 January, in an attempt to keep the offensive going, the Germans launched two new operations. At 09:15, the Luftwaffe launched Unternehmen Bodenplatte (Operation Baseplate), a major campaign against Allied airfields in the Low Countries. Hundreds of planes attacked Allied airfields, destroying or severely damaging some 465 aircraft. However, the Luftwaffe lost 277 planes, 62 to Allied fighters and 172 mostly because of an unexpectedly high number of Allied flak guns, set up to protect against German V-1 flying bomb attacks, but also by friendly fire from the German flak guns that were uninformed of the pending large-scale German air operation. The Germans suffered heavy losses at an airfield named Y-29, losing 24 of their own planes while downing only one American plane. While the Allies recovered from their losses in just days, the operation left the Luftwaffe weak and ineffective for the remainder of the war.

On the same day, German Army Group G (Heeresgruppe G) and Army Group Upper Rhine (Heeresgruppe Oberrhein) launched a major offensive against the thinly stretched, 70 miles (110 km) line of the Seventh U.S. Army. This offensive, known as Unternehmen Nordwind (Operation North Wind), was the last major German offensive of the war on the Western Front. It soon had the weakened Seventh Army, which had at Eisenhower's orders, sent troops, equipment, and supplies north to reinforce the American armies in the Ardennes, in dire straits.

By 15 January, Seventh Army's VI Corps was fighting on three sides in Alsace. With casualties mounting, and running short on replacements, tanks, ammunition, and supplies, Seventh Army was forced to withdraw to defensive positions on the south bank of the Moder River on 21 January. The German offensive drew to a close on 25 January. In the bitter, desperate fighting of Operation Nordwind, VI Corps, which had borne the brunt of the fighting, suffered a total of 14,716 casualties. The total for Seventh Army for January was 11,609.[1] Total casualties included at least 9,000 wounded. First, Third and Seventh Armies suffered a total of 17,000 hospitalized from the cold.

Allies prevail

While the German offensive had ground to a halt, they still controlled a dangerous salient in the Allied line. Patton's Third Army in the south, centered around Bastogne, would attack north, Montgomery's forces in the north would strike south, and the two forces planned to meet at Houffalize.

The temperature during January 1945 was extremely low. Weapons had to be maintained and trucks had to be run every half hour, so as to prevent the oil in them from congealing. The offensive went forward regardless.

Eisenhower wanted Montgomery to go on the counter offensive on 1 January, with the aim of meeting up with Patton's advancing Third Army and cutting off most of the attacking Germans, trapping them in a pocket. However, Montgomery, refusing to risk underprepared infantry in a snowstorm for a strategically unimportant area, did not launch the attack until 3 January, by which time substantial numbers of German troops had already managed to successfully fall back, but at the cost of losing most of their heavy equipment.

At the start of the offensive, the First and Third U.S. Armies were separated by about 25 miles (40 km). American progress in the south was also restricted to about a kilometer a day. The majority of the German force executed a successful fighting withdrawal and escaped the battle area, although the fuel situation had become so dire that most of the German armor had to be abandoned. On 7 January 1945, Hitler agreed to withdraw forces from the Ardennes, including the SS panzer divisions, thus ending all offensive operations.

Winston Churchill, addressing the House of Commons following the Battle of the Bulge said, "This is undoubtedly the greatest American battle of the war and will, I believe, be regarded as an ever-famous American victory".

Controversy at high command

As the Ardennes crisis developed, Montgomery assumed command of the American First and Ninth Armies (which, until then, were under Bradley's command). This operational change in command was approved by Eisenhower, as the northern armies had lost all communications with Bradley, who was based in Luxembourg.

On the same day as Hitler's withdrawal order, 7 January, Montgomery held a press conference at Zonhoven in which he said he had, "headed off ... seen off ... and ... written off" the Germans. "The battle has been the most interesting, I think possible one of the most tricky ... I have ever handled." Montgomery said he had "employed the whole available power of the British group of armies ... you thus have the picture of British troops fighting on both sides of the Americans who have suffered a hard blow." Montgomery also gave credit to the "courage and good fighting quality" of the American troops, characterizing a typical American as a "very brave fighting man who has that tenacity in battle which makes a great soldier", and went on to talk about the necessity of Allied teamwork, and praised Eisenhower, stating, "Teamwork wins battles and battle victories win wars. On our team, the captain is General Ike." Despite these remarks, the overall impression given by Montgomery, at least in the ears of the American military leadership, was that he had taken the lion's share of credit for the success of the campaign, and had been responsible for rescuing the besieged Americans.

His comments were interpreted as self-promoting, particularly his claiming that when the situation "began to deteriorate," Eisenhower had placed him in command in the north. Patton and Eisenhower both felt this was a misrepresentation of the relative share of the fighting played by the British and Americans in the Ardennes (for every British soldier there were thirty to forty Americans in the fight), and that it belittled the part played by Bradley, Patton and other American commanders. In the context of Patton's and Montgomery's well-known antipathy, Montgomery's failure to mention the contribution of any American general beside Eisenhower was seen as insulting. Indeed, General Bradley and his American commanders were already starting their counterattack by the time Montgomery was given command of 1st and 9th U.S. Armies. Focusing exclusively on his own generalship, Montgomery continued to say he thought the counteroffensive had gone very well but did not explain the reason for his delayed attack on 3 January. He later attributed this to needing more time for preparation on the northern front. According to Winston Churchill, the attack from the south under Patton was steady but slow and involved heavy losses, and Montgomery claimed to be trying to avoid this situation.

Montgomery subsequently recognized his error and later wrote: "I think now that I should never have held that press conference. So great were the feelings against me on the part of the American generals that whatever I said was bound to be wrong. I should therefore have said nothing." Eisenhower commented in his own memoirs: "I doubt if Montgomery ever came to realize how resentful some American commanders were. They believed he had belittled them-and they were not slow to voice reciprocal scorn and contempt."

Bradley and Patton both threatened to resign unless Montgomery's command was changed. Eisenhower, encouraged by his British deputy Arthur Tedder, had decided to sack Montgomery. However, intervention by Montgomery's and Eisenhower's Chiefs of Staff, Maj. Gen. Freddie de Guingand, and Lt. Gen. Walter Bedell Smith, moved Eisenhower to reconsider and allowed Montgomery to apologize.

The German commander of the 5th Panzer Army, Hasso von Manteuffel said of Montgomery's leadership: The operations of the American 1st Army had developed into a series of individual holding actions. Montgomery's contribution to restoring the situation was that he turned a series of isolated actions into a coherent battle fought according to a clear and definite plan. It was his refusal to engage in premature and piecemeal counter-attacks which enabled the Americans to gather their reserves and frustrate the German attempts to extend their breakthrough.

Aftermath

Casualty estimates from the battle vary widely. The official U.S. account lists 80,987 American casualties, while other estimates range from 70,000 to 108,000. According to the U.S. Department of Defense the American forces suffered 89,500 casualties including 19,000 killed, 47,500 wounded and 23,000 missing. An official report by the United States Department of the Army lists some 108,347 casualties including 19,246 killed, 62,489 wounded and 26,612 captured and missing. The Battle of the Bulge was the bloodiest of the battles that U.S. forces experienced in World War II; the 19,000 American dead were unsurpassed by those of any other engagement.[18] British losses totaled 1,400. The German High Command's official figure for the campaign was 84,834 casualties, and other estimates range between 60,000 and 100,000.

The Allies pressed their advantage following the battle. By the beginning of February 1945, the lines were roughly where they had been in December 1944. In early February, the Allies launched an attack all along the Western front: in the north under Montgomery toward Aachen; in the center, under Courtney Hodges; and in the south, under Patton. Montgomery's behavior during the months of December and January, including the press conference on 7 January where he appeared to downplay the contribution of the American generals, further soured his relationship with his American counterparts through the end of the war.

The German losses in the battle were critical in several respects: the last of the German reserves were now gone, the Luftwaffe had been shattered and the remaining German forces in the West were being pushed back to the defenses of the Siegfried Line.