

# Objective Antwerp: Hitler's Ardennes Offensive

by John H. Butterfield

**D**ecember 16, 1944 witnessed the opening of Germany's last great offensive of World War II — the Ardennes counterattack. The Battle of the Bulge, as it came to be known, conjures up place names that resonate in American military history: Bastogne, St. Vith, Elsenborn Ridge and Malmedy. Antwerp, however, was the ultimate German objective, yet that Belgian port-city rarely figures into accounts of the battle. Indeed, the port was the very reason for Adolph Hitler's last gamble.

He envisioned his panzers racing through the Ardennes forest in Belgium and Luxembourg, breaking through the Allied lines and taking Antwerp, thereby delivering a decisive blow against the Western Allies. Instead, his armies fought a stubborn enemy for every town, crossroads and river crossing in the dark woods, and were ultimately stopped halfway to their objective. Why, then, was Antwerp so important to Hitler that he would gamble everything on it — an objective that, in the opinion of his own generals, was unreachable?

To Hitler in late 1944, the capture of Antwerp offered military and political rewards and the only way to completely turn around the war in the west. Its geographic location meant seizing the port would split the Western Allied armies in two, leaving British *Twenty-First Army Group* and one US army cut off from supply.

Antwerp was the largest deep-water port available to the Allies in northwest Europe. Prior to the Normandy landings in June 1944, its capture had been put forth as a top priority by Allied planners, even more important than the liberation of Paris. *First Canadian Army* reached the city in September, and the port had been opened up as the main Allied logistical hub in November. Until then, supplies had to travel the length of France from Normandy, forcing the Allies to prioritize gasoline and ammunition along a front running the entire length of the German border. Antwerp, though, could process supply for 50 divisions with more in reserve, which was a vast advan-

tage over the 13 divisions supportable by the port of Cherbourg farther west. To lose Antwerp would set the Allied war effort back considerably, and could have a devastating impact on morale, especially among the Commonwealth troops who'd paid so dearly to open it.

There was also a political dimen-

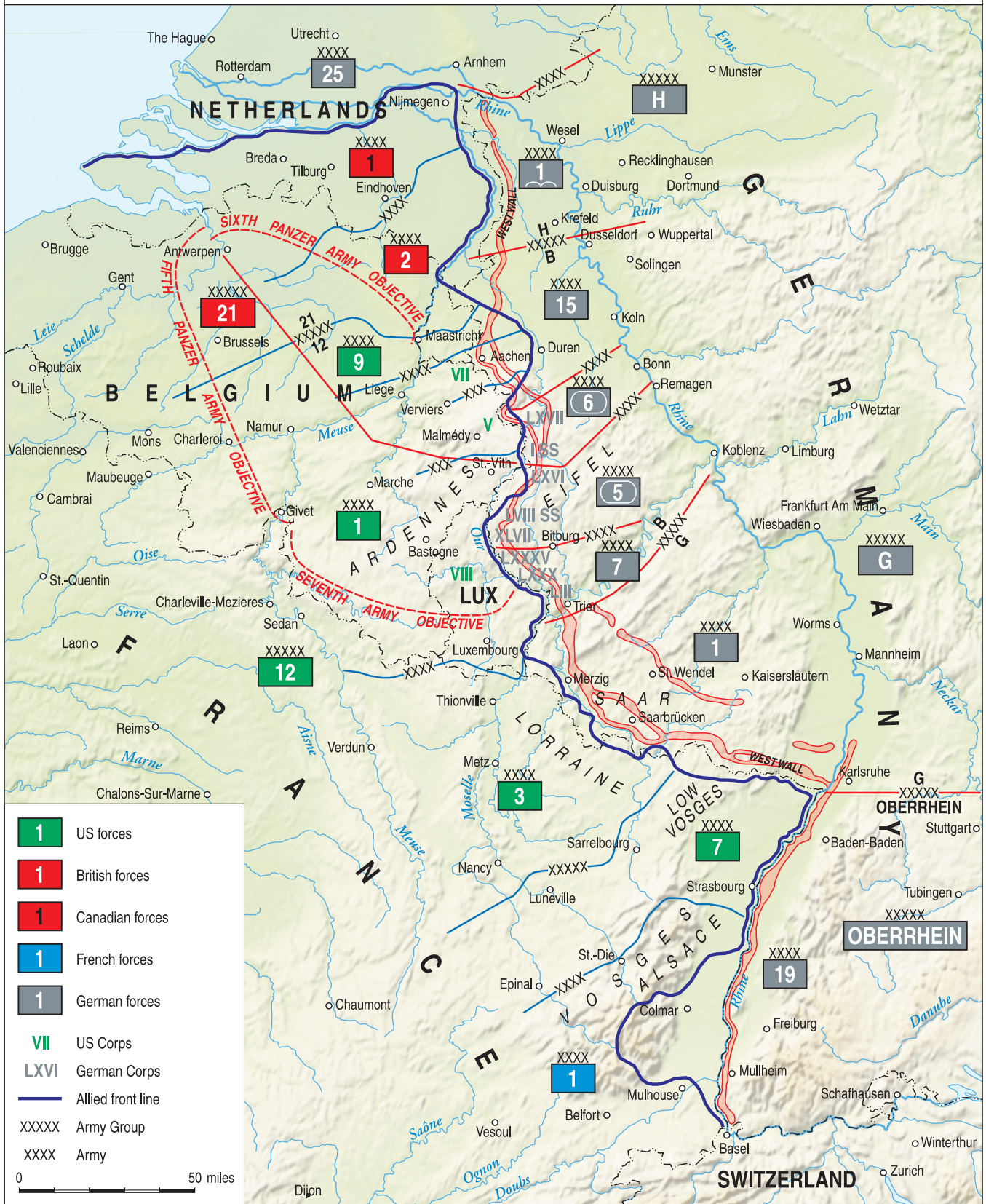
sion, at least in Hitler's mind. Taking Antwerp would, he believed, drive a wedge between the Western Allies, perhaps causing the coalition between the US and Great Britain to crumble. He was aware of the friction between Field Marshal Montgomery and Gen. Eisenhower (though greatly exagger-



Hitler and Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt plot the Ardennes offensive



# The Western Front, 15 December 1944 and the German Ardennes Plan





ated by the time it reached his briefing room), and he intuited that a major defeat would shake Allied confidence and even suspend Allied offensive operations, allowing him to turn all his attention to the eastern front. Finally, retaking Antwerp would on its face be an enormous victory that couldn't help but boost German morale. Thus, Antwerp was worth the great gamble he ordered his generals to take.

## German Plan & Allied Situation

"I have made a momentous decision." With those words to his incredulous senior staff, then meeting in his "Wolf's Lair" headquarters in East Prussia on 16 September 1944, Hitler declared his intention to mount a major counteroffensive through the Ardennes region of Belgium, Luxembourg and France, with Antwerp as the goal. By mid-October the plan had been worked out and set into motion. Three armies, consisting of a total of 30 divisions, were to assault the thinly held US line along a 60-mile stretch between Monschau in the north and Echternach in the south. Leading the assault in the north, four SS panzer divisions of *Sixth Panzer Army* would break through, cross the Meuse River in the vicinity of Liege, and then roll through the flat land of Belgium to the port. Supporting that main assault, three panzer divisions of *Fifth Panzer Army* would cross the Meuse farther south and advance to Brussels. Protecting the far southern flank of the offensive, the infantry of *Seventh Army* would advance on the attack's left.

From the outset, Hitler's generals complained the goals of the plan were beyond the capabilities of the German Army and, accordingly, they proposed several alternatives, mostly involving swinging hard north after a breakthrough to encircle US forces in the Aachen area. Hitler would have none of it, and his plan remained unchanged, though as preparations progressed the number of divisions that could actually be committed to the offensive diminished to 28, of which only 19 were in place for the initial assault.

Hitler's choice of the difficult terrain of the Ardennes region for the initial phase of the operation was based on its position in the center of the Allied line and on intelligence informing him the region was thinly defended. Brushing aside his generals' concerns the area would be unsuitable for rapid armored advance, due to its insufficient road

network and the winter conditions, Hitler pointed to the success his panzers experienced there in 1940.

German intelligence was indeed correct about the paucity of Allied forces in the Ardennes. For all the Western Allies' strength on the continent, Eisenhower lacked enough divisions to attack everywhere and still maintain a reserve against German counteroffensives. Taking a calculated risk, he bolstered his forces driving on the Ruhr and the Saar by stripping both his reserves and his defense in the center — namely, the Ardennes. There, *US V* and *VIII Corps* held a 60-mile front with three infantry divisions: the *99<sup>th</sup>*, *106<sup>th</sup>* and *28<sup>th</sup>*, with the *9<sup>th</sup> Armored Division* in local reserve. For those units, that was more than three times the frontage prescribed by doctrine. Fortunately for the Allies, and undetected by the Germans, *V Corps* moved the veteran *2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division* into the *99<sup>th</sup> Division* sector in early December, from where it was preparing to attack northeast toward the Roer dams.

## Watch on the Rhine

Not content with directing the offensive, Hitler also masterminded its secrecy. Surprise was essential to

the success of his plan. The Allies had to be led to believe the Germans were incapable of staging major offensive operations, even as three full armies were building up and deploying to attack. Hitler gave the offensive the deceptive code name *Wacht am Rhein* (Watch on the Rhine) to make the plan sound like a defensive effort. *Die Wacht am Rhein* was a popular German patriotic song dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when France threatened to declare the Rhine its eastern border. It included these lines: "Dear Fatherland, no Fear be Thine! Firm and True stands the Watch, the Watch at the Rhine!"

Throughout the war the Germans relied for security on coded radio communications, using an encryption system called "Enigma" by the British. As is now well known, the Germans were unaware the British succeeded in cracking the code early in the war, making *Wehrmacht* radio communications available to the Western Allies under a top secret program called "Ultra." By the fall of 1944, Hitler realized the Allies had somehow breached German security, but he attributed it to traitors in the ranks, especially since the failed July assassination plot against him. Not knowing how his secrets were leaking, he set up extreme security



Lt. Col. Joachim Peiper: commander of the SS spearhead

16,17 December

## Four Routes of Advance

Key to the German plan to rapidly cross the Meuse were four predefined advance routes for 1<sup>st</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> SS Panzer Divisions of the Sixth Panzer Army (see map). These spearhead divisions were supposed to advance aggressively and without regard to their flanks, assured that to their south Fifth Panzer Army would protect their left. On the north flank, it was assumed the deep penetrations of the SS panzers would so disrupt US and British defenses that coordinated counterattacks wouldn't be possible. The problem with that approach was it depended on the success of all the attacking columns to provide mutual protection for each other. As it turned out, only one of the four formations, *Kampfgruppe Peiper*, the reinforced 1<sup>st</sup> SS Panzer Regiment of 1<sup>st</sup> SS Panzer Division, managed to achieve a breakthrough.

## German Assault Tactics

The different approaches to command and tactics practiced by Hasso Von Manteuffel, commander of the Fifth Panzer Army, and Sepp Dietrich, commanding Sixth Panzer Army, are evident in the conduct of their initial attacks. Dietrich, who had little army-level command experience, preceded all his attacks with extensive artillery barrages. They had little effect on the dug-in Americans beyond warning them something was up. His army's *Volksgrenadier* divisions then marched in column to conduct frontal assaults on US positions — and they were shot to pieces.

Manteuffel, on the other hand, studied the tactics of the formations his men were to attack, learning their patrol routines. He sent infantry units across the Our River to infiltrate under cover of darkness, seeking out routes between established US outposts. Instead of massed artillery, his gunners fired a brief artillery salvo to maximize surprise prior to the assault. As a result, the US 28<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division found itself fighting a confused battle of withdrawal, seemingly surrounded by the enemy from the outset.

## KG Peiper

Chafing behind the slow progress of the *Volksgrenadier* divisions that were supposed to break a gap in the US line on 16 December, Lt. Col. Joachim Peiper personally led the armored column of his battle group from the 1<sup>st</sup> SS Panzer Division in its attack through the Losheim Gap the following morning. From there he sped west along his assigned route, planning to cross the Salm and Ambleve Rivers at Trois Ponts and then race to the Meuse. Along the way his battlegroup displayed both daring and ruthlessness.

Knowing his panzers would, at least temporarily, need to find their own fuel, he detoured north to seize a US depot at Bullingen, even though that town was on the planned route of 12<sup>th</sup> SS Panzer Division. Continuing west, the tail of his column crossed paths with a US artillery unit heading south through the town of Baugnes, near Malmedy. There his troops, evidently without Peiper's knowledge, carried out the infamous Malmedy Massacre, gunning down 86 captured US soldiers.

Peiper brushed aside resistance as he roared through Stavelot, but on reaching Trois Ponts, he began to encounter heavy opposition. American engineers blew the bridges along his route. Refusing to get bogged down in a battle with US airborne troops arriving in the town, he turned north, again taking over the route of 12<sup>th</sup> SS, expecting them to follow behind and protect his rear. Skirting the north bank of the Ambleve, he reached the village of Staumont on 19 December. There his aggressiveness caught up with him. No other German formation had penetrated the US front to the north, leaving Peiper's right exposed. While he fought near Staumont to continue forward, the US 30<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division descended on the rear of his column, cutting him off back at Stavelot.

Without fuel, Peiper's advance stopped. Efforts by the rest of 1<sup>st</sup> SS Panzer Division to relieve Peiper from the south were blocked by the US 30<sup>th</sup> Infantry and 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Divisions. Trois Ponts and Stavelot remained in US control. Accepting the reality that his dash for the Meuse was over, Peiper fought unsuccessfully to break through US lines and re-establish communication with 1<sup>st</sup> SS Panzer Division. Finally on 24 December, he led 800 of his surviving SS troopers on foot back to German lines. That was all that was left of his original command of 4,000 men and 300 vehicles. ♦

measures for *Wacht am Rhein*.

Only a few in Hitler's inner circle and the individual army and army group commanders were informed of the operation before December. They included Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, Commander-in-Chief of the German Army in the west (OB West), Field Marshal Walther Model, commander of Army Group B, and the commanders of the three attacking armies, Gen. of the Waffen SS Joseph "Sepp" Dietrich of Sixth Panzer Army, Gen. of Panzer Troops Hasso von Manteuffel of Fifth Panzer Army, and Gen. of Panzer Troops Erich Brandenburger of 7<sup>th</sup> Army. All communications regarding the offensive were delivered by couriers accompanied by Gestapo agents.

To start the deception, Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel, head of OKW (*Oberkommando der Wehrmacht*, the armed forces high command), informed all his commanders in the west there could be no offensive operations that year and that all energy should go toward defending the German frontier. Throughout the fall, all German radio communications gave the reasons for movement toward the Ardennes as a response to the Allied offensive in the Aachen area.

For the most part, all German command and military intelligence flowed up to the top and back down. There was no sharing of information laterally. Whatever the drawbacks of that system, it supported the deception in the case of the Ardennes offensive. Since departments and formations looked up the chain of command for direction, units redeploying to the Ardennes weren't aware they were part of a much larger operation. Secrets were easier to keep if even those redeploying or reinforcing weren't aware they were part of a greater plan. For example, in November, panzer divisions refitting for the offensive were assembled west of Cologne, believing they were part of a mobile reserve against an expected Allied offensive to seize the Ruhr.

Taking advantage of the extensive infrastructure of the *Reichsbahn*, the German railroad system, men and material were moved into the Eifel — the region of Germany facing the Ardennes — under the view of US aerial reconnaissance flights. By sequencing train routes and schedules, the Germans made Allied intelligence believe troops were being transferred between fronts to the north and south, with the Eifel merely serving as a way station. The fact that troop and



supply movements were terminating in the region was missed by the Allied intelligence analysts. The overall movements were noticed, and bombing of the rail system was recommended by intelligence officers, but that request was denied due to the unlikelihood of success. Track was so plentiful across the region that if one route were cut, several others would still be available.

So the buildup continued in secret, not just from the Allies but from the officers who would be leading the attack. Not until the first week of December were corps commanders informed of the real plan. The downside of the secrecy was a lack of training for the specifics of offensive operations and the terrain of the Ardennes. Division commanders weren't told of the offensive and its location until just five days before its launch, meaning they had no opportunity to prepare troops with maps to negotiate the difficult terrain. That was especially a problem for the masses of new recruits

in the attacking divisions, of which there were many. It would be their first major combat, and they lacked the experience to deal with the situation.

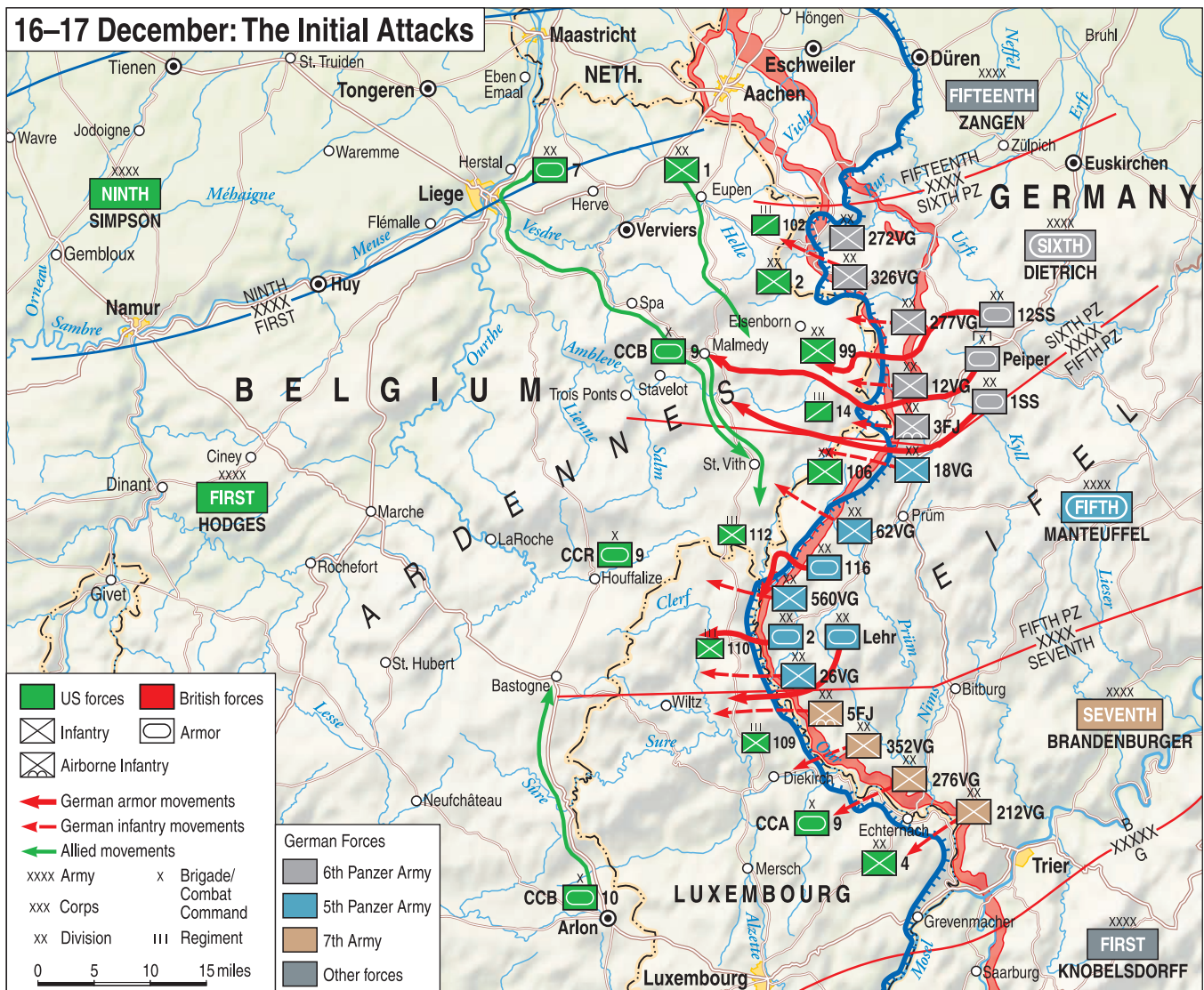
In the final days of preparation, roads and ramps made of straw and corduroy muffled the sound of moving tanks and heavy equipment. German aircraft flew low over the front to further mask the noise. Artillery ammunition was moved up by hand to avoid the waste of precious fuel. Final deployment to the start line occurred in three steps. On the night of 13/14 December, German forces moved to within 3.75 miles (six km) of the front. The next night they advanced to within 1.8 miles (three km), and then to their jump off points the night of 15/16 December.

### Allied Intelligence Failure

In the autumn of 1944 the Allies believed they were facing a *Wehrmacht* on the verge of final collapse. True, the Germans had managed to organize a

defense along the Rhine frontier, but the halting of the drive was attributed to the Allies having reached the end of their supply lines. With supplies at last flowing plentifully through Antwerp, it was thought it would be only a matter of weeks before a renewed Allied offensive shattered the German line. That assessment was the product of the US Army's intelligence system, and it was correct in one way. It reported in early December the German front line armies were being mined for units by OB West to create a last-ditch reserve, ready to respond to inevitable Allied breakthroughs. What the Allies missed was the true purpose of that reserve, which was, of course, to buildup for *Wacht am Rhein*.

To understand how that happened, an appreciation of the US Army intelligence system is needed. The staff system of the US Army, from the supreme command to army groups, to armies, corps and divisions, was organized the same way. In each



18,19 December

## Fluid Front

Chance encounters and near misses played a big part in the first three days of the Battle of the Bulge. German units driving west often rolled through critical crossroads just shortly before or after US formations headed north or south across the same intersection, unaware they were now behind enemy lines. Gen. Norman "Dutch" Cota, commander of *28<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division*, withdrew his headquarters staff from Wiltz just as the Germans advanced into the town. Relocating to Sibret, 30 miles to the west, he passed unaware through territory held by the enemy in the process of encircling Bastogne. He even drove into Bastogne itself to check on the situation.

Perhaps the most significant "near miss" was that between the US *7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division's* *Combat Command Reserve (CCR)* and *Kampfgruppe Peiper*. Heading south toward St. Vith from Verviers on 17 December, the US armored column passed through the towns of Malmedy and Baugnez. Peiper approached the same towns scant hours later, running into a rear-echelon artillery observation battalion that had inserted itself on the road march between CCR and follow up elements of *7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division*. Peiper's spearheads easily overwhelmed those soldiers, capturing over 100. As Peiper continued west, follow up units in his column shot down the captives.

Throughout most of the rest of the battle, though, the notorious murders perpetrated by SS troops against prisoners, wounded and civilians were the exception. Combat was often bitter and at close quarters, but when an engagement ended, captors usually acted humanely. In most cases wounded Americans who became prisoners received the medical treatment they needed.

## German Intelligence

German signals intelligence was adept at intercepting Allied radio traffic. They knew, for example, the *101<sup>st</sup> Airborne*, *82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne* and *30<sup>th</sup> Infantry Divisions* were entering the battle on 18 December. They even reported that knowledge back to US soldiers in their propaganda broadcasts. In fact, Hitler was pleased to hear of the deployment of the two American airborne divisions, because he calculated it meant the Allies were in truly desperate straights, having to commit the last of their strategic reserve. While that was technically true, Hitler didn't realize the US and British also had the capability of rapidly redeploying line units from north and south of the Ardennes.

## German Commandos

Hitler authorized several special operations to create confusion and disrupt Allied reinforcements in the opening days of the offensive. The most notable of the special operations units was *150<sup>th</sup> Panzer Brigade*, organized by Col. Otto Skorzeny. There was also an airborne drop under the command of Col. Friedrich von der Heydte.

Using captured American equipment, the *150<sup>th</sup>* was to pass through American lines to seize and hold key approaches to the Meuse. Small commando teams dressed in American uniforms and driving US jeeps were to change road signs and misdirect traffic. Those operations had little immediate effect on the Allied defense, but when some of the commandos were captured, rumors and paranoia spread throughout the American Army. Gen. Bruce Clarke, commander of *CCB 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division*, was captured by US MPs and detained for half a day because he didn't know the Chicago Cubs were in the National League.

Skorzeny, aware fighting in enemy uniforms violated the Geneva convention, ordered his teams to travel in US uniforms but to reveal their German outfits beneath before actually fighting. That rationalization failed to impress the Americans, and captured commandos were summarily executed, including a four-man team that actually reached the Meuse.

Von der Heydte's paratroop regiment was similarly ineffectual. The Germans hadn't conducted airborne operations for over a year, resulting in inexperienced pilots and jumpmasters dropping 1,000 troopers across a 20 mile stretch of Germany and Belgium. Von der Heydte's aircraft and 10 others out of 105 managed to drop near their target in the woods between Malmedy and Verviers. With too few men and no weapons other than pistols and rifles, the survivors could do nothing but try to make their way back to German lines. Most, including von der Heydte, were captured. Again, though, the rumors of commandos and paratroops behind American lines fueled fears, including an imagined German plot to airdrop near Paris and assassinate Eisenhower. ♦

formation, a chief-of-staff oversaw a "G-1" officer (personnel), a "G-2" (intelligence), a "G-3" (operations and training) and a "G-4" (logistics). That system created clear lines of authority within a unit for staff functions, and clear lines of communication up and down the command chain. Similar functions existed at the regimental and battalion level, using "S" designations.

Despite its numerical position in the command structure, the G-2, or intelligence officer, was low man in the command hierarchy. Unlike the prestige afforded intelligence officers in the British Army, a common perception in the US Army was that G-2 was staffed by men who couldn't make it in the other command sections. Also unlike the British system, there was no chain of command between G-2 staffs. The G-2 reported to his unit's commanding officer. The sharing of intelligence up and down the command chain depended on the relationships developed between G-2s at the various levels. For example, the G-2 of US *First Army*, Col. "Monk" Dickson was viewed as an alarmist by the G-2 at *Twelfth Army Group*; so Dickson's reports tended to be discounted.

German activity that was accurately reported was misinterpreted. One reason for that was the Americans were practicing a deception of their own. The *VIII Corps* carried out operations in front of the German lines near Clervaux consisting of vehicles patrolling with the insignia of the *75<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division*, along with fake tanks and artillery parading as if new troops were moving in. The hope was to draw German forces away from the impending attacks on the Roer dams to the north. Thus, reports of a buildup on the German side were interpreted as the Germans taking the bait and reinforcing the area's defenses.

Finally, the ace in the hole of Allied intelligence operated at the strategic level: Ultra. The stream of German messages decoded in England was operating at full force early in 1944; however, radio traffic decreased as the *Wehrmacht* fell back into Germany due to increased use of telephone landlines as the primary method of secure communication. Even so, an average of 50 messages a day were still being intercepted. The reason clues in those messages to the upcoming offensive were missed has to do with the nature of gathering of information, but in its analysis. Ultra intercepts were

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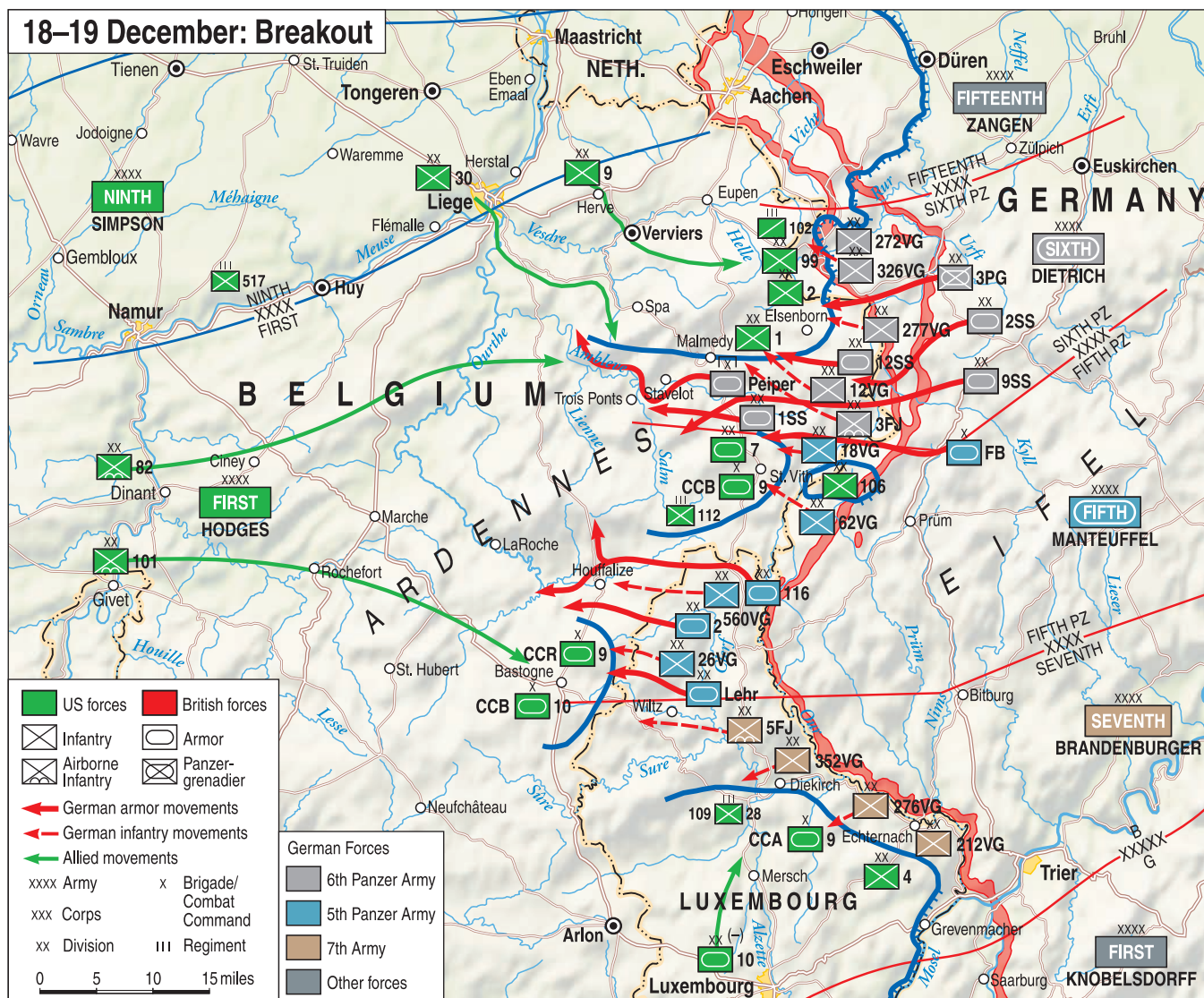
## The G-2

US Army G-2 sections analyzed information from several sources to gather intelligence and reach conclusions:

- Prisoners of war provided information under interrogation; however German POWs typically didn't represent a good cross-section of their armed forces, since demoralized and non-ethnic German units did most of the surrendering. So that type of information tended to exaggerate the picture of a collapsing *Wehrmacht*.
- Civilians offered a prime source of intelligence to the Allies racing across France; however, upon approaching and crossing the German border, this source largely disappeared. Eastern Belgium was home to many ethnic Germans, who were uncooperative with the Allies.
- Aerial reconnaissance missions flew regularly over German rear areas, weather permitting. With flying conditions generally poor in the first half of December, the USAAF IX and XIX Tactical Air Commands prioritized other areas of active Allied operations. Only three missions were flown over the quiet Ardennes region in the week before the attack.
- Signals (radio) intelligence picked up German messages at division-level and below. Here, Hitler's "no

radio" order concerning the offensive proved successful, as no unusual troop movements were detected via radio transmissions at the lower command levels.

- Outposts and patrols watched and probed enemy lines, but the Germans had the edge here in the thinly held Ardennes. It wasn't unusual for German infiltrators to visit friends and family in German and Belgian towns behind Allied lines. Successful front line reconnaissance requires constant contact with the enemy. In the Ardennes the Allied divisions weren't aggressively patrolling — the region was used for refitting, resting and acclimating new units. What few reports there were had to travel a long way before reaching sources who might appreciate the bigger picture, from a platoon or company leader to a battalion S-2 and on up through regiment, division and corps G-2. Along such a lengthy route, there was plenty of opportunity for reports to be discounted if they didn't fit preconceptions. For example, a report from a regimental S-2 in the 28<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division about the sound of enemy tank movements didn't fit that divisional command's picture of enemy capability; so it was discounted as coming from some other type of tracked vehicle. ♦



daily decoded and delivered to all upper commands: SHAEF headquarters, the army groups and armies. Those intercepts indicated the following:

- Panzer divisions were forming into a reserve between Cologne and Aachen, and *Sixth Panzer Army* was to be the OKW reserve; that is, an army directly under Hitler's command, not under OB West or Army Group B.
- *Luftwaffe* aircraft were building up near the front in preparation for a planned but unidentified operation.

- There were numerous requests for fighter aircraft to protect railheads in the Eifel.
  - Messages intercepted from the *Riechsbahn* revealed a great increase in transport of men and material toward the front.
  - There were requests for aerial reconnaissance of towns and river crossings in the Ardennes, including bridges across the Meuse.
- On 9 December, evidence from Ultra of the buildup in the Eifel was attributed by the G-2 of Gen. George Patton's

## 20-22 December

### A Few Good Men

All German penetrations of US lines during the Bulge were through undefended or thinly held areas. Wherever the American troops defended in strength, often at nothing more than battalion strength, the Germans made little headway. The Germans generally sought to probe through weak points whenever resistance was encountered, but skillful use of terrain by US defenders, and small mobile reserves backing up dug-in infantry, gave German patrols the impression strong forces held the line even though that often wasn't the case. On several occasions, most notably at Hotton, a bridge or town held by units little larger than a company were reported by German scouts to be battalion strength or more, causing them to pull away and search in another direction for a point of breakthrough when a frontal assault might have overwhelmed the defenders.

### Ad Hoc Formations

German *Kampfgruppen* and the US task forces saw extensive use in the Battle of the Bulge. *Kampfgruppen*, *ad hoc* combined-arms formations of armor, infantry and artillery, were formed for specific operations and ranged in size from 200 to 20,000 troops. Usually created at the army-level or higher, KG reported directly to corps or army commands and could stay in formation for weeks or even months. The most notable of those formations in the Ardennes was *KG Peiper*, a brigade-sized unit drawn from *1st SS Panzer Division* and reinforced to lead the main drive across the Meuse.

US Army task forces tended to be a less formal and more tactical application of the *ad hoc* formation, usually company or battalion in size. Ordered at the divisional or regimental-level, a task force would draw as needed from within a larger unit to defend or take a specific tactical objective, such as a town, river line or crossroads. Like German KG, task forces were named for the commanders of the temporary formations. Small task forces from *10th Armored Division* proved vital in defending key road approaches to Bastogne as the US defense of that town took shape.

### Crisis in Command

Hitler believed his Ardennes offensive would drive a wedge between US and British forces, trapping Montgomery's *Twenty-First Army Group* in the north and thereby also shattering the Anglo-American alliance. While there was little real chance of that happening, either militarily or politically, the offensive did create tensions within the Allied command. The German advance split in two Bradley's *Twelfth Army Group*, with US *First Army* on the north of the Bulge and *Third Army* to the south, rupturing communication and mobility between them. Though it pained him to do so, Eisenhower knew he needed his forces north of the Bulge under a unified command, especially with the British moving down to reinforce. Therefore, starting on 21 December, all US forces on the north side of the Bulge were temporarily attached to *Twenty-First Army Group*, under Montgomery. Complaints from Bradley's staff were immediate, and the British press trumpeted the situation as Monty coming to rescue of the crumbling Americans. Nevertheless, it's easily seen that Eisenhower made the right move and, as he promised at the time, the shift was only temporary. ♦

*Third Army* to the massing of a centrally located reserve, situated to respond to Allied attacks against the Ruhr or the Saar. Even though that interpretation was wrong, it prompted Patton to order his generals to prepare a plan for *Third Army* to shift north to the Ardennes, should the German's launch a spoiling or counterattack in that area. That preparation stood him well a week later.

Gen. Omar Bradley, commander of *Twelfth Army Group*, expected no enemy action in the Ardennes. The region seemingly offered neither of the two primary objectives for an attack: destruction of enemy forces or a viable geographic objective. Though no attack was expected, Bradley wished for one: "If the other fellow would hit us now! We could kill more Germans with a good deal less effort if they'd only climb out of their holes and come after us for a change."

The Allied command held assumptions about the Germans that discounted the information they received. Paramount of those assumptions were the following:

- The German defense in the west was under the command of rational soldiers such as Rundstedt and Model. They were men who would value a strong armored reserve for swift counterattack. The Allied command thus assigned no significance to information the panzers in reserve were under the direct control of Hitler, a man willing to gamble everything on one throw of the dice.
- Increased German movement near the Ardennes was due to the *Wehrmacht* shifting reserve units north and south to counter expected Allied attacks.
- The enemy was critically short of manpower, fuel and supplies, desperately trying to patch up a defense and incapable of large offensive action.

Thus the evidence failed to shake the Allies leaders of their preconceptions. It was only when the front erupted on 16 December that SHAEF belatedly came to understand the real situation.

## 16-17 December

The German assault jumped off in the pre-dawn darkness of 16 December, achieving Hitler's goal of complete surprise. The first warning to US soldiers were hundreds of pinpoint of light beyond the German line — artil-

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lery and rocket launchers unleashing their barrages. Achieving surprise is one thing, however, and taking advantage of it is another. Along many stretches of the front, the beleaguered GIs held the line or fell back in good order, quickly upsetting the German timetable. Both the northern and southern shoulders held against German attacks conducted by poorly trained

green infantry. The presence of the *2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division* in the north contributed to success there, as continual attacks against that shoulder pushed back the US line to the Elsenborn Ridge but couldn't break through.

Below the north shoulder, after other ineffectual infantry attacks, the armor of *1<sup>st</sup> SS Panzer Division* broke through the Losheim Gap on the

morning of the 17<sup>th</sup>, overwhelming elements of the *14<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Squadron* and the *106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division*. In the meantime, the *62<sup>nd</sup> Volksgrenadier Division* advanced on the southern flank of the *106<sup>th</sup>*, threatening to cut off two regiments of that green US division.

In the center, *Fifth Panzer Army* crossed the Our River and infiltrated through the outposts of the *28<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division*, but it couldn't achieve a quick breakthrough, due as much to traffic jams and delays getting bridges for armor built across the Our as to US resistance.

## 23-25 December

### Leading from the Front

For all their formidable reputation, German formations demonstrated frequent moments of timidity in the Bulge. Bypassing Bastogne to the south and heading for St. Hubert, two regiments of *Panzer Lehr Division* stopped at a log barrier placed by US engineers and simply waited, certain of an ambush if they advanced any farther. It took the personal intervention by an enraged Manteuffel to get the units moving again. Racing to the front, he got in the lead vehicle, drove it around the roadblock and then all the way into St. Hubert. Not a single US soldier was encountered along the way. The *2<sup>nd</sup> Panzer Division* was similarly stalled after crossing the Ourthe River over the same bridge the *116<sup>th</sup>* had avoided the day before, by a roadblock between Ourtheville and Marche.

### Evacuating the Goose Egg

For four days, US forces held a position protruding from Vielsalm to St. Vith, known as the Fortified Goose Egg. There they tied down German movement and logistics and confined enemy breakthroughs to narrow fronts north and south of the Egg. Finally, on 22 December, the Americans could hold no more against increasing German pressure. The challenge then became to extract 20,000 men and over 200 armored vehicles from a nearly surrounded position via dirt and gravel roads turned to mud, all through a narrow exit at the town of Vielsalm. Because of the limited road network, a schedule of phased withdrawals was worked out to avoid units getting tangled in the Goose Egg's center. When the withdrawal got underway on the evening of the 22<sup>nd</sup>, the ground was soft and muddy, impassable to heavy vehicles.

*Combat Command B (CCB)* of *9<sup>th</sup> Armored* (1) and the *424<sup>th</sup> Regiment* of the *106<sup>th</sup> Division* (2), both in continual combat since 16 December, held the eastern wall of the Goose Egg. They were the first frontline units to pull out, covered by a battalion of the *424<sup>th</sup>*. The roads were still somewhat firm in that area, and the retreat went smoothly with only the covering battalion coming under fire as it withdrew from in front of the *62<sup>nd</sup> Volksgrenadier Division*.

Fortune continued to smile on the defenders as an overnight cold wind brought freezing temperatures, hardening the ground and enabling vehicles to move overland in the early hours of the 23<sup>rd</sup>. That in turn allowed the next scheduled withdrawal group in the northeast of the egg, *CCB* of *7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division*, to move cross-country (3). Along the way, the US armor struggled to disengage from an attack by the *Fuhrer Begleit Brigade* at Rodt, where the frozen ground also allowed the enemy to get moving.

Next, *CCA* of *7<sup>th</sup> Armored* fought off attacks from *9<sup>th</sup> SS Panzer Division* while waiting its turn to pull out (4). Once they got moving, daylight and a break in the clouds brought more help. An enemy attempt to pursue was foiled by a flight of P-38s attacking targets of opportunity. *CCR* of *7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division* guarded the north flank of *CCA*'s withdrawal and then followed that unit into Vielsalm.

Finally just two units remained, the exhausted troops of the *112<sup>th</sup> Regiment*, *28<sup>th</sup> Division* on the south of the salient (6), and *Task Force Jones*, made up of tank destroyers and light tanks detached from *7<sup>th</sup> Armored*, accompanied by remnants of *14<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Group* (7). By that time the Germans were attempting to block the withdrawal at the town of Salmchateau. German forces had moved into the center of the salient and were driving to cut off the escape route from the east. At the same time, *2<sup>nd</sup> SS Panzer Division* attacked into the salient from the southwest. Retreating US units collided with each other on the way out, but managed to sort that out while fighting their way through German fire at Salmchateau. They then reached the safety of the lines of the fresh *82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division* at Vielsalm. ♦

## 18-19 December

*Fifth Panzer Army* achieved a broad breakout in the center of the front. With no US force in the way between Bastogne and Vielsalm, the *116<sup>th</sup>*, *2<sup>nd</sup>* and *Lehr Panzer divisions* had their choice of where to go. Unusually tentative, the *116<sup>th</sup>* probed farthest west, apparently fearing a US division at every intersection. Meanwhile, *Lehr* and *2<sup>nd</sup> Panzer* raced for Bastogne. After some indecisive engagements, *2<sup>nd</sup> Panzer* bypassed that town to the north in order to continue west. Initial attempts to advance into Bastogne by *Lehr* and the *26<sup>th</sup> Volksgrenadier Division* were held off by small task forces and road blocks thrown in the way by the US *9<sup>th</sup>* and *10<sup>th</sup> Armored Divisions*, giving the newly arriving *101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division* time to set up a proper defense.

In the north, two regiments of the *106<sup>th</sup>* were cut off and encircled in the Schnee Eifel while the Americans struggled to establish a line around the key crossroads town of St. Vith. With the northern shoulder continuing to hold, the breakout of *Sixth Panzer Army* was constricted to the narrow corridor traversed by *Kampfgruppe (Battlegroup) Peiper*. Follow-on forces of *1<sup>st</sup> SS Panzer Division* were unable to keep up, and soon got bogged down by the defense to the north of St. Vith. With *12<sup>th</sup> SS Panzer Division* continuing to unsuccessfully assault Elsenborn Ridge, two more panzer divisions, *2<sup>nd</sup>* and *9<sup>th</sup>*, entered the fray.

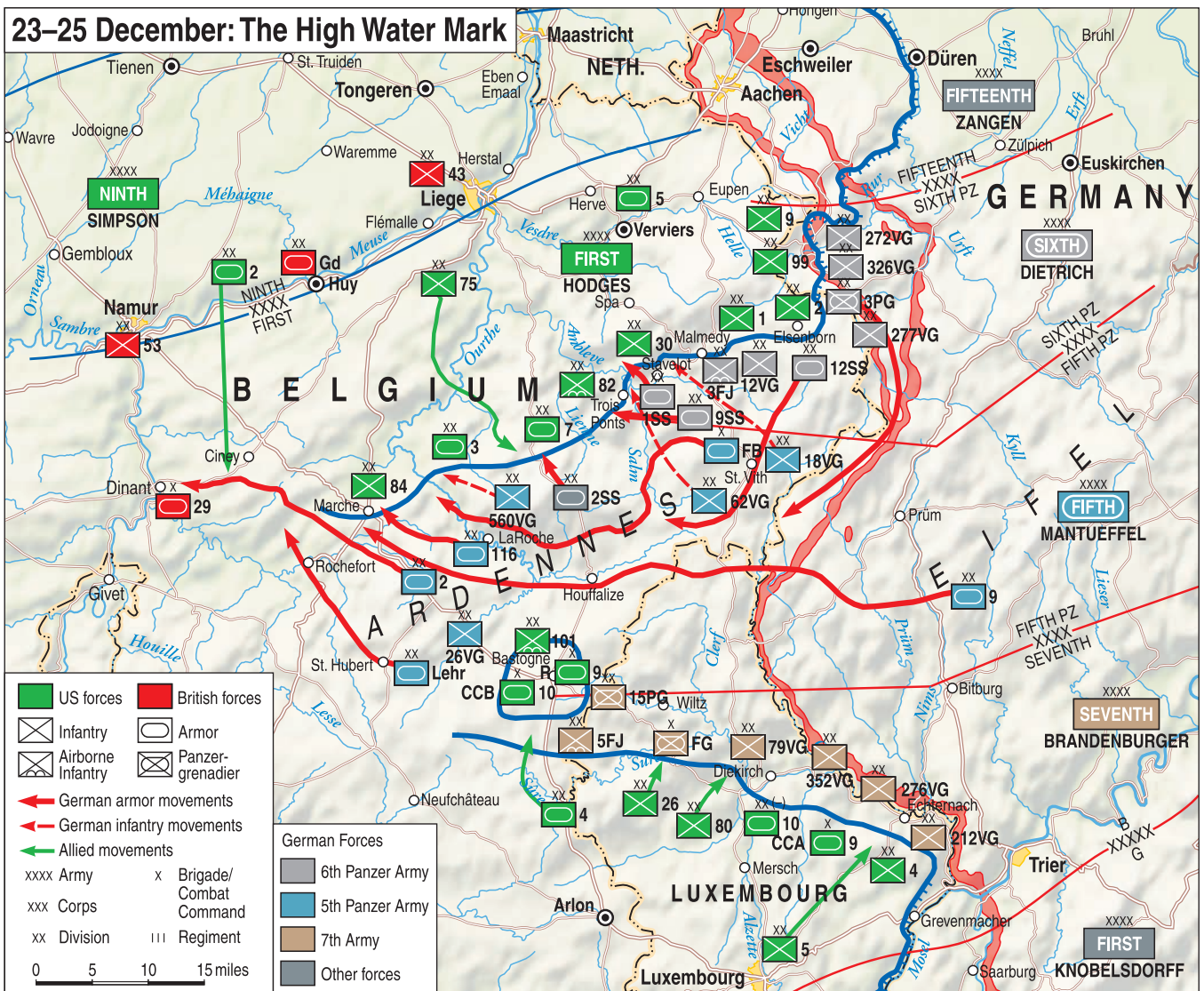
Traffic jams plagued the German advance for the first several days of the offensive. As late as 19 December, *Sixth* and *Fifth Panzer Armies* were competing for road space north of St. Vith, thereby greatly delaying the assault on that key road junction. Disgusted with the situation, Model took it upon

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Patton's Shermans advance on Christmas day



himself to personally direct traffic and clear up the mess. Manteuffel and his corps commanders had been doing the same in the *Fifth Panzer Army* sector the previous two days.

Even in their desperate situation, US commanders tried to help each other when they thought they could.

In response to a request from Troy Middleton of VIII Corps, for example, Gen. Jones of the *106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division* sent two companies from the St. Vith salient toward Bastogne in an attempt to disrupt the enemy attacking Bastogne from Houffalize. Those companies never reached their destination.

## 26-30 December

### The Artillery Battle

Hitler hoped to use a massive artillery barrage to initially rupture the American front in the Ardennes. In reality, German artillery lacked the mass to pulverize the enemy, though it did manage to disrupt communications in some areas. As the Wehrmacht advanced, their supporting artillery was given low priority on the narrow road network of the Ardennes, taking several days to move forward just a few miles. Thus German artillery played little part in the battle beyond the initial front line.

Allied artillery was at first only thinly spread along most of the front, except along the northern shoulder where *V Corps* had massed guns in preparation for the planned attack on the Roer dams. Surprise and the disruption to American communications caused by the German initial barrage prevented US artillery getting into the battle on the first day: coordinates for targets couldn't be pinpointed as the Germans moved into "no fire" zones occupied by friendly troops. Once a new line was established, however, the power of US artillery hammered the Germans. The actual casualties attributed to artillery fire tended to be over-estimated in after action reports, but its ability to stop attacks and divert advances is indisputable.

### Tigers & King Tigers

The weapon most feared by the Americans in the Ardennes was the German Mark VI and VIb heavy tanks — the "Tiger" and "King Tiger." The Tigers' reputation far outstripped its actual effectiveness, as lesser tanks (Mark IVs and Mark V "Panthers") were often reported by US combatants as Tigers in order to add to the drama of the report. Of the approximately 1,000 armored vehicles deployed by the Germans in the offensive, only about 150 were Tigers.

The Tiger's frontal armor was invulnerable against all US anti-tank weapons. Its 88mm gun could destroy a Sherman tank half a mile away; however, many roads and bridges in the Ardennes weren't suitable for a tank the size and weight of the Tiger, thus limiting its mobility. Moreover, the heavy tanks devoured precious fuel. More Tigers were abandoned for lack of fuel than to Allied fire in the Battle of the Bulge. Nonetheless the tanks gave the Germans a psychological advantage, as US soldiers feared a Tiger around every corner.

### Airpower

By December 1944 the Allies possessed almost complete air superiority. Hitler's planning took that into account by scheduling the offensive when overcast skies were predicted — and the forecasters proved correct. Close support airpower played little part in the first six days of the battle, aside from an occasional ground support mission. Much of the air war for the Ardennes actually took place to the east, where Allied fighters engaged German aircraft heading for the battlefield before they got across the Rhine, or where deep interdiction missions were being executed. When the weather cleared on 23 December, six days of unrelenting Allied air attacks began: strafing German columns, interdicting supplies and blocking roads. During that time the Germans were forced to conduct much of their movement at night. The cumulative impact on German materiel and morale was devastating. The Allies were also able to keep the Bastogne garrison supplied by air, a remarkable feat in the face of the many heavy German anti-aircraft weapons ringing the town.

German Me-262 and Ar-234 jets made appearances in the battle, impressing combatants on both sides. But those first operational jets made no material difference due to their small numbers, representing less than two percent of the German aircraft committed to the Ardennes. ♦

## 20-22 December

On the evening of the 20<sup>th</sup> the Germans completed the encirclement of Bastogne. In another instance of enemies just missing each other, Gen. McAuliffe (acting commander of *101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division*) and his staff drove from Neufchateau into Bastogne via the only road still open. Minutes after they passed through one quiet intersection, it was cut by the Germans.

The first German division to reach the Ourthe River, the last water obstacle before the Meuse, was *116<sup>th</sup> Panzer*. Dashing south of St. Vith, its spearheads charged through Houffalize and continued on to La Roche where they found the bridge had been destroyed by US engineers. Scouts from the division probed south and found an intact crossing near Ourtheville, but Gen. Kruger, commander of *LVIII Panzer Corps*, feared it would be blown before his main force could seize it; so he instead headed north to attempt a crossing at the village of Hotton. That was another opportunity missed, as German forces from *2<sup>nd</sup> Panzer Division* crossed at Ourtheville without incident the next day.

After three days of bitter fighting, St. Vith fell. With unrelenting attacks carving in several stretches of the perimeter, the call to withdraw to lines two miles west of the town went out to all units. Some received the order later than others and had to run through a gauntlet of Germans already in the town to escape. One company of five Shermans, carrying German prisoners, picked up US stragglers as they rumbled through town. Together the opposing hitchhikers joined together to sing *Silent Night* as the tanks dodged German fire on their way to the safety of the new US lines. Even with the withdrawal, US forces were able to keep a strong salient in the German line, extending from just west of St. Vith back to Vielsalm and the Salm River. This "Fortified Goose Egg," as it was called, proved a large thorn in the German side, hindering their advance for several more days.

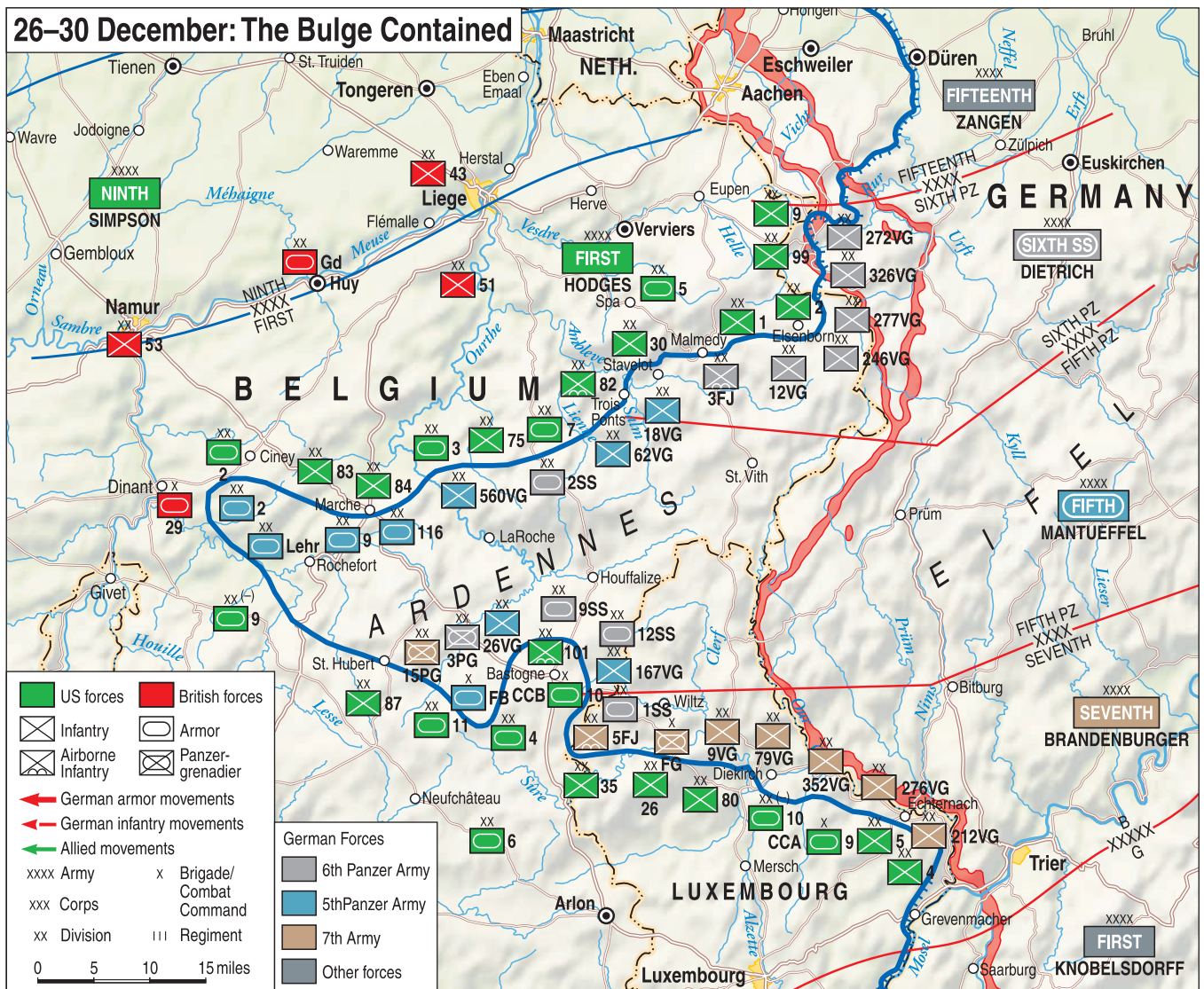
Blocked from further advance and cut off from retreat, *Kampfgruppe Peiper* was fighting for its life. In the town of Staumont, the force awaited promised reinforcements from *1<sup>st</sup> SS Panzer Division*, but it was not to be. Here the Americans practiced some stealth of their own. The US *704<sup>th</sup> Tank Battalion* and GIs from *30<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division* secretly

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A US patrol in the Ardennes, late December 1944





built a corduroy road from the main highway through the woods to muffle the sound of their tracks as they launched a surprise attack.

To the east, *Sixth Panzer Army* made its last major effort to break through Elsenborn Ridge. Tanks and troops of *12<sup>th</sup> SS Panzer Division* succeeded in penetrating the lines of *US 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division* at Butgenbach. As the Germans exploited that hole, however, US reserves rushed into fill the half-mile gap taking advantage of the hills and terrain to pick off enemy tanks one by one, leaving a graveyard of Panthers and halftracks. The northern shoulder was not heavily attacked again.

Field Marshal Montgomery took command of *US First Army* on 21

December — among his first orders was the one to withdraw from the St. Vith salient. *First Army* commander Hodges and his corps commanders favored holding the Fortified Goose Egg, viewing it as a good locale from which to launch a counterattack with newly arriving reinforcements. Montgomery supported the idea of a large counterattack, but only after the lines were tidied up. The new hierarchy of command in the north prevailed, and the withdrawal of the salient commenced.

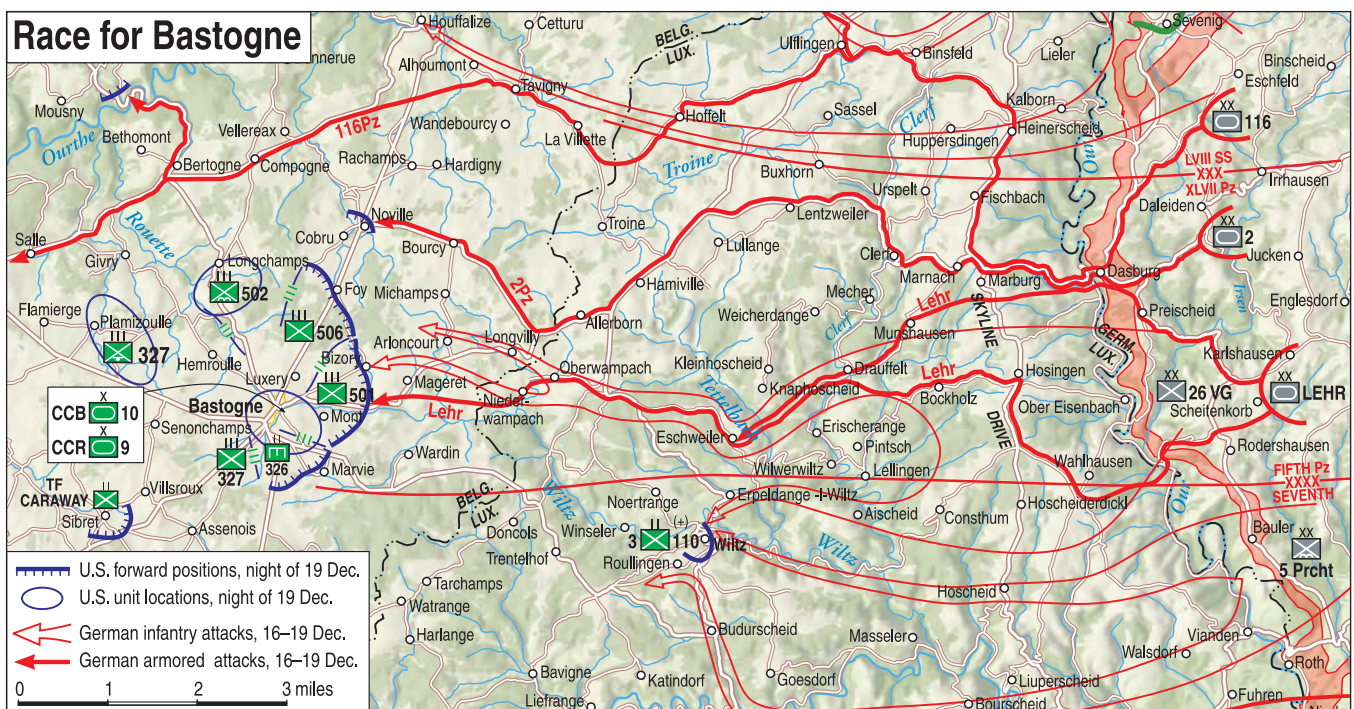
### 23-25 December

One of the most difficult military operations is to withdraw from a salient under fire. Nevertheless, the Fortified

Goose Egg was successfully evacuated, with all troops and equipment executing a brilliant maneuver through Vielsalm to west of the Salm River, through the lines of the *82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division* (see inset map). As some of the last tank destroyers drove out under fire, they noticed a soldier calmly digging a foxhole beside the road. “Are you looking for a safe place?” he asked.

When they responded yes he added: “Well, buddy, just pull your vehicle behind me. I’m the *82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne* and this as far as the bastards are going.”

Still seeking a breakthrough on the north, Model shifted west. *Sixth Panzer Army’s II SS Panzer Corps*, consisting of *2<sup>nd</sup> SS* and *12<sup>th</sup> SS Panzer divisions*, to commit it against the still developing Allied line between the Salm and Ourthe Rivers. A breakthrough there would give the German armor and panzergrenadiers a path across the Ourthe to the Meuse. As elsewhere in the Ardennes, the difference between victory and defeat was a handful of men and weapons at key crossroads, such as Baraque de Fraiture. There a reinforced battalion of the *82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division* held off concerted attacks for three days, finally being overwhelmed on 23 December. That left only the battered survivors withdrawn from the Fortified Goose Egg between the Germans and the Ourthe. The weather turned the tide as the 24<sup>th</sup> dawned clear and Allied air attacks forced *2<sup>nd</sup> SS Panzer Division* to stop and take cover in the woods. That immobilized the entire





German advance while also enabling the newly arriving US 75<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division to move to reinforce the line.

Farther to the west on 24 December, Fifth Panzer Army, spearheaded by 2<sup>nd</sup> Panzer Division, reached the high water mark of the German advance, moving to within five miles of the Meuse. Their advance had been unopposed since crossing the Ourthe, but they were then hindered by their supply problems. Lack of fuel slowed their movement to fits and starts. With adequate fuel they would've reached the Meuse the previous day. Near the town of Celles, they stopped again to wait for more fuel and to reconnoiter.

Since Montgomery took command of the northern Allied forces, his focus had been on organizing a solid defensive line from the eastern shoulder at Monschau and Elsenborn west to the Meuse. He refused to authorize counterattacks until the front was secure and the Germans had spent their offensive energy. On several occasions he nixed counterattack opportunities suggested to him by corps and division commanders. In fact, the key counterattack that ended all German advances on the Meuse happened when it did only because Gen. Lawton Collins, commander of VII Corps, deliberately chose to "misinterpret" his orders, authorizing US 2<sup>nd</sup> Armored Division to attack the spearhead of 2<sup>nd</sup> Panzer Division. That successful effort quickly bagged thousands of panzer troops and hundreds of vehicles, stalled due to lack of fuel.

With the mauling of 2<sup>nd</sup> Panzer Division, Manteuffel knew the Meuse wouldn't be forced. He did see some opportunity in turning Fifth Panzer Army north to try to trap US units between the Ourthe and the Meuse, but his recommendation and requests for reinforcement to his spearheads were rejected by Hitler.

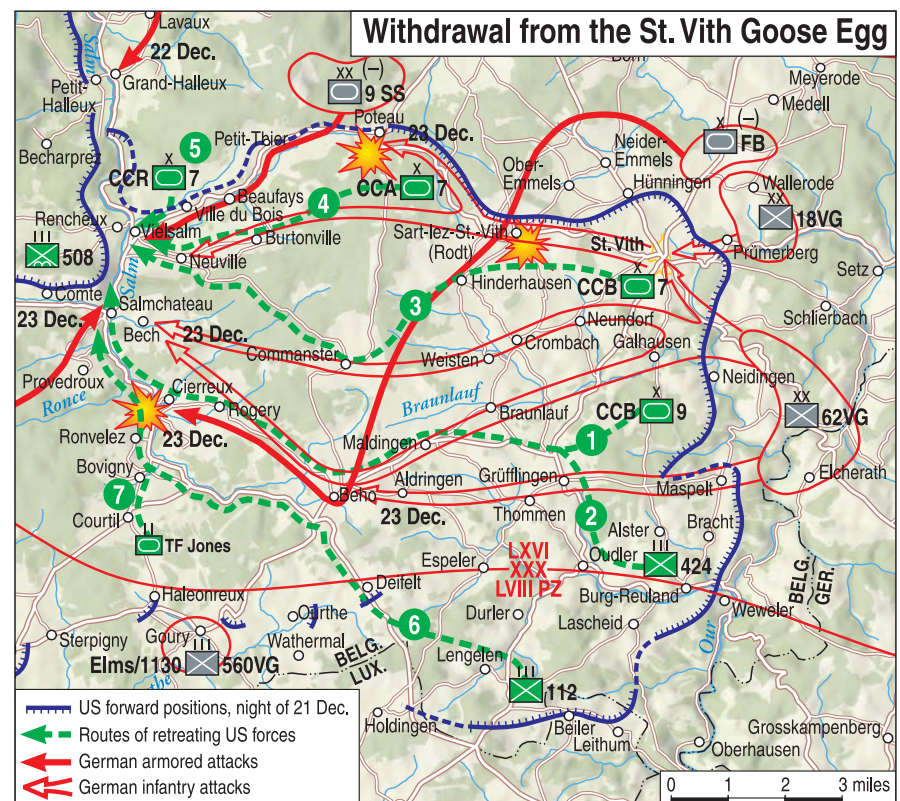
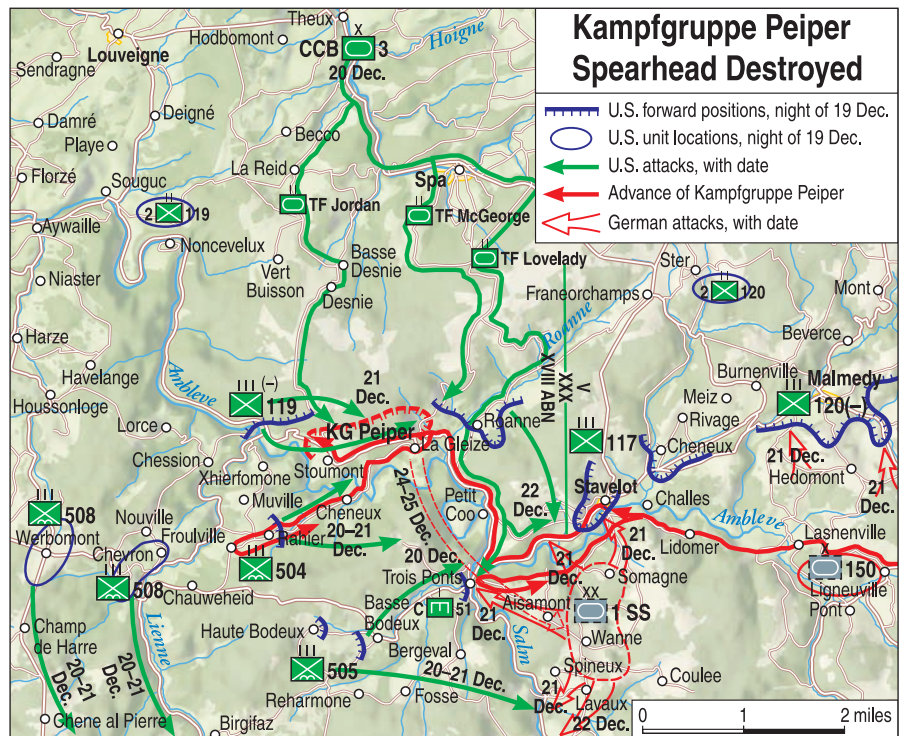
## 26-30 December

The 12<sup>th</sup> SS Panzer Division was finally withdrawn from its futile attempt to force Elsenborn Ridge and moved west to join 9<sup>th</sup> SS Panzer and 560<sup>th</sup> Volksgrenadier Divisions in what turned out to be an equally futile attempt to cross the Ourthe at Hotten. Finally realizing the Meuse couldn't be reached, Hitler turned his fury on Bastogne, redirecting much of his force to take that town. It was a pointless exercise, as its belated capture wouldn't alter the fact the Allies

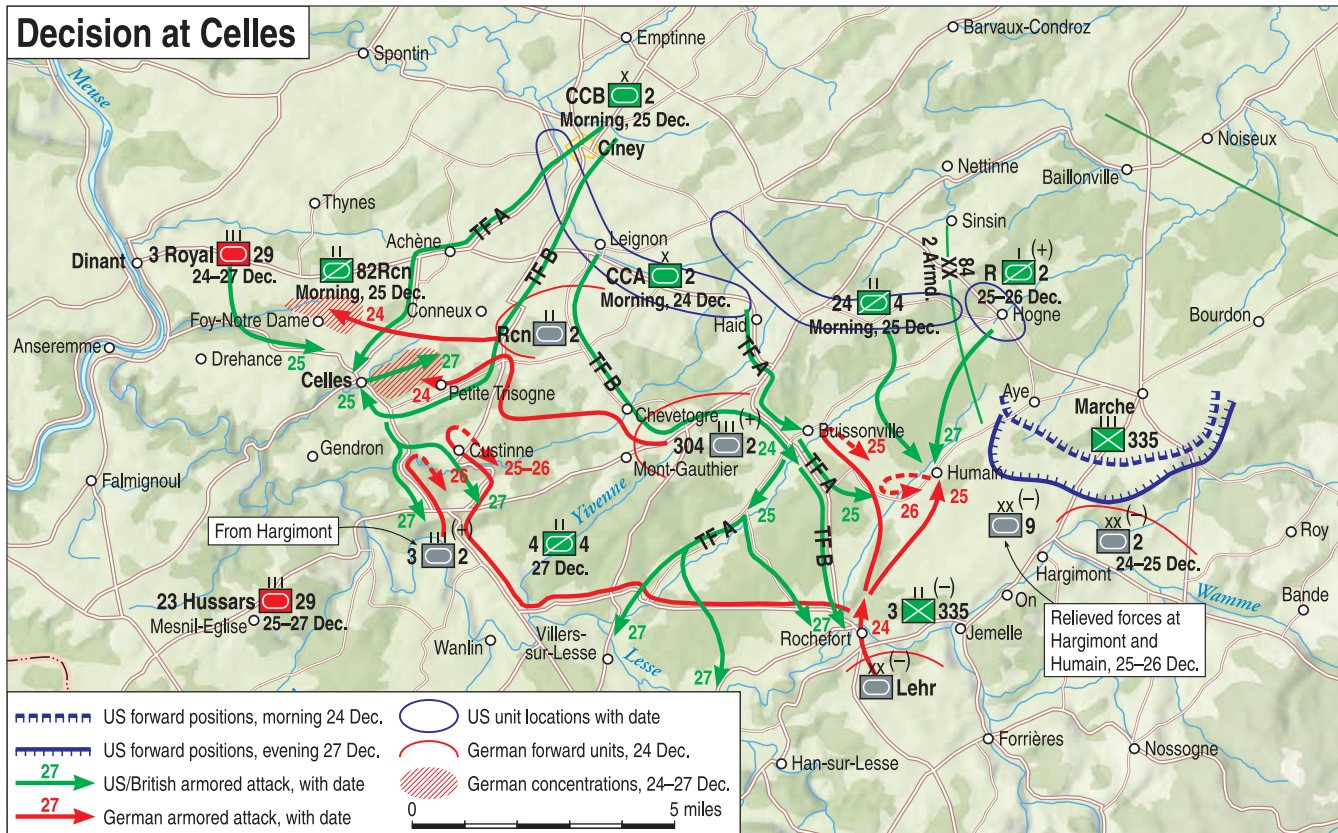
had blocked the way to the Meuse.

At the same time, Bradley and Hodges implored Montgomery to attack from the north, to cut off the Germans in their extended positions. Monty, though, remained convinced the Germans had more bite, and he refused to go over to the offensive. His caution was without basis. The Germans were spent all along the northern front, and they became even

weaker when most of their armor redeployed toward Bastogne. There's little doubt a US counterthrust in the north in late December would've crumpled the northern German line, and likely would've lead to a quick link up with the Bastogne defenders, thereby cutting off numerous German divisions. Instead, the reduction of the Bulge became a slow and grinding affair, lasting throughout January.







### Conclusion

Hitler's greatest error was in underestimating the Allies, especially the US high command's ability to respond. He saw the situation in terms of his great victories of 1939-41 and not 1944. As both the supreme political and military leader of Germany, he made all strategic decisions, and he assumed Churchill and Roosevelt did the same. He therefore wrongly assumed any decision to deploy Allied reserves to the Ardennes would have to go up and down a lengthy chain of command, a process that would take at least a week. Hitler couldn't conceive that, unlike his own generals, Eisenhower really was the Allied "supreme commander."

For his part, Eisenhower kept his superiors informed, but he didn't need their permission to move divisions,

corps and armies in Europe. Likewise, his army group commanders, Montgomery and Bradley, set deployments for their units within the larger framework established by Ike. Within 24 hours of the German offensive starting, three US divisions had been redeployed to the Ardennes; within 48 hours another three divisions arrived. Six days after the start, an Anglo-American counterattack force of 11 additional divisions was moving against the Germans — testimony to the flexibility of the Allied command system.

In studying the movements of Allied and German forces over the course of the battle, one can't help but appreciate the different approaches to operations taken by the opposing high commands. You can see it on the day-by-day maps

that accompany this article. Allied commitments were forceful and consistent. When a decision was made to send a unit to a sector in an otherwise fluid battlefield, it tended to stay there and contribute to the forming of a solid defensive line that created "shoulders" that held against the German advance until, finally, it was completely contained. Units generally knew their ground and their mission. On the other side, the movement of German units reflected the desperation of their situation. Divisions moved from one futile assault across the battlefield to another, wasting time and fuel as objectives shifted. For example, the *Fuehrer Begleit Brigade* was given no fewer than four objectives in the space of 10 days. ❖



left — American infantrymen of the 290th Regiment fight in fresh snowfall near Amonines, Belgium. 4 January, 1945



right — A German soldier carries ammunition boxes. Belgium, December 1944