

The Battle for Hurtgen Forest

by Ken MacFarlane



Mobile firepower: US self-propelled artillery battery takes up position

Sprint to the Border

The Allied armies had roared across France in the late summer of 1944 finally coming up against the Westwall, sometimes called (erroneously) the Siegfried Line. The Westwall was a line of defenses that stretched across the German frontier from the Dutch to the Swiss border. It consisted of mutually supporting concrete bunkers and tank obstacles built mainly during the pre-war years. Allied leaders recognized the necessity of getting past those fortifications before the *Wehrmacht*, which had been shattered in Normandy, could recover and properly man the line. Yet the Allies didn't have enough troops or supplies to break through the Westwall on a wide front. They had to choose specific regions that seemed to be most favorable to their offensive.

The Twenty-First British Army Group, commanded by Field Marshal Sir Bernard Montgomery, was given the task of attacking across Belgium and Holland into the north German plain. Because they'd been advancing on the Allied left since Normandy, those Canadian and

British armies were assigned the sector flanked by the sea. They therefore also became responsible for capturing the Channel Ports, especially Antwerp. Those ports were key to landing supplies and other logistical support sufficient to maintain the strength of the offensive. Without the ports, any Allied drive would exhaust itself before the war could be won, because the Allied base in Normandy was too far away to provide sufficient support to the formations at the ever more distant front.

US First Army, under command of Gen. Courtney Hodges, was assigned a sector of the front from the Belgium-Dutch border through the Ardennes to Luxembourg. First Army was tasked with protecting the southern flank of Montgomery's army group from any German counteroffensive. Simultaneously, it was to close on the German border and, if possible, prevent the enemy occupation of the Westwall in that area.

SHAEF (Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces Europe) commander Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower also specified the primary focus of all

Allied armies should be destruction of German combat forces. The seizure of geographic objectives was only to be considered second to that goal (other than the vital supply ports). Because German combat formations appeared to be scattering everywhere across France, 'victory fever' began to take hold in the Allied camp. Nevertheless, Eisenhower remained more wary of the recuperative capacity of the Germans. He continued to demand a broad front strategy that would keep pressure on the entire front. Of course, such a strategy also dispersed Allied strength and prevented concentration in any one spot. The only exception permitted was the Market-Garden operation, the airborne landings in Holland that were supposed to fully and finally breach the German northern flank. Market-Garden failed, though, to achieve its objectives in the face of strong German resistance.

As US First Army drove toward the German frontier, Hodges and his superior, Gen. Omar Bradley of Twelfth Army Group, selected the ancient city of Aachen and the open terrain east of it as their first objective upon entering

German national territory. Since Roman times that area had served as a staging area and invasion route for armies heading east. Two formations were assigned the task of encircling Aachen and then advancing beyond it to the Rhine. The VII Corps, commanded by Gen. J. Lawton Collins, was to screen the southern part of the city and advance through Stolberg to Duren. The northern flank was covered by the newly formed XIX Corps, commanded by Gen. Charles Corlett. It was made responsible for linking up with the British at Maastricht and screening along the Wurm River from the transport hub of Geilenkirchen south to Aachen.

The VII Corps was comprised of the 1st and 9th Infantry Divisions, 3rd Armored Division and the 4th Cavalry Group. Following a hard-fought battle near Mons, Belgium, where remnants of five German divisions were surrounded and destroyed, early September found VII Corps crossing the Meuse River. Liege, Spa, Eupen and Rotgen fell to the Americans after only light opposition. Rotgen, on the western edge of the Hurtgen Forest, was the first German town to be occupied by Allied forces. Task Force Lovelady, of 3rd Armored Division, took it on 12 September, while 1st Infantry Division advanced northeast to the outskirts of Aachen. That was the first large German city to be reached by the Americans. It sits at the western side of a corridor of open

terrain that passes north of the Hurtgen Forrest, extending to the cities of Duren and Julich and then spreading out across the Rhineland to the Rhine River.

Green Hell

The area known as the Hurtgen Forest lies at the northern extreme of the Ardennes-Eifel massif (high plateau), terminating just south of Aachen. The forest is crisscrossed with deep draws and gorges filled with old-growth conifers, dense forest litter and spongy soil. The largest gorge is cut by the Roer River, which rises near the Belgian-German border town of Monschau. Flowing north and east to the Rhine River, the Roer marks the southern and eastern boundaries of the Hurtgen Forest. Prominent along the medium-sized river were the massive dams at Schwammenauel and Urft, which together restrained 123,000 acre-feet of water. Spreading across the forest like the fingers of a hand are ridges that run southwest to northeast, the largest of them being the Monschau corridor, which extends from Monschau to Duren on the other side of the forest. The ridges are largely composed of open meadows with villages sprinkled throughout. That 10x20-mile forest presents an atmosphere that's been likened to the mood of the frightening fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm.

The terrain north of Aachen and

behind the Westwall was mostly open plain dotted with towns and villages. Due to heavy and relentless autumn rains in 1944, that normally ideal tank country was boggy. Two rivers crossed that part of the Rhineland, the Wurm — about 30 feet in width, and the larger Roer to the east. The Wurm had been incorporated into the Westwall as a natural tank obstacle.

The Germans initially considered the Hurtgen a low priority during their retreat in front of the Allied advance. Their focus was on the city of Aachen, where a breakthrough of the undermanned Westwall could lead to loss of the Rhineland and, soon thereafter, the industrial Ruhr. In September, therefore, only weak and inexperienced units were fed into the forest to act as roadblocks, because the Germans felt their enemy wouldn't waste any serious effort in such bad terrain.

When First Army crossed the German frontier, American morale hit a high pitch. Unfortunately, supplies weren't keeping up. In spite of appropriating trucks from every source (including newly arriving American divisions that were stripped of their transportation), supplies became so scarce at the front that troops were relying on captured food. Gasoline was the commodity in greatest demand, while artillery ammunition received lowest priority due to the low level of combat.

The truck convoy system, the



At the Reich's frontier: American GI at the West Wall

famous Red Ball Express, was a historic innovation to try to keep the frontline troops supplied; however, it fell short of delivering what was needed for a continued full-blown offensive. Gen. Hodges therefore ordered his divisions to hold at the border to allow the troops to rest, refit and resupply. The orders to stop before breaching the Westwall disturbed the subordinate commanders so much that Gen. Collins requested permission to continue the advance under the guise of a reconnaissance in force. In that capacity, then, Task Force Lovelady was allowed to continue into the Hurtgen, along the Rotgen-Stolberg road, in order to flank forces opposing the 1st Infantry Division near Aachen and open an additional supply route.

The task force consisted of tanks and armored infantry from Combat Command B (CCB) of 3rd Armored Division. Once concrete dragon's teeth and road crater obstacles were eliminated, the unit moved north until it encountered a Panther tank. The German crew destroyed four Sherman tanks before the GI's eliminated it. TF Lovelady left the knocked out vehicles behind as they continued about two miles into the forest before stopping for the night. In that way, the first of two bands of the Westwall had been penetrated on 13 September, less than a month after the Battle of Falaise. Meanwhile, CCA of the 3rd Armored Division had penetrated the Westwall just south of Aachen. Both combat commands were losing tanks and half-tracks at a prohibitive rate, however, considering their replacements were 100 miles behind the spearheads.

The Germans were scrambling to man their fortifications before the Allies made irrevocable penetrations through them. In Aachen itself, 116th Panzer Division attempted to hold the city as well as an escape route out of it to the east. The battered 9th Panzer Division was tasked with holding off 3rd Armored's penetration to the south. Many of its replacement armored fighting vehicles went into combat as they unloaded from the trains that brought them directly from German factories. Hitler had appointed Field Marshal Walter Model, skilled in desperate defenses in Russia, to take charge of the west front defense. Hitler devoted the full production output of armor to rebuilding West Front units. Home guard, training, naval and Luftwaffe units were also dispatched in a desperate race to man the defensive works before the Americans overran them.

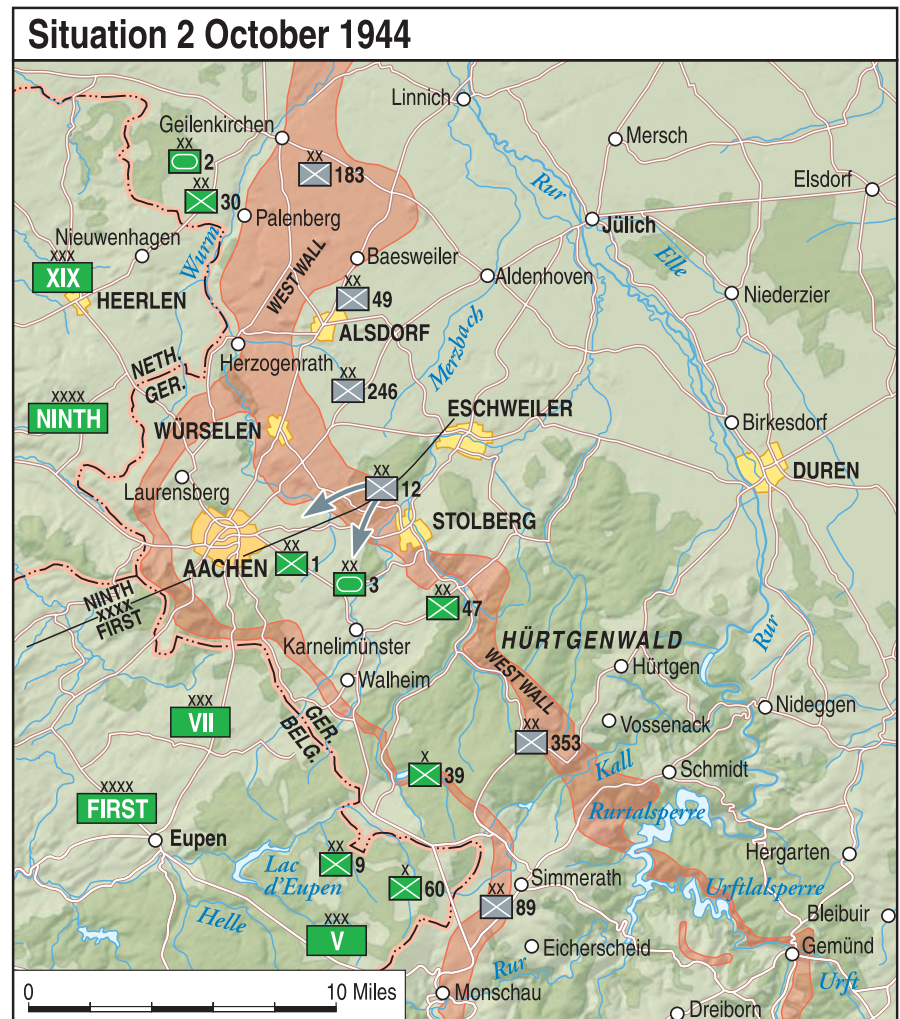
Enter Ninth Infantry Division

As the southernmost division of VII Corps, 9th Infantry was assigned the task of clearing the Hurtgen to shield the offensive units in the Aachen corridor from counterattack. Little was known about the forest at that time other than the fear it might hide large enemy formations from easy detection. Allied airpower ruled the skies; so German formations tried to stay out of open terrain. The forest offered sanctuary from air attack while also denying the Americans their mobility advantage. It was an infantryman's environment with few trails or roads. Bunkers and minefields enhanced the defensive capability of poorly trained and equipped Germans.

The American army and corps commanders had little interest in the Hurtgen, beyond denying it to the Germans out of a vague fear they might otherwise use it as a base from which to launch a counterattack. They therefore assigned a series of single divisions the task of taking the forest, but left the planning as to exactly how to do that up to each succeeding division

commander. As each division burned out, it was replaced by a new one whose headquarters cooked up a totally new plan. As higher-level American commanders focused their attention to the north, they provided little direction or support to the effort in the forest, resulting in failure and wasted combat units. The 9th Division was the first victim of that deficient strategy.

The 47th Infantry Regiment of the 9th Division was ordered to move to the high ground in the north of the Hurtgen abreast of Task Force Lovelady, so that unit could resume its attack on 16 September. While the task force was roughly handled by some German assault guns, the 47th managed to slip through the fringe of the forest and take Schevenhuetten, a village four miles to the east. That proved to be the largest single advance of the entire battle. The sudden advance surprised the Germans. A colonel on forward reconnaissance from the 12th Infantry Division was surprised to find the Americans so far into the forest. The arrival of his division was intended to plug the hole in the German lines.



Allied Strategy Assessed

When the Allied armies were racing across France in the summer of 1944, an air of victory began to infect the troops with a belief the Germans wouldn't be able to stop them; however, Gen. Eisenhower respected this recuperative ability. He insisted the Allies maintain a broad front, which was the strategically conservative but safe approach. Montgomery was then able, however, to tempt Eisenhower with a gamble to use First Allied Airborne Army to jump the Rhine River at Arnhem, Operation Market-Garden.

The decision to bet everything logistically on a single-road attack exposed the Allies to delay on their other advances, most notably that of clearing the Scheldt Estuary so supplies could be delivered via Antwerp. Supplies were siphoned from other armies and vital transport had to be devoted to Market-Garden. The Airborne Army was thus drawn into a fruitless sideshow when it represented the only Allied strategic reserve.

First Army commander Gen. Hodges chose the Aachen corridor, a traditional invasion route into Germany, as his main objective. The 9th Infantry Division was assigned to screen his southern flank by occupying the Hurtgen Forest, a reasonable strategy. Since the Germans were still in full retreat, the Allied generals hoped they could slip through the forest without meeting substantial resistance, but Model was able to place just enough troops into the Westwall defenses to stop the weakened American effort. Terrible autumn weather and forest terrain denied the Americans their trump advantages of airpower and armor. Artillery support was further hampered by wet radios and grounded aerial reconnaissance. So the battle became an infantry fight with the defenders in prepared positions, armed with numerous automatic weapons, and well aware of the restricted avenues of approach. That allowed the Germans to mine, booby trap, and set-up artillery or infantry ambushes along those few trails and roads.

Division after attacking division was gutted of infantry while their commanders ordered one more push in operations reminiscent of World War I. Veteran troops disappeared from the units as casualties, and most replacements in turn became casualties after a few hours of combat. Whole divisions became combat ineffective in that way within a couple weeks, and then were replaced with fresh units to repeat the process. American higher-level commanders failed to provide a coherent strategy for the battle and were piecemeal in their commitment of force.

Another glaring omission of the Allied planners was the Roer River dams. Control of the dams allowed the Germans to flood the Roer at their discretion to create a water barrier that lasted for weeks. Any Allied unit unwary enough to be caught on the river at that time could be trapped and annihilated within the flood zone. With the dams in Allied hands, the tables would be turned and the Germans would have to withdraw to the east. There they would have to defend in open terrain, exactly where they were most vulnerable. The German Ardennes counteroffensive would thereby also have lost its north shoulder and all chance for success. By the time the Allied generals finally organized an operation to take the dams in mid-December, they'd almost lost the 2nd Division while it was mired deep in the forest. Gen. Robertson barely saved his command from being surrounded in the opening days of the Battle of the Bulge. Since the dams went unsecured, the autumn battle for the Hurtgen Forest was a monumental waste of American blood. ★



Gen. Collins

To the south of 47th Regiment the remainder of the 9th Division had to advance through the forest on a front of 18 miles. The 39th and 60th Regiments were first assigned to clear the area south of Monschau and then move onto the Monschau corridor to the east. Those GIs were forced to halt at the forest edge, where dragons teeth prevented vehicles from continuing. Pillboxes spouted machinegun fire that forced the Americans to become expert at combined-arms bunker busting tactics. The advance was effective but slow, requiring every bit of regimental manpower and armored assets. There were no reserves remaining to enter the unoccupied forest in the gap between the 39th and 47th Regiments; so the next day elements of the 353rd Division were able to occupy those defenses without interference. That pattern of managing to get reinforcements where they were vitally needed "just in the nick of time" characterized German operations for the rest of the battle.

Opposing the American regimental thrusts in the south was the 89th Infantry Division and units of LXXIV Corps, led by Gen. Erich Straube. With a cadre of veterans, the 1056th Regiment acquitted itself well by holding the American advance to the west slope of the gorge. Even so, that German unit was so poorly equipped it had but a single old Italian artillery piece, which quickly ran out of ammo. As a ruse, they dragged the useless cannon back and forth to impress the Americans. The attack stalled after five days of heavy casualties.

In the north, 12th Infantry Division went into counterattack immediately upon arrival. Assisted by some anti-tank units, the fresh troops managed to stall the progress of 3rd Armored's task forces. The battle on the northern fringe of the forest devolved into a slugging match, a situation that would remain unchanged until after the fall of Aachen. The Americans had to await reinforcements, consolidate and re-supply. By adroit generalship, luck and desperate reinforcement, the Germans held the Allies at the Westwall.

By late September the front started solidifying. Gen. Collins of VII Corps still believed he could make progress in the forest. He therefore ordered 39th Regiment to cross Weisser Weh Creek, seize the village of Germeter along the Simmerath-Duren road, and then move east to take Vossenack, a village stretching along a windswept ridge. That was actually an overwhelming

assignment, considering the terrain was cut by gorges and sprinkled with bunkers and minefields. Only muddy trails and firebreaks provided vehicle access. A portion of the 60th Regiment was also to strike southeast across the Kall River gorge toward a ridge northwest of Monschau. The American command didn't expect significant opposition; otherwise, so small a force would've only been tasked to screen the area, not conduct a full assault.

Automatic weapons fire confronted the GIs at every turn. A steady rain of mortar rounds fell as defenders fought from log-covered positions that were all but invisible to the attacking troops. The US infantry also got their first taste of another dangerous weapon: artillery rounds set to explode on impact with the tops of trees. Those "tree bursts" caused severe casualties to anyone without shelter as the shrapnel and splinters rained down. Merely going to ground, as the soldiers were trained to do, did nothing to decrease the chance of being wounded. Instead, they had to hug tree trunks and hide under their helmets to survive. Attrition among small-unit leaders was high. Privates sometimes found themselves in charge of platoons that were reduced below 50 percent strength.

It took all of October for the attack to take Germeter and, even then, the GIs could go no farther. Groups of Germans roamed the forest, sometimes encountering American headquarters and supply troops. Firefights broke out unexpectedly, as the lines were fluid and many became lost in the woods. Counterattacks and ambushes were the order of the day. For a gain of a mere 3,000 yards during the



Field Marshal Walter Model

first half of October, 9th Division lost some 4,500 total casualties. German losses were estimated at 3,300.

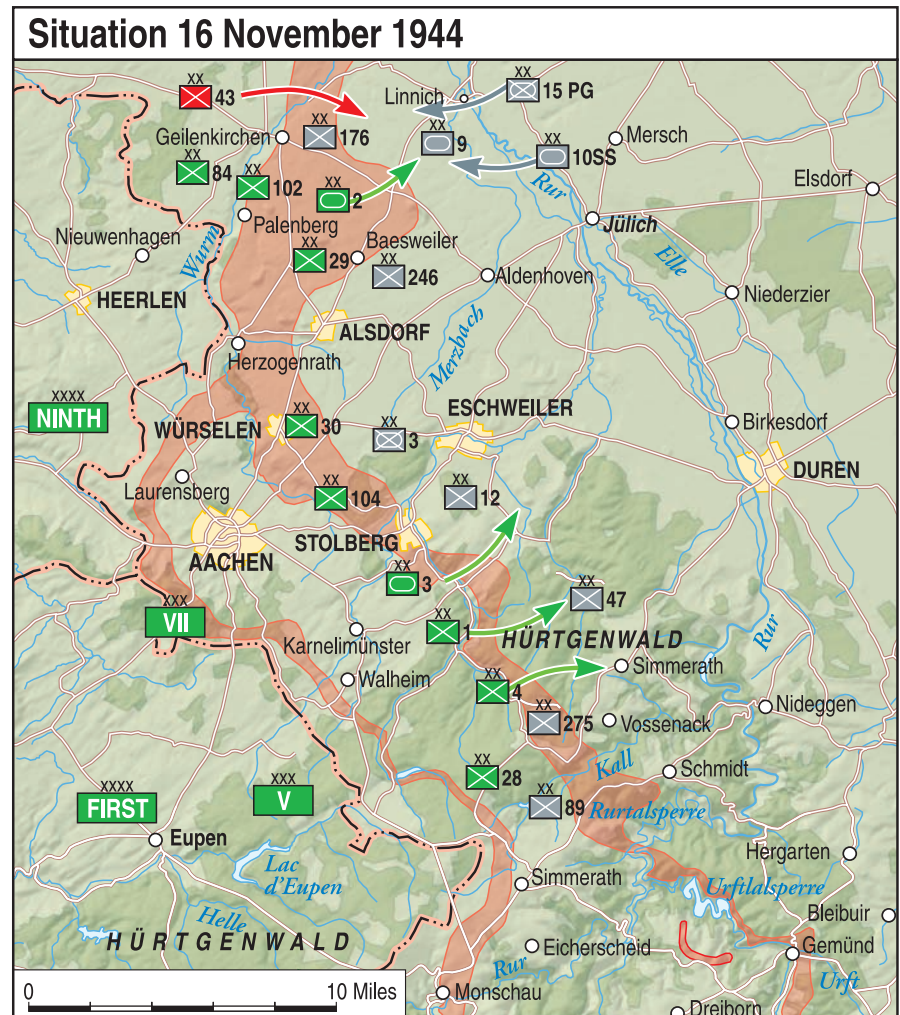
It was time to regroup for both sides. The Germans were able to place the 275th *Volksgrenadier Division* in the center of the forest, get the 272nd *Volksgrenadier Division* into the Kall Gorge, and pull out the 9th and 116th *Panzer Divisions* for refitting. Just as importantly, supplies, mines and artillery arrived to support those units.

Gen. Hodges was able to bring XIX Corps into the line north of Aachen in hopes of developing an attack through that corridor. That corps was instead forced to merely deal with its open northern flank as the British moved off in that direction during Market-Garden. Brest, a major German-held French port in Brittany, finally capitulated, which released VIII Corps to take station in the Ardennes, thereby allowing V Corps to slide north into the Monschau area. The 28th Infantry Division replaced the 39th and 60th Regiments, while the 47th was attached to the 1st Infantry Division. Food, gasoline and ammo started to catch up to the units at the front.

Aachen Encircled

1st Infantry Division and 3rd Armored Division of VII Corps penetrated the Westwall south of Aachen and attempted to rush through the Stolberg corridor to take Duren on the Roer River. The 1st Infantry made a shallow penetration east of Aachen, to the town of Verlautenheide, while the combat commands of 3rd Armored made a deeper move, taking Solberg before running into stiff resistance. By 20 September, American progress was halted by a heavily reinforced *LXXXI Corps*, lead by Gen. Friedrich Kochling. The 12th *Infantry Division* launched several counterattacks in cooperation with some leftovers from 9th and 116th *Panzer Divisions*. Model, recognizing the direction of the main American thrust, rushed reserves to the Stolberg area as fast as he could, including newly arrived King Tiger tanks. By 25 September, 3rd Armored had been forced to go over to the defensive.

The XIX Corps was reinforced with the 7th Armored and the 29th Infantry Divisions, which went into the line in the north. The 30th Infantry Division



was assigned to cross the Wurm River, penetrate the Westwall and close the ring around Aachen by making contact with 1st Infantry. Meanwhile, 2nd Armored made a deeper penetration to the left and attempted to close with the 3rd Armored in the Stolberg corridor. Facing the Americans, *LXXXI Corps* still controlled five infantry divisions, even as 9th and 116th *Panzer Divisions* were withdrawn for refitting.

The 30th Infantry Division launched a textbook river crossing and fortified line assault on 2 October. Using boats, ladders, log mats and culverts, they pushed across the 30-foot river behind a massive barrage to close with the bunker line. Well rehearsed teams destroyed the bunkers while other infantry and armor overwhelmed the supporting trench system by fire and assault. By end of day the area was in American hands. As expected, a strong counterattack was conducted the next morning using two battalions from the 49th *Infantry Division* and one from the 246th *Volksgrenadier Division*. A curtain of artillery fire helped turn back the attack on the newly won American positions. The next day, task forces from 2nd Armored passed through the 30th Infantry's lines to capture Waurichen

on the road to Duren. The *LXXXI Corps* front began to tear apart at the town of Alsdorf, so Kochling rushed every unit he could find to mend the break.

As XII and VII Corps closed the pincers on the east side of Aachen, Model and Kochling assembled forces to attempt to hold open the last road to the beleaguered city. Panzer units were paired with local infantry battalions to stop the American advance and push them back from the Stolberg corridor. Stolberg was recovered and a battle shaped-up in the town of Bardenberg, where the men of the 30th Infantry replayed the gallant stand they'd made during the summer in the Battle of Mortain. The 1st Infantry was also hard pressed to hold its positions. Curiously, the army command seems to have remained oblivious to the strength of the German commitment, and those American generals continued to harangue their units to close the gap and renew the offensive. By 16 October, the gap was closed by 30th Infantry, three days after an attack into Aachen itself had been launched by the 26th Regiment.

A stalemate settled over the front in late October, giving the leaders on both sides an opportunity to reevaluate their

strategies and plan new operations.

The Americans brought their Ninth Army into the line between the British in the north and the First Army near Aachen. The Ninth took control of XIX Corps, with the 29th and 30th Infantry Divisions, 2nd Armored Division and the 113th Cavalry Group. The 7th Armored Division, along with the 84th and 102nd Infantry Divisions, were also assigned to the new XIII Corps to cover the northern part of the front.

Simultaneously, Model decided to assign Gen. Hasso von Manteuffel, in command of *Fifth Panzer Army*, to take responsibility for the front from Maastricht to Duren. As both sides built up their forces along the Rhineland frontier, it had become evident *Seventh Army* couldn't by itself control the long front that stretched from the Dutch border to south of Luxembourg. Additionally, because most of the panzer formations were in the north, they would benefit from *Fifth Panzer Army's* mechanized support formations. During the respite, thousands of mines were laid and buildings across the front were converted to strongpoints. Hundreds of panzerfausts and many anti-tank guns, the latter both self-propelled and towed, were distributed to the frontline units.



German assault gun: *Stug III*s on the move

28th Infantry Repulsed

In early November the 28th Division was assigned the objective of securing the town of Schmidt. In addition, it was also assigned the tasks of capturing the town of Hurtgen and the fortification zone west and south of Schmidt. The division's attack plans called for its 109th Regiment to take Hurtgen, its 110th Regiment to capture the western and southern fortified zone, and its 112th Regiment to take the main objective of Schmidt. Inexplicably, it was the only First Army offensive action planned for early November, which allowed the Germans to concentrate to defeat it. Planning was left to the division staff, with little guidance coming from above despite the fact the operation had huge strategic implications.

The attack on Hurtgen succeeded after a vicious struggle, but the 109th Regiment was then frozen in place by strong counterattacks. The attack by the 110th stagnated with heavy casualties, primarily due to lack of fire support for the infantry attacking the bunkers. The division reserve was committed to reinvigorate that effort, but that

battalion bogged down as well.

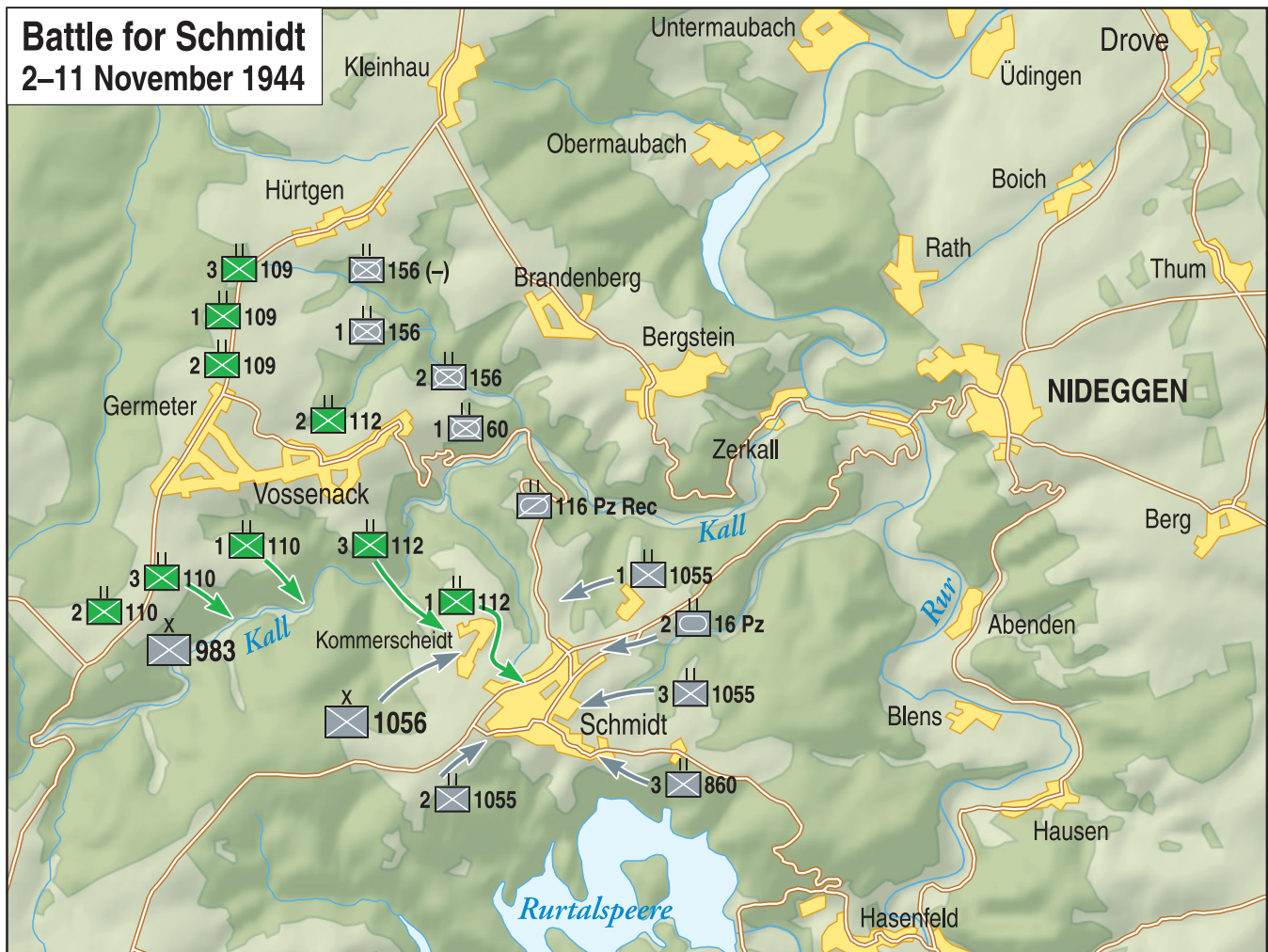
The 112th Regiment, with armor support, captured the town of Vossenack in order to establish a line of departure for the move across the Kall River gorge to the village of Kommerscheidt and then up the hill to Schmidt. The next day, that regiment launched its main attack with two battalions into the gorge, across the swift, chilly little river and up the steep hill to Kommerscheidt. GIs routed a small group of German service troops and then continued uphill to move into the largest Hurtgen Forest settlement of Schmidt. After clearing some snipers, the exhausted soldiers established their defensive perimeter; however, instead of digging foxholes as ordered, the squads simply nested in the warmer houses. None of the commanders thought to send out patrols that night, which was a disastrous oversight. A battalion of engineers was assigned the daunting task of converting the only supply route through the Kall River valley to Schmidt from a wagon trail to a road, so it could accommodate tanks. The 112th Regiment was fully committed with no reserve.

The Germans had been caught

unprepared by the sudden surge of American troops through their line, but several senior German commanders were conducting a wargame a few miles from that part of the front. In fact, they were examining what actions they should take against a renewed American offensive into the Roer River valley. Field Marshal Model, who sponsored the wargame, was one of the few senior officers aware of the plans for the upcoming Ardennes counteroffensive, set to start in six weeks. The Schmidt area was the linchpin on the north flank of that offensive. Its loss wouldn't only threaten the defensive line all the way north to the Dutch border; it would unhinge Hitler's great gambit. That threat demanded a strong and immediate reaction, which was made easier because there were no other threats along the whole *Seventh Army* front at that time.

The 116th Panzer Division was refitting after its recent tour of duty in the Aachen area north of the Hurtgen Forest. It was ordered to counterattack the 28th Division and restore the fortification line. The 89th Grenadier

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Miracle in the West

The recovery of the Germans on the west front at the end of summer 1944 puzzled and surprised the Allies. Following the *Wehrmacht's* collapse in France, the Germans were able to cobble together a new line of resistance along the Westwall in time to halt the victorious Allies at the border. Long a topic of speculation, this recuperation, known as the "Miracle in the West," had several sources.

Beginning in 1944, the German economy went to a full wartime footing directed by its organizational genius, Albert Speer. Production of advanced armor, aircraft and infantry weapons peaked that year in spite of supreme efforts by Allied bomber forces to suppress German industry. Most of those weapons were of new designs that often out-classed their Allied counterparts.

Perhaps the greatest factor of all was the German soldiers' psychological imperative to defend the Fatherland. Coupled with a call of devotion to the *Fuehrer*, embodied by mandatory sworn allegiance to Hitler, propaganda programs had distorted the German psyche into unquestioned service to the Reich. Wonder weapon programs also promised to revive the dreams of German dominance. Germanic cultural affinities for organization and service contributed to social fidelity and unit cohesion. Friendly populations living near the frontlines were used to provide labor for defensive works, while internal security organizations like the Gestapo prevented any expression of dissent.

Because of Allied air and naval superiority, *Luftwaffe* and *Kriegsmarine* manpower became available to ground commands as their original missions became superfluous. Those men were already accustomed to military rigors; so they required minimal time for additional infantry training to qualify for defensive roles. Nazi use of forced labor and foreign workers also freed native manpower to be mobilized for military duty.

Loss of substantial territory during the summer of 1944 allowed German armies to contract their defensive lines, concentrating remaining troops along a shorter line. The Westwall marked a rally position to which scattered remnants made their way without

needing detailed guidance. Most of the headquarters staffs were able to escape from France while the frontline soldiers bore the brunt of the Allied attacks. Those staffs provided a core of talented leaders who were able to direct reinforcement troops and survivors into a coherent defense. The generally excellent quality of German field grade and non-commissioned officers was instrumental in rebuilding the frontlines using under-trained manpower.

There was also another factor that's often gone overlooked. That is, Gen. Friedrich Fromm and Maj. Gen. Herrmann von Tresckow had increased the strength of the Replacement Army to a previously unknown level. That army was responsible for providing trained units and replacements to the depleted front lines. That increased strength had been kept secret from other German officials, including the *Fuehrer*, as part of the July Bomb Plot to assassinate Hitler — Operation Valkyrie. The expanded Replacement Army was to be used by the victorious plotters take charge of the country following the *Fuehrer's* demise.

Fromm was the commander of the Replacement Army, within which recruits were trained and organized into replacement groups for front line service. His chief of staff, Claus von Stauffenberg, the key man in the July Bomb Plot, was also instrumental in increasing the size of the Replacement Army so it could overwhelm domestic Nazi organizations to take control of Germany. Fromm became aware of Stauffenberg's conspiracy, yet permitted it to develop in hope of reaping power and credit if the plot succeeded.

Maj. Gen. Herrmann von Tresckow was a key organizer of the resistance effort against Hitler. He assisted in several plans to assassinate the *Fuehrer* culminating in the July Bomb Plot. One of his major contributions was to organize the enlargement of the Replacement Army and plan for its role in the government takeover.

Following the failure of the Bomb Plot, the engorged Replacement Army constituted a trained force that enabled formation of many new divisions. Those divisions comprised a substantial portion of the reinforcements that stabilized the German defense that autumn. ★



Finale for the Desert Fox: Rundstedt attends Rommel's funeral

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Division and smaller German formations were also ordered into the attack.

Before dawn on 4 November, Kommerscheidt and Schmidt were subjected to an intense artillery barrage. As the shelling lifted, tanks and German infantry attacked from both sides of the town. The American defenses crumbled as tanks fired directly into foxholes and buildings. The stunned Americans were simply overwhelmed by the attacking force. Remnants of the battalion fell back on the village of Kommerscheidt, where their sister battalion had dug in, while the rest of the Schmidt defenders were killed or captured. The defenders were forced out of Kommerscheidt two days later in another overwhelming attack that routed the remaining GIs who scattered down the hillside.

The 28th Division as offensive had ended with its infantry battalions shattered. It had to be withdrawn for rehabilitation along a quiet sector of the Ardennes Forest. Gen. Hodges ordered the 12th Infantry Regiment of 4th Infantry Division to relieve the 109th

in its attack on Germeter through the Wild Sau minefield. But the 12th was also caught in an attack by elements of the 116th Panzer Division, and was surrounded for several hours.

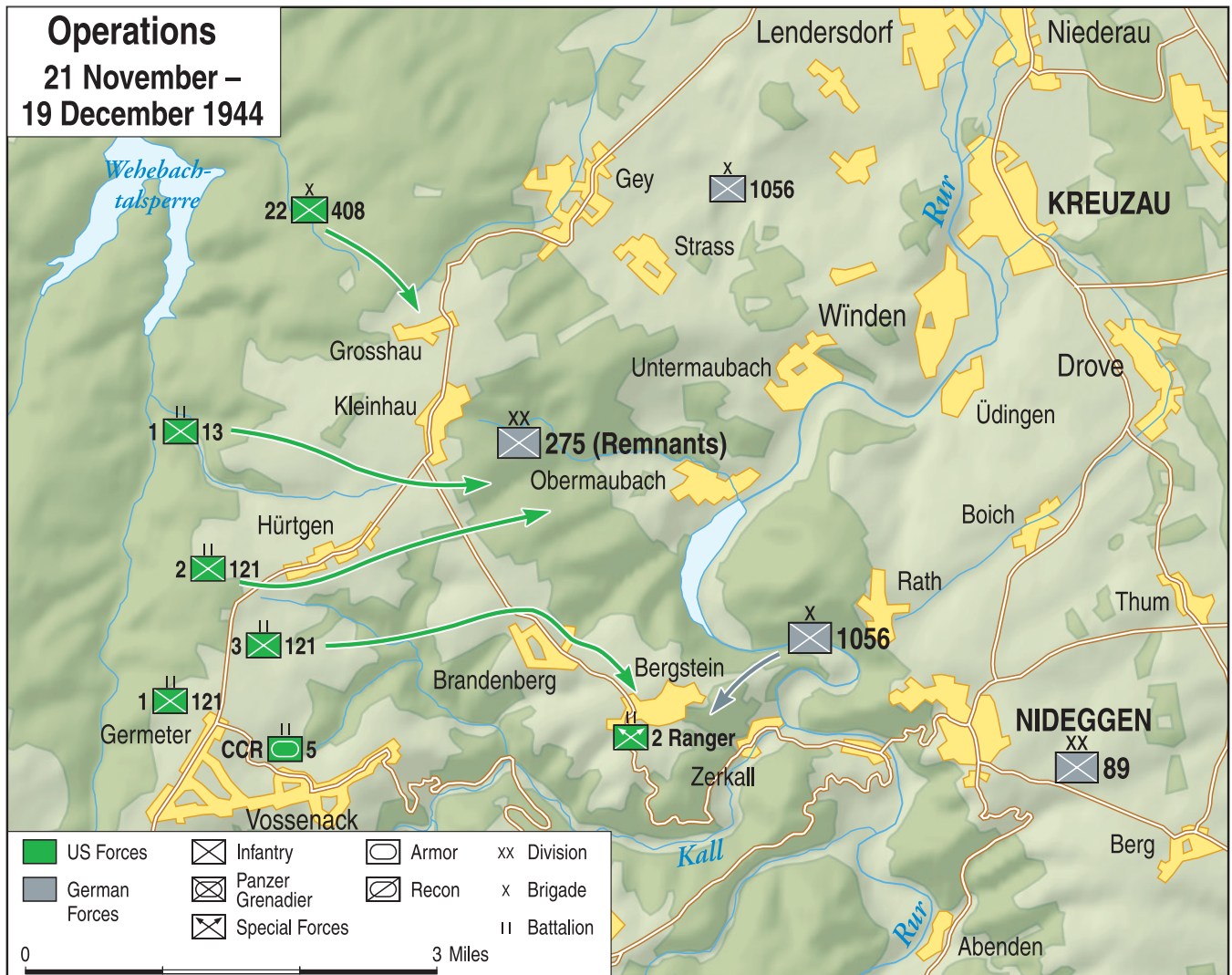
November Offensive

The Allied November offensive opened with a carpet bombing mission, Operation Queen, which employed 1,204 American and 1,188 British heavy bombers along with hundreds of medium-bombers and fighters. On 16 November, several Rhineland cities and towns were reduced to rubble as over 10,000 tons of bombs were dropped on Eschweiler, Langerwehe, Julich, Heinsberg and Duren among others. Extensive precautions allowed the Allies to avoid friendly casualties, and artillery barrages suppressed German flak. It was the largest such support operation of the war. While some German units were disrupted, though, most of their strength was well protected due to their experience with Allied air supremacy.

Their rear area communications were drastically affected, as roads were clogged with rubble and bomb craters.

The 1st Infantry Division, with the attached 47th Regiment, was given the task of clearing the northern Hurtgen Forest to protect the southern flank of the offensive. From 16 November through the end of the month, those veteran GIs struggled to clear the towns and hills to advance their lines two miles to the eastern edge of the forest. A particularly nasty battle was fought with the 12th Volksgrenadier Division for the town of Hamich. That fight turned into a cat and mouse battle, with the US troops taking the upper stories of each building while the Germans slowly retreated through tunnels dug among their basements. Many veterans of the summer fighting claimed that, other than Omaha Beach, it was the worst fighting they'd experienced in Europe.

Opposed every foot of the way by the 47th Volksgrenadier Division, the 1st Infantry Division had to bash its way through the final forest villages before



emerging onto the Roer River plain. The weather continued to deprive the GIs of their favored method of attack: strong tactical air support combined with armor and infantry assaults. While clouds grounded aircraft, muddy trails often caused the armor to be late or useless. The one asset remaining to the Americans was used to full advantage: as many as 30 batteries of artillery were targeted against single resistance points, and with devastating results. Nevertheless, both sides suffered staggering losses. The 1st Division suffered 3,993 casualties while the entire 47th *Volksgrenadier Division* effectively ceased to exist.

The troops of VII Corps had to claw every yard from the Germans.

Bunker Busting

As the Americans approached the Westwall, they recognized modifications had to be made to their tactics for reducing enemy bunker systems. Existing doctrine called for frontal assaults by infantry/engineer teams covered by artillery barrages. Just prior to the attack on the Westwall, formations like the 30th Infantry Division found they had to retrain their troops because the old tactics weren't effective and they were short of experienced infantry, due to casualties suffered in the battle for France.

Typical Westwall bunkers measured 25 by 40 feet and were 25 feet in height. They were constructed of reinforced concrete with three to eight foot thick roofs covered with soil and flora. Half of the structure was underground. There were rooms for ammunition storage and sleeping quarters for 20 troops. A steel door was located in the back, with two or more firing embrasures in the front and sides. Several hundred German bunkers were scattered along the French and Belgium borders, organized to provide mutual protection.

The new tactics also had to deal with numerous German defenders who occupied supporting positions among the bunkers. The new doctrine therefore called for combined-arms attacks using artillery, armor and infantry assault teams. In addition to their normal weapons, each 20-man assault team would carry six satchel charges, a bazooka or flamethrower, two additional automatic rifles and smoke grenades. Weapon and mission cross-training was an essential aspect for the teams. Armor support would consist of tank or tank destroyers that would provide suppression fire on supporting positions and bunker embrasures. Artillery and mortar fire would conduct pre-assault bombardments, followed by providing a curtain of fire beyond the bunker line that would isolate them from enemy reinforcement. Sometimes self-propelled 155-mm guns could be positioned for direct fire into the bunkers.

The moment the preparatory artillery fire lifted its curtain fire mission, the infantry teams would go forward to take the supporting entrenchments while the armor provided suppression fire on the bunkers and fighting positions. Flamethrowers and bazookas would contribute to keeping the Germans from targeting the assaulting infantry. Once the supporting entrenchments were taken, four-man demolition teams would set their satchel charges at the rear entrances of the bunkers, the weak point of the structures. Usually, when the doors were blasted open, the occupants would surrender. Barring that, grenades and flamethrowers overwhelmed remaining resistance.

A further critical modification to the earlier assault tactics came into play after a bunker line was taken: the assault troops had to take up defensive positions just beyond the bunker line to repel the inevitable German counterattack. Colored smoke grenades would mark the new American positions, so air and artillery fire could be directed against counterattacks while the armor would move forward in support as minefields were cleared. When the German counterattacks could be broken, the Americans would make further advances because the local enemy strength would then have been exhausted. The Westwall could thereby be busted through careful planning and the use of trained soldiers operating under aggressive tactical leadership. ★

Fighting was as strenuous as it had been in Normandy five months earlier. Both sides made maximum use of their artillery and mortars, which put every soldier not under cover at great risk. On 22 November, by conducting a night assault, the 104th Division was able to slip into Eschweiler and advance about two miles. That was the single biggest gain for the corps during the whole offensive.

Farther north, XIX Corps made fair initial headway, except at Wurselen, where 3rd *Panzer* Division stopped cold 30th Division's attack. The next night the Germans had to withdraw due to danger from the south caused by the 104th Division's advance. The 30th Division then surged

into Linden, where they caught 3rd *Panzer* during its withdrawal, capturing an entire battalion. That loss alarmed von Rundstedt so much he released 9th *Panzer* and 15th *Panzer* Divisions to move to limit the new American penetration.

On 21 November the *Luftwaffe* sent 45 aircraft to strafe and bomb the advancing Americans in order to buy time for the defenders. Engineers were hurriedly building a new fortified line on the east bank of the Roer River for the next fall-back position.

The Battle for Geilenkirchen started on 18 November, as Gen. Brian Horrocks's British XXX Corps took charge of the US 84th Infantry Division in its debut attack. Though the 183rd *Volks* Division had weeks to prepare, they didn't fight with enthusiasm, retreating into their pillboxes as the Allies drew near. The Americans seized the center of town the next day, while troops from the British 43rd Infantry Division took towns to the north. Unfortunately, a counterattack by 15th *Panzer* Division and part of 10th SS *Panzer* Division then trapped and destroyed the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry Battalion. GIs from the 84th Infantry were unable to break through to rescue them in time.

The 4th Infantry Division was brought in to bolster and then replace the 28th Division, once the severity of its casualties became evident. The 4th Division moved into the deepest portion of the forest, aligning with Weisser Weh Creek as a jump-off point for their mid-November offensive to take the villages of Hurtgen and Kleinhau. The key objective was to control the road through the forest to the city of Duren on the Roer River. Rather than considering the potential threat of the dams, the Allied leadership was still focused on gaining supply lines to break through to the Rhine. The forest and the Germans once again disappointed their hopes.

The regiments stumbled along, encountering more minefields, log bunkers and automatic weapons, marking their gains in feet before running out of riflemen. Support troops were pressed into service to fill out the decimated rifle companies, but those inexperienced soldiers weren't enough to tip the scales in favor of the offense. They confronted fighting positions so well disguised the Germans could hold their fire until the GIs came within a few feet. Once again, using

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Roer River Dams

There were two major dams on the upper Roer River and its tributaries. The Urft Valley Dam regulated the flow of the Urft River and provided hydroelectric power to the cities of Aachen, Duren and the surrounding towns. The more massive Schwammenauel Dam was built in the 1930s to regulate the Roer River. Fifty yards high, it was constructed of earth over a concrete core and contained an 81,000 acre-foot reservoir south of Schmidt.

The first written American report, filed by Maj. Jack Houston on 2 October 1944, identified the dams' great importance to the 9th Infantry Division. He noted that, "demolition of the dams would result in great destructive flood waves which would destroy everything in the populated industrial valley as far as the Meuse and into Holland."

Houston's report was largely ignored by First Army headquarters, though XIX Corps engineers estimated the release of the reservoir would cause a flood up to 500 yards in width.

The Americans launched two attacks in the fall of 1944 that could've gained access to the dams even though their objective was actually to capture road networks. The first, made by the 60th Regiment of 9th Division in October, was too weak and barely got up to the Westwall fortifications. The second attempt, by 28th Division in early November, penetrated to the town of Schmidt, near the dams, but was then repulsed by alarmed German defenders.

Only at the end of November did the American leadership finally come to recognize the importance of the dams for their future strategy. They realized whichever side controlled the dams could flood the Roer valley and isolate units caught on the wrong side

of that water. If the Germans released the flood after American units crossed the Roer, the Germans could counterattack and wipe out those exposed formations. Similarly, if the Americans gained control of the dams, the Germans would be forced to withdraw across the Roer. The Germans also had to worry about losing a staging area vital to their upcoming Ardennes offensive.

The first offensive that intentionally targeted the dams was conducted by the 78th Infantry's assault on Kesternich, made in conjunction with an advance from the south by 2nd Infantry Division in mid-December. The timing of that attack was unfortunate, as the German Ardennes counteroffensive almost isolated the 2nd Division while it was deep in the forest. The dams then had to wait until the Battle of the Bulge was resolved.

In early February, the 78th Division captured Kesternich and cleared the area west of the upper Roer River to the town of Schmidt, assisted by elements of 7th Armored Division. The 9th Infantry Division struck south of the reservoir to take the Urft Dam on 5 February, while the 78th struggled to break through Schmidt. The final assault was conducted by the 309th Regiment of 78th Division on the night of 10 February, when the 1st Battalion, along with some engineers, rushed the Schwammenauel Dam amid the noise of rushing water and artillery fire. Though the attack was successful, the Germans had demolished the control valves, releasing a steady torrent of water from the reservoir. The dam itself was made safe and secure, but high water hampered the American operations to cross the lower Roer River for two weeks. ★

A half track of the 16th Infantry Regiment, 1st Infantry Division, makes its way through a muddy road in the devastated Hurtgen Forest at the end of the battle, 15 February 1945.



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the difficult terrain and murky weather to maximum effect, the Germans were able to prevent a breakthrough to the open plains of their country.

The next infantry division to be called north from Luxembourg was the 8th. Traveling in open trucks through rain and sleet, those troops had to be summoned when the weakness of the 28th Division became apparent. Fresh soldiers were called on to once again make what was once more hoped would be the final push through the forest to the Roer River plain. This time an armored division was to help the infantry push through to the east edge of the forest and then exploit onto the plain beyond. The assignment of CCR of 5th Armored to help take Hurtgen and the Brandenburg-Bergstein ridge still demonstrated how little understanding the American generals had of the battlefield. Tanks and tank destroyers were tasked to negotiate narrow, muddy trails through forest and villages teeming with panzerfaust-armed German soldiers. Mines claimed an extraordinary number of vehicles because trees prevented them from leaving the trails. Tree bursts were a constant threat to crews in

open-topped M10 tank destroyers.

As part of the USV Corps, the 8th Division's attack began on 21 November with strong artillery preparation; however, most targeted bunkers and minefields remained intact and as lethal as ever. Veterans complained the dense forest muffled their combat-bred sixth sense, which contributed to an increase in casualties. Their reaction time suffered as the sound of incoming fire was reflected by the trees. November 23 was Thanksgiving Day. Turkeys had been sent forward to the front line in fulfillment of political promises to parents that all soldiers would be treated to a traditional dinner. The Germans, with intelligence gleaned from American radio broadcasts, treated the front-line troops to Thanksgiving artillery barrages. The GIs recalled with disdain how they spent the day in their foxholes watching as just out of reach thawing turkeys were splattered with mud and shrapnel.

On 28 November, Hurtgen finally fell, followed by Kleinhau the next day. At last those villages were in friendly hands after defying capture by four other US divisions. 8th Division and CCR 5th Armored then turned east to clear the Brandenburg-Bergstein

ridge. The 121st Regiment attacked north and east to the fringe of the forest as the 28th Regiment advanced to the bank of the Kall River in the south. It was a slender US victory: 8th Division resorted to sending hospital discharges to the town who were told to pick up weapons from the dead.

To supplement the devastated units, the 2nd Ranger Battalion was brought forward to take the final position, Hill 400 (Castle Hill), which overlooked the junction of the Kall and Roer Rivers. A barrage preceded the attack, but the Germans countered with a mortar barrage of their own. Two Ranger companies fixed bayonets and charged. They arrived as the American artillery fire lifted and carried the position, albeit with substantial casualties. The Germans didn't give up the hill. They conducted six major counterattacks, which were each defeated by American valor supported by 18 battalions of artillery.

The Bulge

The newly arrived 83rd Infantry Division exchanged positions with the weakened 4th Infantry Division,

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A brief interlude: American soldiers eat a meal in the field

Battle for Aachen

Aachen, the ancient capital of Charlemagne, was the first major German city the Americans came upon as they closed the frontier on 12 September 1944. The city was virtually undefended as 1st Infantry Division of VII Corps approached from the southwest. Residents of Aachen had been ordered by their Nazi leaders to evacuate, while the city itself was designated as the first “fortress city” inside the Reich. The commander of the unit then responsible for the city’s defense, 116th Panzer Division, Gerhard Graf von Schwerin, countermanded the evacuation order. He then offered surrender of the city to the Americans if they would guarantee good treatment of the occupants. His offer was intercepted by Nazi officers and never reached the Americans.

Gen. Clarence Huebner ordered his 1st Infantry Division to work around the south side of the city to the high ground to the east. He was trying to avoid a frontal attack into the built-up urban area until the city was encircled in order to prevent German reinforcement. Ironically, 1st Division could’ve probably taken the city then with few casualties, as it had few defenders at the time. The 16th Infantry Regiment screened the city while the other two regiments of the 1st fought through the fortified lines to reach the eastern high ground. Meanwhile, 3rd Armored Division penetrated the fortified lines farther to the east and south in a futile effort to take the Roer River town of Duren. The XIX Corps, northernmost of 1st US Army, had the task of crossing the Wurm River north of Aachen, then completing the encirclement of Aachen to

the north. Desperate counterattacks by 116th Panzer Division were brushed aside as 1st Infantry Division moved into Aachen’s eastern suburbs.

Over the next three weeks, 30th Infantry Division (XIX Corps) crossed the Wurm River and closed the gap with 1st Infantry Division to pull within site of those VII Corps soldiers. In spite of multiple division-sized counterattacks, those troops were able to complete the encirclement and seal off German access to the city.

The 2nd and 3rd Battalions of 26th Infantry Regiment, backed by the 634th Tank Destroyer Battalion and the 745th Tank Battalion, launched their attack from the eastern portion of Aachen on 13 October. The 2nd Battalion’s objective was to sweep the south side of the city while the 3rd attacked in the north toward the hills inside of it. Col. Gerhard Wilck then held responsibility for defending Aachen with two depleted regiments from the 246th VG Division (689th and 404th), 1st SS Battalion, 600th Sturm Pioniere Regiment, a fortress battalion, an assault gun brigade, and a few miscellaneous troops and artillery pieces. That amounted to about 3,000 defenders, who were short on ammo but had good morale. The attackers were actually outnumbered by the defenders; however, the GIs had substantial quantities of artillery, armor and air support.

The Americans advanced into the city using tanks and tank destroyers to suppress enemy fire while the infantry worked behind them from building to building.

A platoon would be responsible for taking houses on a single street, staying aligned with units to either side. As the tanks would blast any spotted machinegun nest or sniper, the troops would toss grenades through windows and then move in to clear every room. They found it was safer to blow holes between buildings, using bazookas or explosives, and then work from the upper stories down to the basement. Defenders forced below ground were less dangerous and more liable to surrender. Progress was steady, but methodical and slow. Help from self-propelled 155mm guns assisted in overcoming positions impervious to tank shells.

The strongest German counterattack overran Observatory Hill in the 3rd Battalion’s zone when a few panzers and the 1st SS Battalion attempted to break the encirclement to make contact with 3rd Panzergrenadier Division to the northeast. The 3rd Battalion was able to seal the breach, assisted by some M10s that destroyed the panzers. For two days SS men used sewers and underground passages to infiltrate past the front line, dragging out the battle for the hill. Severe losses finally spelled an end to the German resistance as American soldiers in other parts of the city squeezed the defenders onto the heights.

On 19 October, Gen. Collins ordered elements of 3rd Armored Division and a battalion from 28th Infantry Division to aid in the final effort to capture the city. Col. Wilck surrendered his forces on 21 October, commenting: “When the Americans start using 155s as sniper weapons, it is time to give up.” ★



left — City fight:
American infantry in support of a tank

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moving north from Luxembourg to the northern Hurtgen Forest alongside the revitalized 9th Infantry Division. Their objectives were the towns of Gey and Strass in the northeast corner of the forest, just shy of the Roer River and a mere four miles from Duren. Cold rain and sleet added to the misery of the GIs as they repeated the desperate combat the earlier divisions had endured. They persevered until the northern reaches of the forest fell to American control.

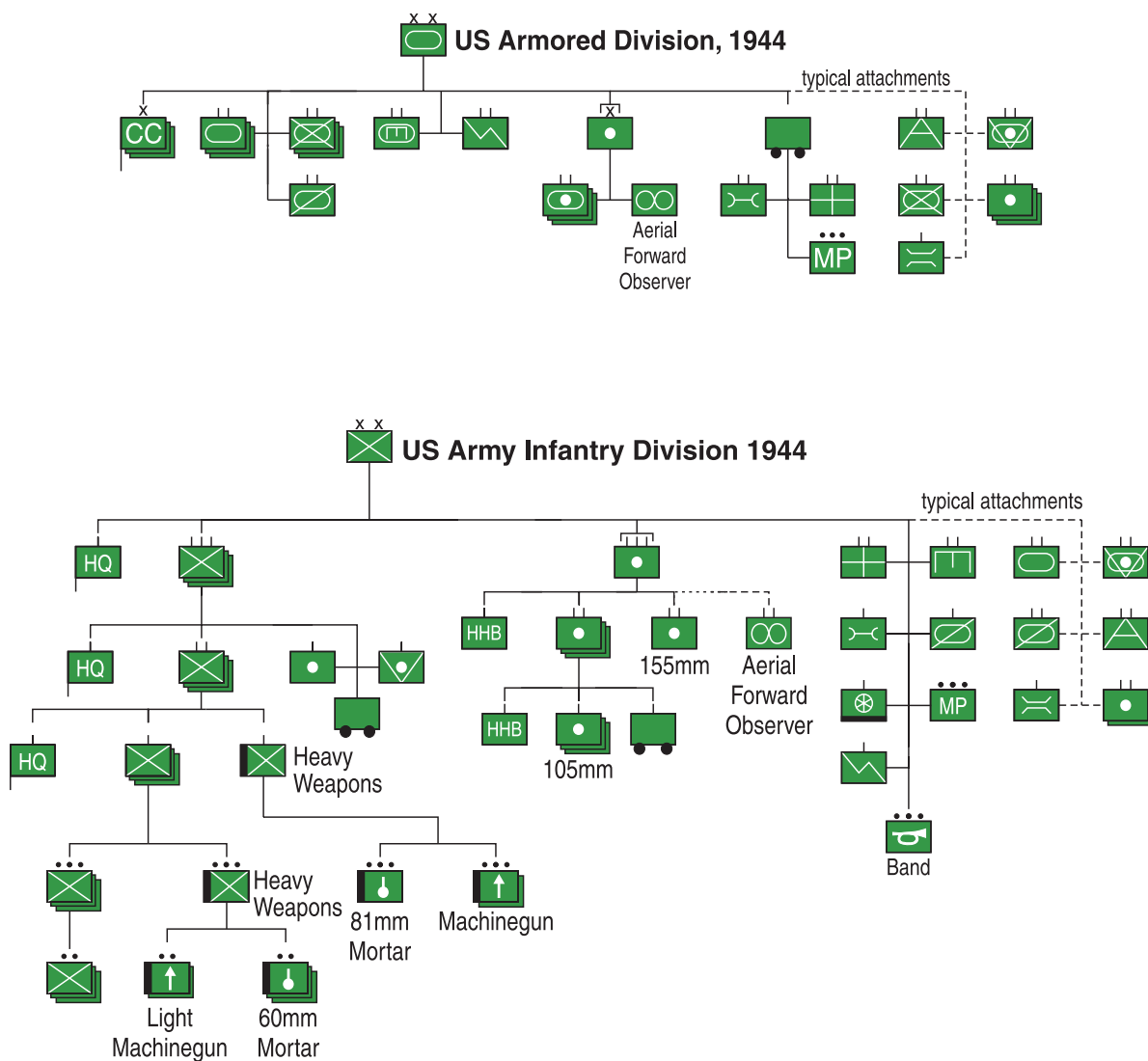
Bitter struggles were also taking place in the south, where Allied leaders had finally realized the flooding threat the Roer Dams represented to the units about to cross the river farther north. The 78th, 2nd and 99th Infantry Divisions were designated to mount a pincer attack on the dams, with the 78th approaching through

the towns of Kesternich and Schmidt as the northern pincer, while the 2nd would approach the dams through the wooded terrain in the south. The untried 99th Division was to provide flank protection for the 2nd, since it would be vulnerable with just one trail as a supply line.

The novice 78th Division set out on 12 December to take Kesternich from the experienced but battered 272nd Volksgrenadier Division. The 78th's baptism of fire began well when they captured the border town of Simmerath, surprising Germans who didn't expect the fresh Americans to attack so soon after they'd arrived at the front. The Germans were once again fortunate, though, in that they were in the process of moving assault troops forward for their big Ardennes counteroffensive and were thus able to divert *Grenadier*

Regiment 980th to backstop the nearly destroyed 982nd Regiment. Fighting in the town of Kesternich was brutal, as the adversaries struggled amid houses and a strong German position (Bunker 47) on the east edge of town. Emergency ("alarm") companies made up of cooks and auxiliary troops were rushed into combat along with a battalion from the 326th Volksgrenadier Division to stem the American advance on 15 December. *Grenadier Regiment 981* was also called forward, even though it hadn't yet replaced the troops lost in the defeat it suffered from 4th Division at Gey the previous week.

The Kesternich counterattack was conducted with great violence and skill. The grenadiers were supported by tank destroyers and armored flak guns as they overwhelmed two companies of the 310th Regiment,



capturing 300 prisoners and retaking the town. The unseasoned Americans had been caught in warm houses, without having set-up observation posts; so they were trapped in basements and out of communication with their artillery. A similar disaster had happened to the 112th Regiment the month before in Schmidt.

An important result of the 78th Infantry's attack was to spoil the German Ardennes counteroffensive's north flank attack against Monschau by significantly weakening two of their divisions.

To the south the 2nd Infantry Division had to channel its attack up a single dirt road through the forest to the Wahlerscheid customs post and on to Hofen. The single supply route was so limiting that division commander Gen. Walter Robertson assigned all his engineers to improve the road and restricted access to vital vehicles. The 9th Infantry Regiment moved cautiously down the forest road until it met resistance on December 15th. The following dawn a massive barrage and infantry attack on the neighboring 99th Division marked the beginning of the Battle of the Bulge and an urgent withdrawal of the 2nd Division regiments from their exposed position.

Epilogue

Following the defeat of the German Ardennes counteroffensive in January, the 78th Infantry Division renewed its attack on Kesternich. Planning was so detailed the troops were given assignments to take individual buildings. Starting on 30 January 1945, the attack broke through the 272nd Volksgrenadier Division's lines and, over the next week, rolled toward the Roer dams. The 311th Regiment seized the west bank of the reservoirs to the Paulushof Dam. The 310th Regiment, backed by CCR of 7th Armored Division, blitzed through the town of Schmidt and rolled to the west bank of the Roer. The 309th Regiment drew the task of taking the huge Schwammenauel dam. A nearly flawless night attack on 9 February secured it, but not before the gate controls were damaged beyond repair. High water would restrict operations along the Roer River for the next two weeks; but the Hurtgen Forest had finally been conquered. ☆

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Cross for the victims of the Battle of Hurtgen Forest in Vossenack, Germany



Near Duren, Germany, American Infantrymen, carrying heavy weapons on their backs, give one another a helping hand as they climb a steep trail. Co. I, 3rd Bn., 8th Regt, 4th Armored Div., 18 Nov. 44.