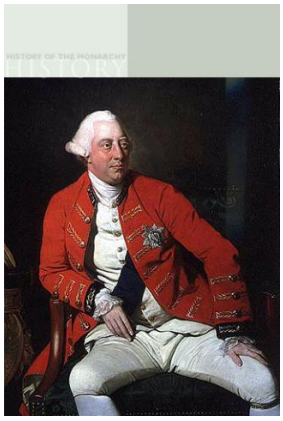
Bastogne Relieved - Hitler Loses Ardennes Offensive



Refueling the King Tigers took a very long time. Defending against the advancing tanks, Allies were able to blow-up their fuel supplies before the Germans could help themselves to much-needed petrol.

Unable to achieve his objective, in the Northern Shoulder of the Ardennes, Joachim Peiper and his tank division (referred to as *Kampfgruppe Peiper*) could not break through Allied lines. Instead of making his way to Antwerp, and then to the North Sea, Peiper sought - and received - permission to abandon his assigned mission. He was also forced to blow-up 80 of his own tanks.

Such developments psychologically impacted the confidence of many German troops who had earlier believed they would win the battle.

For awhile, Germany still held the upper hand in the southern area of fighting. Six thousand men, of the 101st Airborne, were still besieged in Bastogne. General George S. Patton, however, was determined to get them out.

Feared by the Germans, Patton was inspirational and professional. He led his Third Army north, racing to lift the siege of Bastogne. Upwards of 50,000 men - and a great deal of equipment - were sent on the mission.

A well-prepared leader, Patton had previously paid careful attention to intelligence reports. Suspicious that the Germans were up to something two months before the Ardennes Offensive began, he was ready to turn his army around within forty-eight hours.

On December 26 (see this guide to military map symbols), the Allied troops in Bastogne were relieved. A month later, the entire Ardennes Offensive - the largest German attack in Western Europe - was over.

Although the battle (which included dogfights, weather permitting) initially seemed like a win-in-the-making for Hitler, the entire operation turned into a devastating defeat. Among other serious problems, Germany lost some of her best men and equipment.

From the Allied standpoint, as Churchill noted, most of the telegrams about dead or wounded soldiers were delivered to American homes. As a result, the Ardennes Offensive remains an important part of U.S. history.

Nearly three months to the day after Germany's defeat in the Battle of the Bulge, Hitler shot himself as the Soviet Army moved ever closer to his Fuhrer Bunker in Berlin.

Can we summarize what went wrong from the German perspective? Can we summarize what went right for the Allies?

To answer those questions, let's review information from the U.S. Army's Center for Military History (with footnotes omitted):

On the third day of the attack the German armor began to acquire momentum; the greatest gains made by the armored spearhead columns actually were achieved during the night of 18 December. With the way west thus clearing, the German mass maneuver behind the armored columns picked up speed on 19 December, this day representing the most rapid movement of the entire offensive.

Yet even now the bulk of German armored weight was not forward nor operating with the speed and mobility expected of armor. For this reason the Fifth Panzer Army was assigned the task of exploitation, in place of the Sixth, on 20 December.

The offensive had gone out of control, and now would follow a series of haphazard improvisations. Why had the German armored mass failed to come forward as planned? These reasons seem paramount:

- *The initial American defense had been more tenacious than anticipated; complete and rapid rupture of the defensive positions had not been achieved.*

- *Tactical support and logistic transport had not kept pace with the advance of the combat formations.*

- *Close operational control and fluidity of movement for the mass of maneuver required free use of the road net in the salient. This had been denied the attacker, most notably at Bastogne and St. Vith but at other points as well.*

- *The flanks of the salient had not been brought forward to keep pace with the drive in the center; the shoulders of the salient had jammed.*

- *The operational build-up of the forces in the salient had taken place so slowly as to deny real depth to the attack.*

- *The tactical reaction of the American forces and their commitment of reserves had been more rapid than anticipated.*

... The one thing that a high command can do in modern war to influence the battle once it is joined is to allocate reserves. Hitler and Jodl repeated in 1944 the mistake made by Ludendorff during the Amiens battle of 1918 when the latter failed to throw in the reserves needed to exploit the unexpected success of the Eighteenth Army. Specifically, Hitler and the OKW [Oberkommando der Wehrmacht - that is, per the glossary, the Armed Forces High Command] *staff failed to recognize that the only real hope of success, after the Sixth Panzer Army failure, was to reinforce Manteuffel and the Fifth.*

The story on the American side was quite different, surprisingly so to Hitler and his entourage who held as an article of faith that the American commanders, for political reasons, would make no major troop movements, particularly if these involved the British, without prior reference to the White House and Downing Street.

This attitude probably explains the German estimate that no major units would be committed by the defense until the third day and that the Allied build-up of a counterattack force would be made west of the Meuse.

Not only did the German planners fail to comprehend the degree of initiative that training and tradition have placed in the hands of American corps and army commanders, they also misunderstood the American doctrine, largely unwritten but universally accepted, that major formations having no pre-battle relationship may, under fluid conditions, unite on the field after the battle is joined.

Hitler seems to have made another and important personal miscalculation, namely that the weak German forces holding the sectors of the Western Front north and south of the Ardennes still retained sufficient strength to grapple the American divisions opposite them, and that the Allied commanders would therefore hesitate to weaken their forces in these sectors by stripping away divisions to meet the German attack.

When did the German armies lose the initiative in the Ardennes?

As early as 20 December there are indications that small clouds of niggling doubt were present in the minds of some of the German field commanders, this because of the Sixth Panzer Army's failure to adhere to the offensive timetable.

By 24 December the crippling impact of Allied air attack, resumed the previous day as the weather broke, was clearly discernible. Then, too, the course of the ground battle on that date was equally adverse.

The counterattack by the Third Army menaced the whole southern flank of the German salient, while the XLVII Panzer Corps, now leading the Fifth Panzer drive, was so lone and exposed that the corps commander recommended a withdrawal of his forward elements until such time as the German flanks at the tip of the salient could be covered.

This combination of threats in the air and on the ground led the Fifth Panzer Army commander to conclude on 24 December that "the objective could no longer be attained."

It is a truism that morale is a governing factor in war. Christmas in the Ardennes, 1944, very clearly is a case in point.

Brig. Gen. S. L. A. Marshall has graphically described the mood of the American troops in Bastogne on the Holy Evening and shown the somber aspect of nostalgia on the part of men engaged in the grim business of war, far from home and loved ones. But in the German camp the sixth Christmas of the war seems to have made a truly indelible impression.

The field postmaster for Luettwitz' corps remarks on the decline in the amount of Christmas mail reaching the front - particularly gift parcels. The German Army newspaper bitterly features a story on the Christmas gift presented by a Spanish restaurateur to Goering - a large supply of caviar. And the commander of the 276th Volks Grenadier Division, whose unit fought its hardest battle on Christmas Day, expresses the hope that in the ultimate withdrawal to the cover of the West Wall his troops will be able to recapture the Christmas spirit.

The German Christmas traditionally was celebrated on two days, the 25th and 26th, and at this emotional nadir of war-weary soldiery the German armies in the Ardennes sustained a series of crushing reverses: The left wing of the Seventh Army was driven back to the Sauer River, over which it had crossed ten days before; the German ring around Bastogne was broken by Patton's troops; the 2d Panzer Division received orders to escape from the Celles pocket; and throughout the day of the 26th a developing "crisis" in supply and communications was noted in the journal at the headquarters of OB WEST [Oberbefehlshaber West - that is, Commander in Chief West or his headquarters]*.*

At 1915 on 26 December General Krebs, Model's chief of staff, made an appraisal of the German situation, "Today a certain culminating point [has been reached]*."*

It may be concluded that by the evening of 26 December the initiative had passed from German to American hands. Before this time the American and Allied forces had reacted to German designs and had abandoned their own. From this point in time the German attacker would be off balance and would take a series of false steps (notably at Bastogne) which were elicited by the operations of his opponent and divergent from the assigned larger objective.

Even at the time there was recognition in both camps that 26 December had been the day of decision.

On the 27th, the German press and radio abandoned the headline treatment of the Ardennes to feature news from Greece and Budapest. This same day the SHAEF [Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force] *propaganda bureau issued instructions that Liège, obviously no longer in danger, should be shown as the goal of the German offensive.*

There seems to have been a slight resurgence of forced optimism in the higher German field headquarters toward the end of December when the appearance of more troops and guns gave some flicker of hope that Bastogne finally might be captured. But this optimism, if it was anything more than a disciplined and soldierly façade, quickly faded.

On the last day of December the OB WEST journal notes that if Bastogne cannot be taken "that is the end of the offensive operation."

Hitler, no matter what exhortations he may have dispatched to Model and Rundstedt, had turned his attention away from the Ardennes.

On 29 December Rundstedt received a message that sixty-three new tanks had come off the assembly line but that OKW (for which read Hitler) would decide whether personnel replacements and artillery should be sent OB WEST in their stead - precisely the first step always taken by the Fuehrer when abandoning a military venture and denuding one fighting front to reinforce another. (*The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge*, by Hugh M. Cole - CMH Publication 7-8, Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army - pp 670 - 673.)

See, also:

Battle of the Bulge - Ardennes Offensive

Battle of the Bulge - Mass Surrender

Battle of the Bulge - The German Tiger II Tanks

Battle of the Bulge - Northern Shoulder of the Ardennes

Battle of the Bulge - Historic Footage

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