

Battle of the Bulge

Operational Summary of Hitler's Offensive in the West December 16, 1944



Origins of the campaign:

Hitler had always maintained that only in attack was the vitality of the initiative of war maintained. After suffering a major debacle at the Falaise pocket precipitating the Allied Breakout of late July and August 1944, the Wehrmacht was on the run on all accounts. The Germans were being routed faster than the Allies could advance. This allowed Germany to regroup and refit her army of shambles and improve morale and “catch her breath”. General Montgomery’s ill fated operation Market-Garden was among other things a signal that the Allies were basically overconfident of a quick victory based on what was happening since it appeared that the Germany was considered a defeated foe and overall victory was imminent. This had the tendency to enter the very pedagogy of military planning. It also resulted in a poor assessment of the German army which precipitated possibly the very prospects of Hitler’s strategic concept of an offensive. It would be a bold stroke which would bring about a complete surprise and hopefully turn around the Third Reich’s’ military fortunes.

A second major concept behind the value of such an offensive was to buy time for Hitler’s so called “miracle weapons”. A number of these weapons were already being delivered in quantity to make an impact upon the battlefield. The new German ME-262 Jet Fighter already was causing an impact on allied bombing runs, and the new V-2 rocket was delivering results on London. On October 22nd 1944 the New York Times reported that Hitler had ordered work on a V3 rocket which was capable of reaching the

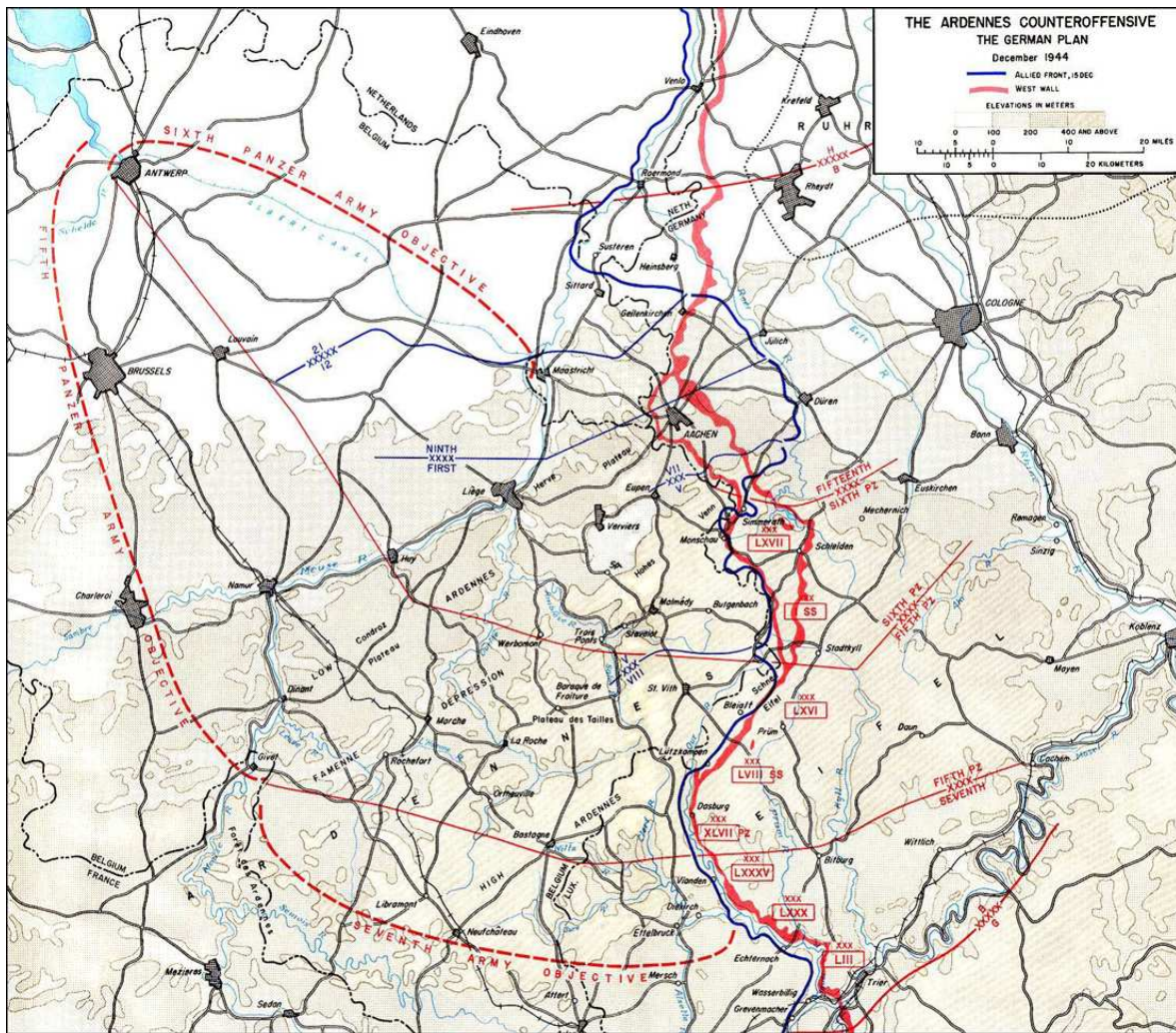
United States. It was said to carry four times the destructive power of a conventional warhead. In reality this was known as the V2/ A-10 multi stage missile, but it was only on the drawing boards. In terms of tank design, Hitler ordered greater focus on heavy tanks resulting in the Tiger II which was a huge advantage against American and British tanks currently in use. Hitler ordered Reichsfuhrer Himmler to raise a replacement force of at least 25 new "Volksgrenadier" divisions- what Hitler referred to as "rear area swine". These were made up from scrapping the bottom of the barrel one last time of anybody who could basically hold and fire a weapon and outfitting them with upgraded equipment such as the MP 40 and MP 44 automatic rifles. They also combed the Luftwaffe of personnel who for example had no plane to work on, or police who served from recently lost territories to the allies.

The very real prospects of any German victory were small to be sure, offered the hope of at least extending the war and postponing the expected Allied offensive against the very soil of what was the Third Reich. On September 16th, while attending a daily briefing at the OKW headquarters after hearing the word "Ardennes" Hitler leapt to his feet "I have made a momentous decision," he declared. He swept his hand across the situation map. "That is to say, here, out of the Ardennes, with the objective Antwerp." Thus began the odyssey that was to consume the very final reserves of Hitler's once invincible armies. The plan was basically simple: Cut the allied armies in a great envelopment which would have resulted in a decisive defeat for the allies on the western front. Antwerp also secured an important supply depot for the enemy and Hitler wanted to deny this major harbor so close to Germany. The resulting losses it was hoped would have caused or broken the western alliance of United States and Britain to be severed and a negotiated peace could be attained for the Reich.

The burden of this plan was to rest on Von Runstedt who had vigorously argued against such a bold plan in favor of a smaller action centered on Aachen. That counter-proposal which would have created sufficient conditions for a far more realistic victory and based upon the current situation was rejected by Hitler, who only saw an "all or nothing" approach to solve Germany's current military prospects. The campaign itself incorrectly was labeled the "Runstedt offensive" much to the chagrin of the capable Field Marshal.

Operation Wacht am Rhein (Watch on the Rhine)

From the middle of October the massing of these forces were being conducted for the offensive. The newly formed 6th SS Panzer Army was to advance from Monschau to Losheim following a massive artillery bombardment. A heavily armored wedge would be cut to the northwest, crossing the Meuse River on both sides of Liege and then advance to Antwerp which was the objective. In the South, the 5th Panzer Army would thrust along the left flank of the 6th Panzer Army providing flank cover and latter joining the attack on Antwerp. A third army the 7th Army was to form a cordon of defense from Altreir to Givet. If the plan moved according to schedule Hitler was to release units of his northern flank from the 15th Army. This was a supporting attack named "Operation Spatlese". As the 6th Panzer closed in on Antwerp, Hitler proposed that Army Group H attack southwest towards the port from the area of Venlo to seal a great victory. (The full order of battle is provided below) Here we have a diagram of the strategic concept the plan had hoped to employ:



Another prerequisite for the success of the plan was the weather. The capabilities of the Luftwaffe could no longer compete with the substantially larger and well supplied Allied Air forces. The only thing to possibly prove an equal foe against the Allies was a sustained overcast, and Hitler patiently waited for such a period. This blanket of poor weather would provide protection to his Panzer columns where the Luftwaffe would fail. The middle of December was looking very good for such a cold front and it was planned with this in mind.

A further consideration was to augment the offensive with an airborne drop by a detachment of Von Heydte's paratroopers. His duty was to create panic behind enemy lines and possibly open and hold some key bridges for the advancing Panzer groups. He did not enough men who were trained for a night drop, but this mattered little to Hitler. He was given less than two week to assemble his forces. Zero hour was fast approaching and the massing continued in the area behind the German lines. Utmost secrecy was maintained at all times. Hitler didn't want anything to violate the principle of surprise that the offensive depended on.



“Soldiers of the Western Front! Your great hour has arrived. Large attacking armies have started against the Anglo-Americans. I do not have to tell you more than that. You feel it yourself. WE GAMBLE EVERYTHING! You carry ...the holy obligation to give everything to achieve things beyond human possibilities for our fatherland and our Fuhrer!” ---Von Rundstedt

The Battle

On Saturday at dawn the great offensive consisting of some 140,000 soldiers, 1,025 Artillery, and some 642 tanks and assault guns began its task. Facing them the Allies had 83,000 men 242 medium tanks, 182 tank destroyers and 394 Artillery pieces.

Spearheaded by the Mighty 6th SS panzer army was by far the strongest of the three German armies led by four of the elite SS Panzer divisions. The basic hope was a quick repeat of the conditions that were employed in June of 1940 based on that experience, it was even hoped that the Meuse could be breached by the first 24 hours.

Oberstrumbannfuhrer Joachim Peiper was in command of the “Absoluter Schwerpunkt” and had worried that the timetable was too optimistic. He specifically wanted the slower moving Tiger II and other such beasts to stay in the background due to their horrific fuel consumption and slow speed. They would be great in any combat but the audacity of the plan did not require the use of firepower, but rather speed and economy of force. Everything rested on the ability to access the major roads.

Kampfgruppe Peiper was assigned to attack the Losheim Gap which was the historic point of entry for the victorious German armies in 1940. In the movie “Battle of the Bulge” it was this same character that was used for the fictional Col. Hessler played by Robert Shaw. Sepp Dietrich was the overall commander of the 6th Army and wrote a note to be read by all commanders which reads:

“Soldiers of the Sixth Panzer Armee! The moment of decision is upon us. The Fuhrer has placed us at a vital point. It is for us to breach the enemy front and push beyond the Meuse. Surprise is half the battle. In spite of the terror bombings, the Home Front has supplied us with tanks, ammunition and weapons. We will not let them down.”

Now as the huge column of Panzers of Kampfgruppe Peiper stood waiting for the zero hour to approach a German tank commander quipped “See you in Amerika”. The march of the panzers had begun. The attack started very well and achieved complete surprise. It was almost too good to be true. Everywhere the Americans were in retreating.

The atmosphere at OB West (the German command center) maintained an incredulous disposition. Von Rundstedt was very worried about the right wing of the 6th Panzer Army. It was proceeding too slowly to maintain the schedule placed before it. Hitler’s position on the initial progress was much more optimistic. He had telephoned General

Balck who was stationed much further south of the operation “Everything has changed in the West! Success- complete success – is within our grasp”.

Those tones belayed the background of caution and trepidation of what may come down the road. The campaign was proceeding too good and it seemed that it took but one failure in the chain of the plan to derail the entire offensive. The operational plan called on the German armor to be fully committed by the second day to punch thru the holes in the line that the advancing infantry had made on the first day. The issue was that the Americans still maintained some semblance of a front line thus the initial breakthrough required for success had not materialized.

Kampfgruppe Pieper was one of the few bright spots in the initial period and had made a clear penetration into the Allied position and was proceeding on schedule.

The Allied reaction was one of underestimation. Eisenhower was getting a promotion to a full 5 star general, while Montgomery was playing golf. Neither was fully alarmed at the scope of the attack but did react promptly to anticipate it. General Bradley considered that the Germans were merely committing a “spoiling attack” .Eisenhower however did take action and ordered the 82nd and 101st Airborne to Werbomont and Bastogne immediately. These were strategic points in that they were a focal point of many roads which would be needed to facilitate movement to the Meuse. The Meuse River was Eisenhower’s stop gap. He ordered under no circumstances were the Germans permitted to breakout beyond the Meuse. Failure to do this would have led to a substantial lengthening of the ability to reduce this “Bulge” which was slowly penetrating the Allied line. The Allies also felt that the objective was Liege which was an important depot of supplies and more importantly fuel which could sustain the Panzers onto further directives from the German high command.

By the 18-19 of December the Germans had made clear armor breakthrough in the area south of the Ambleve River with Piepers group and a second spearhead between Houffalize and Bastogne led by the Panzer Lehr division. The Germans also executed operation Grief which was a plan to use the 150th Panzer Brigade and provide it with captured American equipment and dress German soldiers in GI outfits. They would seize the bridges on the Meuse and hold them until relieved by the advancing Panzer column. In command of this group was a very capable man known as Otto Skorzeny.



Otto Skorzeny was a man who never failed in his mission and someone Hitler felt he could trust to carry out his duties. Earlier in July 1943 he had rescued Mussolini from imprisonment following the fall of Italy. After the war he was given a passport to Spain and latter organized the Odessa group which supported the rescue of former SS officers. He died from cancer in 1975 a multi-millionaire.

Looking at the situation maps in the next couple of days a clearer picture was presenting itself. The German high command was less than pleased with the progress of the offensive in the evening report. Piepers group was the only bright spot to date and Von Rundstedt recorded that “no real progress by the panzer formations”. He was fully convinced that the campaign was a complete failure and advocated going over to the defense. The very crucial element of speed was muted due to the very icy roads and poor weather. This was the same weather that Hitler hoped would “cloak” his army on the ground. But is also to prove a major element to explain the failure of the Whermacht. Hitler continued to order the attack to continue and rebuked the pessimism of Von Rundstedt. After the third day it was also clear that the fuel supplies were running precariously low. Many units were unable to move up the breach in the line caused by the initial surge. The Fuhrer Begleit Brigade was just released and soon simply ran out of fuel. A secondary problem was the fuel stores were kept too far behind in the Germans rear presumably to avoid air attacks. At the crucial moment the momentum had stalled due to the poor reserves of fuel stocks. It was a campaign on a shoestring to say the least. The only element the Germans had going for them was the weather. This too was beginning to change.

The high water tide of the offensive was Dec 22-23rd where the 2nd Panzer division supported by Panzer Lehr got a few miles of the Meuse River. Von Rundstedt promised that the 9th Panzer division was coming up to support any breach past the Meuse and widen it. This panzer column was known as Kampfgruppe von Bohm. Its forward progress was stopped cold in its tracks by Maj. Gen. Lawton Collins and his VII corps which arrived at the scene. The overcast was disappearing and Allied fighters were appearing all over the battlefield and pulverizing German ground forces. This was simply nothing that could be coped with.

Meanwhile at Bastogne the 101st airborne was completely surrounded but staying put for the moment and also denying the Germans with access of its central road distribution. The panzers had to go around and waste precious time. The Germans offered to negotiate a surrender of the besieged forces:

“The fortune of war is changing. This time the U.S.A. forces in and near Bastogne have been encircled by strong German armored units. More German armored units have crossed the river Our near Ortheuville, have taken Marche and reached St. Hubert by passing through Hompre-Sibret-Tillet. Libramont is in German hands.

There is only one possibility to save the encircled U.S.A. troops from total 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 A. A. Battalions are ready to annihilate the U.S.A. troops in and near Bastogne. The order for firing will be given immediately after this two hours' term.

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

The German Commander.”

The famous replay was quick to return

McAuliffe then wrote down:
"To the German Commander, "Nuts!"

The American Commander."



This simple American response was a sort of rallying cry for the Allied armies. It was the morale booster after a week of bad news. Eisenhower ordered Patton's 3rd army to turn completely around from its preparations for a planned southern offensive in the Saar to assist and punch the southern portion of the German line and relieve the forces at Bastogne. In the North the British were ordered to contain the expansion and hold the line. The turning point occurred in the period of December 25-26th 1944. Everywhere the Allied air force was making its presence felt. Hitler had no answer to the weather. His luck had finally run out.

Feeling the pressure the Whermacht was ordered to pulverize the "Battered Bastards of Bastogne" with a complete Artillery shelling and the fury of the vaunted panzers but to no decisive result. Eventually Patton's 3rd army was able to reconnect with the 101st and the German line was pushed all the way back. By the end of the month it looked as it did on December 15th. Of course the Germans had lost any strategic reserves to cope with the coming Allied offensive. It was now only a matter of time. Hitler had spent his last chance to reverse the tide of wars fortune.

Reasons for the German failure:

German view:

According to Von Manteuffels' chief of staff Carl Wagener the failure of the 6th Panzer Armee:

"The insufficient training condition of the SS organizations especially among commanders and a subordinate commander was also to blame for the failure. Its motorized units having no driving technique and no road discipline were soon standing hopelessly wedged into four columns beside each other on those roads selected for advance, but still blocked by the enemy. It did not help them any to force their way into the sector of the fifth Panzer Armee and thus clog the northern roads."

Allied View:

According to Coles' official US Army account of the battle he offers 6 reasons:

- 1) Unexpected tough American resistance
- 2) Supply failure

- 3) Denial of German use of the road net such as St. Vith and Bastogne.
- 4) Failure to carry the shoulders of the offensive
- 5) Lack of depth to the attack due to the slow German commitment of reserves.
- 6) A timely Allied reaction to the offensive.

My view:

I prefer to look at the operation in terms of violating or adhering to the classic Clausewitz principles of war:

Objective – Antwerp was not attainable objective based on the allocation of resources and the distance of the goal. It was too far to reach and the units were not prepared.---

Failure

Offensive- This concept was not violated but any gains achieved were not fully exploited by the allocation of timely reserves. Once the line was breached there was no fresh units left to exploit the initiative—**Failure**.

Mass – This was achieved and the Germans picked the correct spot in which to load up against limited allied forces—**success**.

Economy of Force – This was somewhere in between. The German armies had the correct size of units to lead the assault, but no follow-up of reserves--- **Pass**

Maneuver – This was a major failure. Due to both the German plan and the Allied counter response the roads were clogged and the use of the slower Tiger II tanks made poor suitability to a rapid development along narrow roads.--- **Total Failure**

Unity of Command – Hitler was the beginning and end of every decision. The ability for improvisation of the battlefield was possible but the overall direction was not a flexible creative concept. It was a chain of “facilitators” with no independent initiative all under Hitler’s thumb-- **Failure**

Security – This was achieved no doubt about it-- **Success**

Surprise – Also achieved--**Success**

Simplicity – Not at all clear. It was too dependant on the other Armies to achieve their objectives in order to work. -- **Failure**

In general it can be safely assumed that the offensive was doomed from the start. The smaller option originally proposed by Von Rundstedt against Aachen might have had a much better chance to succeed.

Below consists of some facts pertaining to the campaign:

Air Sorties during the Campaign:

Date	Weather	Allied	German
Dec.16th	Overcast	359	100
Dec.17th	Fog	1,053	650
Dec.18th	Fog	519	849
Dec.19th	Overcast	196	290
Dec.20th	Overcast	2	2
Dec.21st	Overcast	100	40
Dec.22nd	Snow	94	94
Dec.23rd	Fog	619	800
Dec.24th	Clear	1,138	1,088
Dec.25th	Clear	1,066	600
Dec.26th	Clear	937	404
Dec.27th	Clear	1,294	415
Dec.28th	Heavy Snow	23	15
Dec.29th	Fog	460	165
Dec.30th	Fog	690	200
Dec.31st	Fog	700	613
Jan. 1st	Clear	1,000	1,035

Note: not all values are battlefield sorties. Also, in some cases additional sorties were flown at night.

At Start German OOB:

6th SS panzer Army- Sepp Dietrich

LXVII Army corps

272 VG Infantry division

1st SS Panzer corps

277th VG Infantry division

12th VG Infantry division

1st SS Panzer division

12th SS Panzer division

3rd Airborne Division (Fallschirmjager)

150th Panzer Brigade

5th Panzer Army: Manteuffel

LXVI Army corps

18th VG Infantry Division

**62nd Infantry division
LVIII Panzer Corps
560 VG Infantry division
116th Panzer Division**

**XLVII Panzer corps
2nd Panzer division
Panzer Lehr Division
26th VG Infantry division**

7th Army-Brandenberger

**LXXXV Army corps
5th Airborne Division (Fallschirmjager)
352 VG Infantry division**

**LXXX Army corps
212 VG Infantry division**

**German Forces:
Reinforcements to the battle:**

**Dec.17th
276 VG Infantry division**

**Dec.18th
2nd SS Panzerkorps HQ:
9th SS Panzer division
Fuhrer Begleit Brigade
3rd Panzer Grenadier Division
560 VG Infantry division**

**Dec.19th
Fuhrer Grenadier brigade
2nd SS Panzer division
246 VG Infantry division**

**Dec.21st
79 VG Infantry division**

**Dec.22nd
9th Panzer division
15th Panzer Grenadier division
403rd Volkswerber Brigade**

**Dec. 24th
167 VG Infantry division
326 VG Infantry division**

Dec.25th
9th VG Infantry division
410th Volkswerber Brigade

Dec.28th
167 VG Infantry division

Dec.29th
340th VG Infantry division

Allied Forces:

American and British Forces:

American OOB:

1st army-Gen. Hodges
V corps: Gen. Gerow
78th Infantry division
99th Infantry division
2nd Infantry division
102nd Armored Brigade

VIII corps: Gen. Middleton
106th Infantry division
28th Infantry division
4th Infantry division
9th Armored division

Reinforcements to the battle:

Dec. 17th:
7th Armored Division
1st Infantry Division
9th Infantry division (-)
10th Armored Division

Dec. 18th:
30th Infantry Division
XVIII Airborne Corps Gen. Ridgeway
82nd Airborne division
101st Airborne division (Gen. Anthony McAuliffe)

Dec. 19th:
3rd Armored division
9th Infantry (39th regiment)

Dec.20th:
3rd Army- Gen. Patton
III corps:
4th Armored Division
80th Infantry Division
26th Infantry Division

Dec.21st:
84th Infantry Division
XII corps:
5th infantry Division
29th Armored Brigade

Dec. 22nd:
VII corps Gen. Collins
2nd Armored division
4th Armored Calvary
75th Infantry division

Dec.23rd:
9th Infantry Division (60th regiment)

Dec. 24th
5th Armored division

Dec. 25th
11th Armored division

Dec. 26th
83rd Infantry division
6th Armored division
35 Infantry division
10th Armored division
17th Airborne division

Dec. 30th
87th Infantry division

Jan.7th
90th Infantry division

British starting order of battle:

21st Army group: Field marshal Montgomery

XXX corps: Gen. Horrocks
43rd Infantry division (Wessex)
"Guards" Armored division

**6th Airborne Division
33rd Armored brigade**

Reinforcements:

**Dec.21st:
29th Armored Brigade**

**Dec. 25th:
53rd Infantry division (Welsh)**

**Dec.26th:
34th Army Tank Brigade**

**Jan. 8th:
51st Infantry Division (highland)**

Researched and written by Imperious leader

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