

Background of the Battle of the Bulge

16 Dec 44 – 28 Jan 45

The Situation

After the invasion at Normandy on 6 June 1944, the Allied troops were moving quickly towards Germany to win the war on the Western Front. There was a debate over the best method to attack Germany. British Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery advocated a single-thrust strategy. Since the Allies had limited supplies coming in from their available ports, Montgomery wanted to concentrate those supplies with his army to allow him to move quickly into Germany and win the war. The danger of the single-thrust plan was that the German's could get around Montgomery's army. Supreme Allied Commander General Dwight D. Eisenhower favored a broad-front strategy, which was the strategy chosen for the offensive. The broad front strategy spread the Allied troops thin and moved slower than a single-thrust would have, but the advance kept all of the Allied line moving forward together.

Obstacles

Natural and man-made obstacles stood in the way of the Allied advance towards Germany. Natural obstacles included the Moselle and Meuse Rivers, the Vosges Mountains in Alsace, the wooded hills of the Ardennes, and the dense Hurtgen Forest near Aachen. Man-made obstacles include French defenses such as the old forts around Metz and the Maginot Line in northeastern France. The German Siegfried Line (the Germans called it the West Wall) and the Rhine River were also difficult obstacles for the Allies to get past. www.army.mil/cmh/, 153.

Photographs #: 3,4

Logistical Problems

Logistical troubles and miscalculations can cripple an army's fighting power. Initially supplies came across the invasion beaches. Ports grew ever more important to the Allies as the size of the Allied force grew and winter approached, because the new season brought heavy winds and storms that prevented Allied use of the invasion beaches. It was critical for the Allies to open new ports in order to keep their armies advancing.

The Importance of Antwerp

None of the other ports under Allied control even came close to the 16,600 tons of supplies per day that Antwerp allowed, (see map #2). Also important was that the Allied front was moving ever further away from the ports in France. In order for the Allied armies to remain supplied, and on the attack, they must have the supplies brought in through the port at Antwerp. Antwerp was liberated by the British 11th Armored Division on 4 September 1944, but Germans still held the mouth of the Rhine down river from the port. Not until 28 November 1944 was the first Allied ship able to dock at the port. The Germans also knew the importance of this port.

The German Plan

As early as August 1944, Adolf Hitler had been plotting a counter-offensive on the Western Front. The German plan was to gather their last available resources, 25 divisions total, and launch a major counter-offensive on the Allied forces in order to seize Brussels and Antwerp. (Brussels is the capital city of Belgium, and has a degree of political influence. Antwerp was desired because of its major port.) Hitler thought this would cut the British troops off from the American troops and force the countries to settle a separate peace with Germany. This would end the war on the western front, and allow the Germans to focus on defeating the Soviets in the east.

The fundamental part of the German attack was speed. The Germans wanted to reach the Meuse River in a single day. Hitler planned to plow through the thinly manned U.S. positions in the Ardennes region of Belgium and Luxembourg, and then push northwest to Antwerp. The Germans decided to attack through the Ardennes because the thickly wooded forest covered their movements, giving them the element of surprise. They also saw opportunity in the Ardennes because it was lightly defended by mostly fresh troops of the 28th and 106th Divisions.

The Germans knew moving that many troops and armor would be difficult. They had to go through rivers, streams, deep valleys, snow, and twisty roads. Map #1 shows the five Rollbahns the Germans mapped out to travel on: Rollbahns A, B, C, D, and E. (In German the word Rollbahn means “the way that you roll”.) These Rollbahns were hard surfaced roads able to support the weight of tanks that could not have moved quickly through mud and forests. All five were necessary in order to keep any one Rollbahn from becoming overly congested and slowing the army down. It was essential to the plan that the Meuse River was reached in one day, and that would be difficult without all five Rollbahns.

The German Troops

The official German army was called the Wehrmacht. When soldiers joined the Wehrmacht they swore allegiance to Germany. This was not the only military wing in the country of Germany at the time. The military formation of the Nazi party was called the Schutzstaffel (SS). Men joining the SS swore allegiance to Adolf Hitler and the Nazi party, not to Germany. The SS had control over the concentration camps and were responsible for carrying out the Nazi mission of “racial purity”.

Three German armies in the forested, mountainous Eifel region were reinforced with all of the troops the German army could put together. Field Marshall Gerd von Rundstedt was leader of the German troops in the western front. (Rundstedt was popular and well known, and his purpose as a leader was to bolster the morale of the Wehrmacht troops. In reality, Hitler had taken control of all military planning.) Field Marshall Walter Model oversaw the German counteroffensive.

An extraordinary measure the Germans used to gather more troops was the creation of Volk units. In German the word “Volk” means “people”. It was made up of all kinds of German people, but most had prior military experience. Since the German navy and air force had already been defeated, the bulk of the Volk army came from ex-navy and ex-air force soldiers.

Photograph #: 1

The American Troops

The Allies had been on the move since Normandy. In late December, 1944, some exhausted units were given a rest at the back of the lines and fresh replacements were being sent to the quiet areas in the front. The American troops that the Germans ran into in the initial counter-attack were either greatly depleted from months of fighting or inexperienced in combat.

In the face of American troops being overwhelmed by massive numbers, General Eisenhower and his staff made a landmark decision regarding American soldiers at the front. Americans with black skin had a long history of serving in the military, but their service was largely contained to segregated units behind the front lines, like in transportation. Eisenhower offered black Americans in service units the opportunity to volunteer for infantry duty on the front lines. Over 2,500 blacks promptly signed up, and many even took reductions in rank and pay in order to fill the necessary positions in the infantry. While these soldiers would not have been trained in time to fight in the Battle of the Bulge, the decision was made as a consequence of manpower demands during the German counter-offensive. By February, the number of black volunteers rose to just over 4,500. The exceptional record of these volunteers paved the way for future changes integration of the U.S. military.

Photographs #: 2,5,9,14

What Actually Happened

Under cover of heavy fog the German divisions struck along a 50 mile front. The Germans had surprise on their side. They broke through the Allied line, overrunning and capturing at least two U.S. Divisions.

The main attack was planned to be in the north along Rollbahns A and B. Ironically, the Germans made the least progress overall in the north. The bulge shape that the battle is known for was formed by the progress of the southern attack. See maps 1,3,4,6

The only Rollbahn that the German army made progress on was Rollbahn D. There was tough fighting in St. Vith and the Germans were able to surround Bastogne. Allied artillery played a large roll in the battle by taking out Ger-

man infantry and leaving the tanks open to attack from the American infantry. Thanks to the heroics of many small units, the German plan was foiled. Even though the Germans made great progress early in the battle, they never did reach the Meuse River, let alone Antwerp or Brussels.

Photographs #: 1-7

The Malmedy Massacre

On 17 December 1944, an American battalion was captured by German SS troops between the towns of Malmedy and Ligneuville, Belgium. The prisoners were forced to line up in a field, and kept under a light guard. It is not certain why, but the German SS opened fire on the American POW's in the field. Eighty-six men were killed by the gunfire and their bodies were left where they fell. Those that survived were able to escape into nearby woods. The initial reason communicated throughout the Allied lines for the shooting was that it was a premeditated execution on the part of the German SS. One supposition to the cause of the crime was that the SS troops were recent arrivals from the eastern front fight with the Soviet Union, where war crimes were more common on both sides. In the book *Battle of the Bulge: Then and Now* historian Jean Paul Pullard offers additional scenarios that led to what is known as the Malmedy Massacre. One is that the initial shot was made by of a nervous German with a pistol and that the machine gunners followed suit. Another possibility was that since the Americans were under such a light guard they were mistaken for enemy combatants by German troops of the Kampfgruppe Peiper as they passed by. Pullard also offers the "escape theory" that the Americans started running towards the woods when it appeared that their captors were preoccupied with fixing their vehicles. The first pistol shot was a warning, but unexpectedly the rest of the grenadiers opened fire with machine guns. Pullard states that it is likely that eighty-six Americans killed also included those killed in the initial battle with the Germans before the prisoners were taken. Regardless of differing opinions of the exact number killed on that field, or the degree to which the act was premeditated, there is one point that historians can agree on. This incident became an indisputable war crime when the machine gun firing stopped, and the German SS troops walked onto the field and murdered any American troops that showed any signs of life. There is no official record of why the Malmedy Massacre happened, but it is widely recognized as the worst atrocity committed against American troops on the European Front of WWII. Regardless of motivation, forty-two former SS officers were put on trial and sentenced to death for this crime. None of the death sentences were ever carried out; most served between 10 years to life imprisonment.