NEW

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From the makers of HISTORY of WAR

BATTLE of the BULGE

THE GREATEST AMERICAN CAMPAIGN OF WWII

Surprise attack

Uncover the planning and tactics behind Hitler's last offensive

A fight to the end

Explore the struggle that left over 35,000 dead

Winter warriors

Meet the men who stopped Germany in the West

Digital Edition

FIRST EDITION

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WELCOME

As the winter of 1944 tightened its icy grip across Europe, Nazi Germany found itself surrounded by powerful enemies intent on seizing Berlin and crushing the Third Reich once and for all. Yet, despite its precarious situation, Germany was far from defeated, and Hitler knew it. Clinging to one last shred of hope, he devised an audacious plan to strike at the Allies in the West in a bid to drive a wedge between them and turn the tide of the war in Germany's favour. Summoning thousands of men and machines, Hitler's commanders prepared to unleash one final assault, an onslaught that would catch the Allies off guard and remind the world that if Germany was to be beaten, many more people would have to perish first. The Battle of the Bulge would prove to be a vicious struggle to the end.

FUTURE

BATTLE of the BULGE

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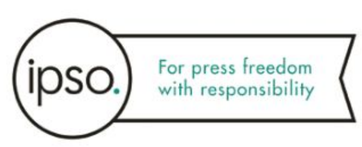


CONTENTS

AMBITIOUS PLANS - 14

- Introduction 8
- Ambitious plans 14
- Surprise offensive 22
- The Malmedy massacre 32
- Operation Stösser 36
- Peiper advances west 40
- The northern attack falters 46

Introduction - 8

Surprise offensive - 22

- The Battle of St Vith 50
- German hardware 60
- The Wereth massacre 62
- The Meuse River 66
- Clandestine operations 72
- The battle in the south 76
- The Siege of Bastogne 80
- The Christmas counter-attack 96

MEUSE RIVER - 66

CONTENTS

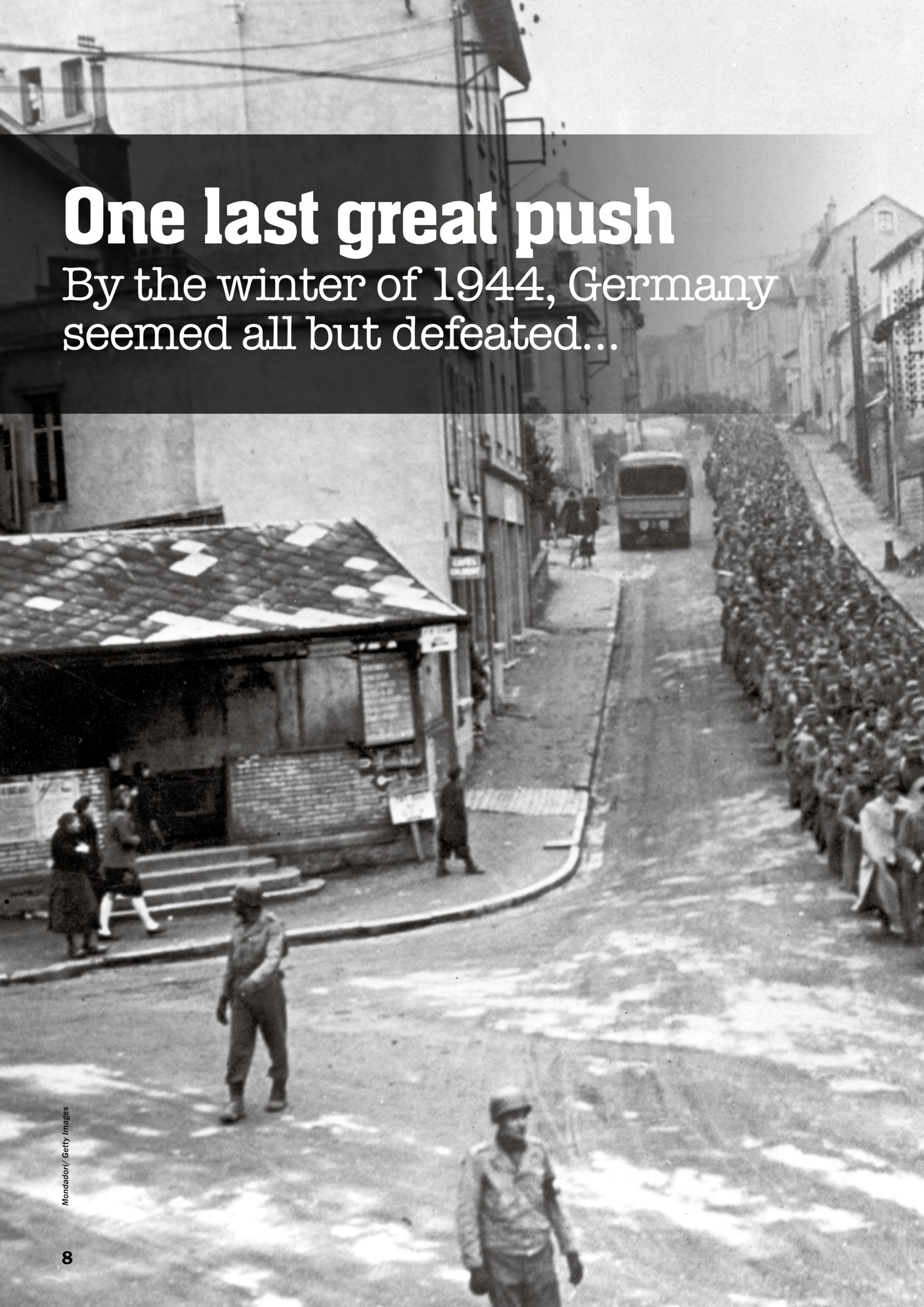
Siege of Bastogne - 80

Peiper advances west - 40

Operation Stösser - 36

- New Year manouvres 102
- Nordwind and Bodenplatte 104
- The Chenogne massacre 112
- The Allies push back 114
- The final assessment 120

THE CHRISTMAS COUNTER-ATTACK - 96



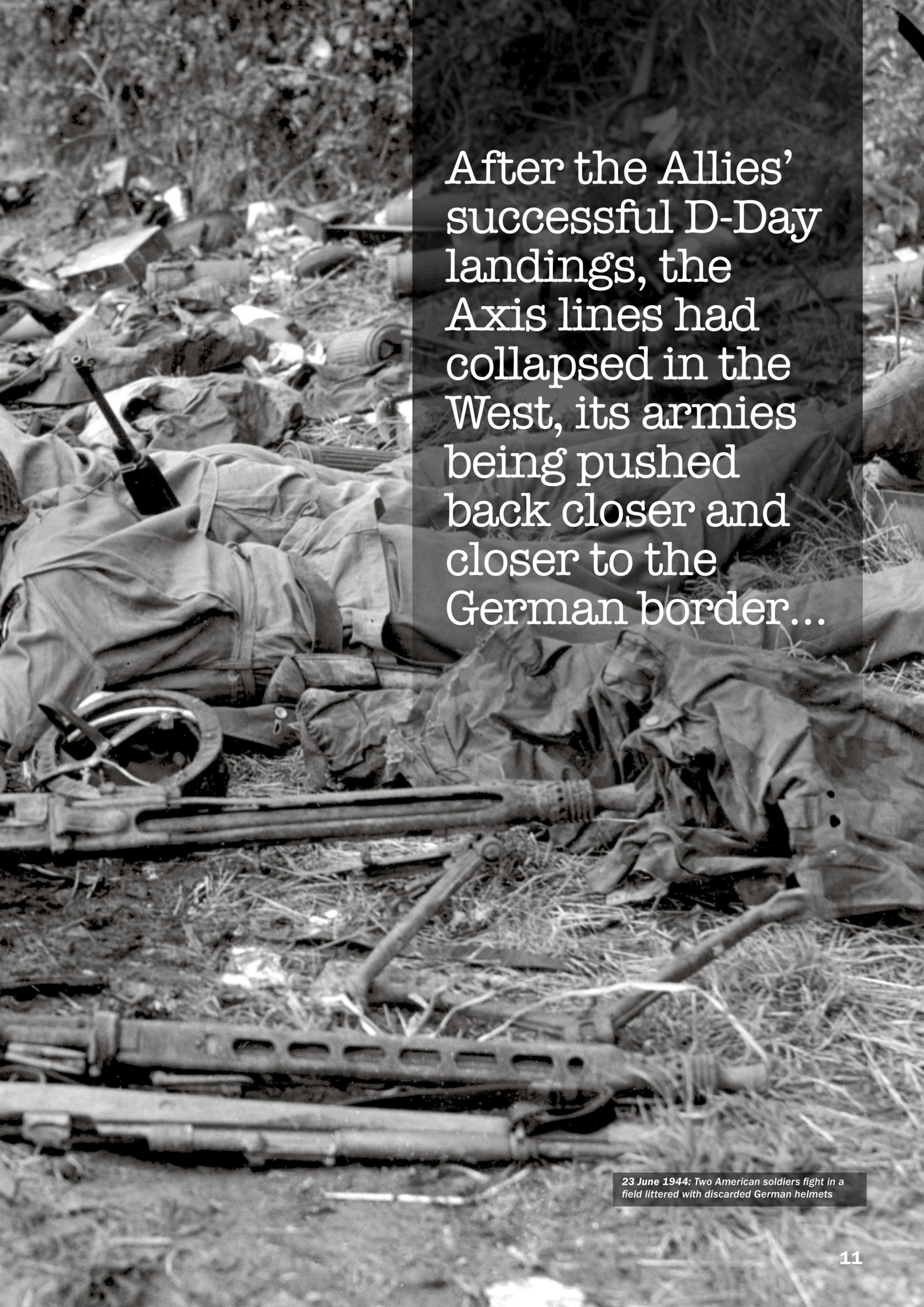
One last great push

By the winter of 1944, Germany seemed all but defeated...

Mondadori/ Getty Images

***November 1944**: German soldiers taken prisoner by Allied forces walk across Epinal*

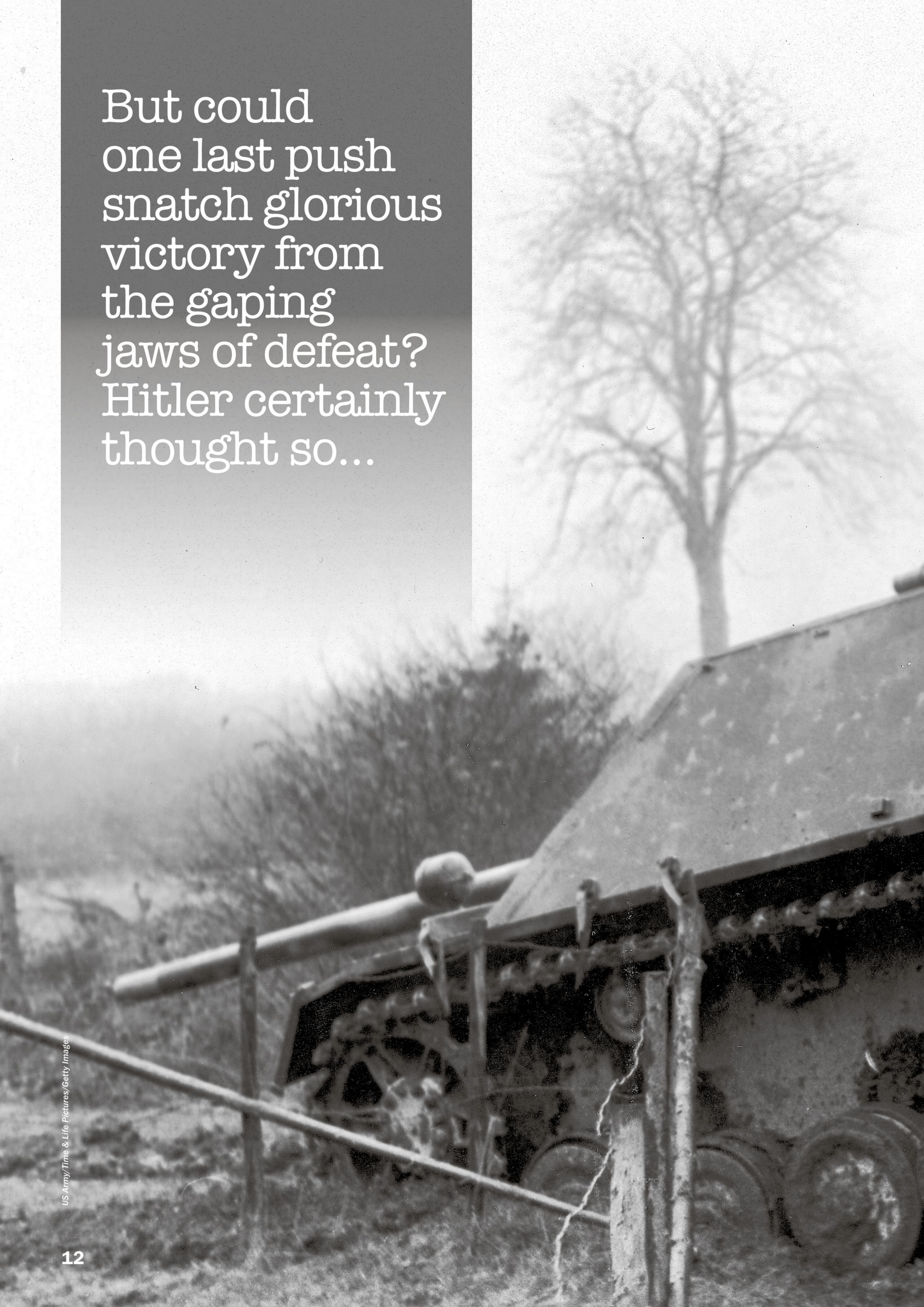
Hulton Archive/Getty Images



After the Allies' successful D-Day landings, the Axis lines had collapsed in the West, its armies being pushed back closer and closer to the German border...

23 June 1944: *Two American soldiers fight in a field littered with discarded German helmets*

But could one last push snatch glorious victory from the gaping jaws of defeat? Hitler certainly thought so...



US Army/Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images

Late December 1944: *German soldiers from the 12th SS Panzer Division aboard a Jagdpanzer IV/70 tank destroyer during the Battle of the Bulge*

HITLER'S LAST GREAT

Depleted resources and bad weather would not deter the Führer

Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images

OFFENSIVE

TOP SECRET

1 October 1944: Adolf Hitler and members of his General Staff review plans for Operation Bodenplatte, an airstrike in support of the Ardennes Offensive

After the initial post-D-Day collapse, the German forces had rallied and regrouped. Operation Market Garden, the Allies' attempt at attacking the heart of Germany's industrial lands, was successfully thwarted. Buoyed by this success, Hitler planned an offensive of his own. It was a bold operation that went against the advice of his generals, but he believed a surprise armoured attack in the Ardennes region could split the Allied lines, cut off their supplies and reinforcements and cause havoc in the alliance between Britain, the US and France. Officially known as The Ardennes Offensive, the inward bulge it briefly caused in the front line gave the operation the name by which it's more commonly known – the Battle of the Bulge.

Hitler identified the Ardennes as a key weak point in the Allied lines, and not without good reason. Allied troops were extremely tired, and their supply lines were stretched thin. Supreme Allied Commander General Eisenhower identified the heavily forested Ardennes region of Belgium, France and Luxembourg as a relatively safe area, one that needed only a small number of troops to defend it.

A 'loose' alliance

Allied supply lines were, by then, in a critical condition, and deep-water ports such as Cherbourg were essential for the transportation of food, fuel and ammunition. Cherbourg was taken during the initial Allied invasions, but the retreating German forces destroyed its infrastructure, and by the end of 1944 it was barely useable. Antwerp, by contrast, was taken intact and proved a vital strategic resource and therefore a tempting target.

Hitler believed the opposing forces were only loosely allied. He certainly felt they shared little common purpose. "Ultra capitalist states on one side, ultra Marxist states on the other," he said. And even the capitalist states had their own vested interests. "On one side a dying empire, Britain. On the other side, a colony, the United States, waiting to claim its inheritance." A determined effort on the Western Front, he believed, "would bring down this artificial coalition with a crash".

Yet if the Allied situation was problematic, Germany's position was desperate. Hitler could only field 55 divisions on the Western Front, and they faced 96 Allied divisions in the field and ten more on the way. Allied air superiority severely restricted German intelligence, while virtually all German movements were spotted and noted. Fuel was in desperately short supply too. Allied bombing campaigns had, by September, reduced German production of oil and gasoline by a massive 75 per cent.

However, by drafting previously exempt students, non-essential government employees and older and non-critically wounded servicemen, the ailing German army could be reinforced. Due to the retreat, Germany had a smaller front to defend and its supply lines were shortened. Also, newly developed weapons were coming into mass production in late 1944, including jet- and rocket-powered aircraft, new submarines, super tanks and V-2 rocket missiles. Hitler believed Germany had the power to mount one last major offensive – an attack on the American-held Ardennes that would split the Allies, cause ructions in the alliance, capture the essential port of Antwerp to disrupt Allied supply lines and force Britain and America to sue for peace independently of Russia.

A momentous decision

In mid-September, Hitler called a top-secret conference of his military advisors. "I have made a momentous decision," he said. "I am taking the offensive. Here [pointing to a map] – out of the Ardennes. Across the Meuse and on to Antwerp."

The Ardennes region was held by the American 12th Army Group led by Lieutenant General Omar Bradley. Under him were the 1st, 3rd and 9th armies. To the south was the 6th Army Group under Lieutenant General Jacob Devers, which consisted of the US 7th and French 1st armies. In the north were the British, Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery's 21st Army Group, which was made up of the Second British Army and the First Canadian Army. Major General Troy Middleton's VIII Corps were also present. He had three infantry divisions, two depleted by fierce fighting. He also had half an armoured division, which was new and untested.

Surprise attack

The Allied forces in the region totalled 85,000 men, covering an area of 85 miles. As both the Allies and the Germans were using this region to rest combat-weary troops, refit depleted units and break in new recruits, it had become a 'ghost front', with little fighting to be done. Could a surprise attack break through the thin and overstretched Allied lines?

Hitler unveiled his plans on 12 December 1944 when he summoned 30 of his generals to the military headquarters at the Rhine river city of Koblenz. From there they were driven to Adlerhorst ('Eagle's Nest'), Hitler's secret command post on the Western Front. He spoke for an hour and a half, frequently invoking the legacy of his hero Frederick the Great, who won victories against great odds, and drawing parallels between the situation faced by the Prussian leader and Germany at the end of 1944.

"People may say, 'Yes, but then the situation was different'," he bellowed. "It was not different, gentlemen. At that time all his generals, including his own brother, were near to despairing of success. His prime minister begged him to put an end to the war since it could no longer be won. The steadfastness of one man made it possible for the battle to be carried through." Germany's course was set. ▶

Getty Images

"HITLER BELIEVED GERMANY HAD THE POWER TO MOUNT ONE LAST MAJOR OFFENSIVE – AN ATTACK ON THE AMERICAN-HELD ARDENNES"

4 December 1944: British military personnel carry an injured girl after a V bomb fell in a street during an air raid on Antwerp, Belgium

TOP SECRET

Hitler's plan called for three armies to attack in the Ardennes in a heavily armoured assault aimed at splitting the Allied forces. The Sixth Panzer Army, led by General Josef 'Sepp' Dietrich, was to lead the attack and to capture the port at Antwerp, which was vital to the Allied supply lines.

Dietrich was a favourite of Hitler's due to his fierce loyalty, but he was less well-respected by his fellow generals. He had little formal military education, and some believed him unsuitable to command an army. No one disputed his personal bravery, however, and his lead-from-the-front attitude did much to endear him to the troops under his command.

Strategy

The Fifth Panzer Army, under the command of General Hasso-Eccard Freiherr von Manteuffel, would first capture St Vith, a strategically important road and rail centre before moving on to Brussels. Manteuffel fought with distinction in both world wars, and as a tank commander was noted for his tactical skill.

The 7th Army was headed by General Adolf Robert Erich Brandenberger, another capable and highly decorated officer. He was tasked with attacking the southern flank to prevent American reinforcements arriving. This army was made up of four infantry divisions, with no heavy armour.

The 15th Army, under General Gustav-Adolf von Zangen, was held in reserve. This army had been depleted by heavy fighting during the defence against the Allied Operation Market Garden in September 1944, but it had by now been refitted and replenished.

In overall command were Field Marshal Walter Model, the commander of German Army Group B, and Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, the overall commander of the German Army Command in the West.

As well as facing only a thin, weak Allied line, the bad weather predicted for December would keep the Allied air forces on the ground. The result? A repeat of the French Campaign of 1940, when German tanks powered through the Ardennes and reached the Channel with little difficulty. Not everyone was convinced, however.

Both Model and von Rundstedt felt that pushing all the way to Antwerp was too ambitious given the resources available (especially fuel) and suggested an alternate plan that only took the advance as far as the Meuse River.

> "NO ONE DISPUTED DIETRICH'S PERSONAL BRAVERY, AND HIS LEAD-FROM-THE-FRONT ATTITUDE DID MUCH TO ENDEAR HIM TO THE TROOPS UNDER HIM"

Even the fanatically loyal Josef 'Sepp' Dietrich had his doubts. "All Hitler wants me to do is cross a river, capture Brussels and then go on and take Antwerp," he complained. "And all of this in the worst time of the year through the Ardennes, where the snow is waist deep and there isn't room to deploy four tanks abreast let alone armoured divisions. Where it doesn't get dark until eight and it's light again at four, and with reformed divisions made up chiefly of kids and sick old men – and at Christmas." But Hitler was unmoved. His plan was to go ahead unchanged.

Key requirements

The plan identified four key requirements that had to be met in order for it to work. Firstly, it had to enjoy the element of surprise. On top of that, the bad weather would have to neutralise Allied air superiority, while German movement through the Ardennes needed to be rapid, with the River Meuse reached by Day Four. Finally, Allied fuel dumps would have to be captured intact; without them the German forces could only travel between a third and a half of the planned distance. Hitler was under no illusions about the stakes. "It will not be possible to concentrate so much equipment a second time. If we fail, we face dark days." ▶

Leading the attack: General Josef 'Sepp' Dietrich's Sixth Panzer unit was tasked with capturing the port at Antwerp

Roger Violet/Getty Images

A trio of special operations were also added to the overall plan. Operation Greif involved a group of English-speaking German soldiers dressed in American uniforms and wearing dog tags recovered from fallen Allied soldiers and POWs. They were to go behind enemy lines and remove or redirect signposts, misdirect traffic and generally disrupt the Allies' movements as much as possible. This group was to be led by Lieutenant Colonel Otto Skorzeny, who the previous year had led the successful mission to rescue the deposed Italian dictator Benito Mussolini. When the time came for the German forces to make a crossing, they would also capture bridges across the Meuse.

For Operation Währung (German for 'currency'), the spies were to bribe rail and port workers to disrupt Allied supplies. Operation Stösser was to be a night-time parachute drop led by Colonel Friedrich August von der Heydte aimed at capturing an important road junction at Malmedy.

To avoid radio communications being picked up by the Allies and decoded, much communication was carried out by telephone and teleprinter. Nothing related to the Ardennes Offensive was to be transmitted by radio. Even so, the German build-up did not go unnoticed. American patrols spotted three more divisions than usual in the area, though far more went completely undetected.

"CONVINCED OF THEIR SUPERIORITY, THE ALLIED COMMANDERS PAID SCANT ATTENTION TO THE BUILD-UP OF GERMAN FORCES"

Seven armoured and 13 infantry divisions were moved into place, with troops and weapons arriving from Norway, Poland, East Prussia and Austria. Over 1,500 troop trains and 500 laden with supplies were also brought west, including 15,000 tons of artillery ammunition and 4.5 million gallons of precious fuel. Concealed in the forests were 1,900 artillery guns and 970 tanks. Meanwhile, Luftwaffe commander Hermann Göring promised 1,000 planes to provide cover, although no one on the ground expected him to deliver on this promise.

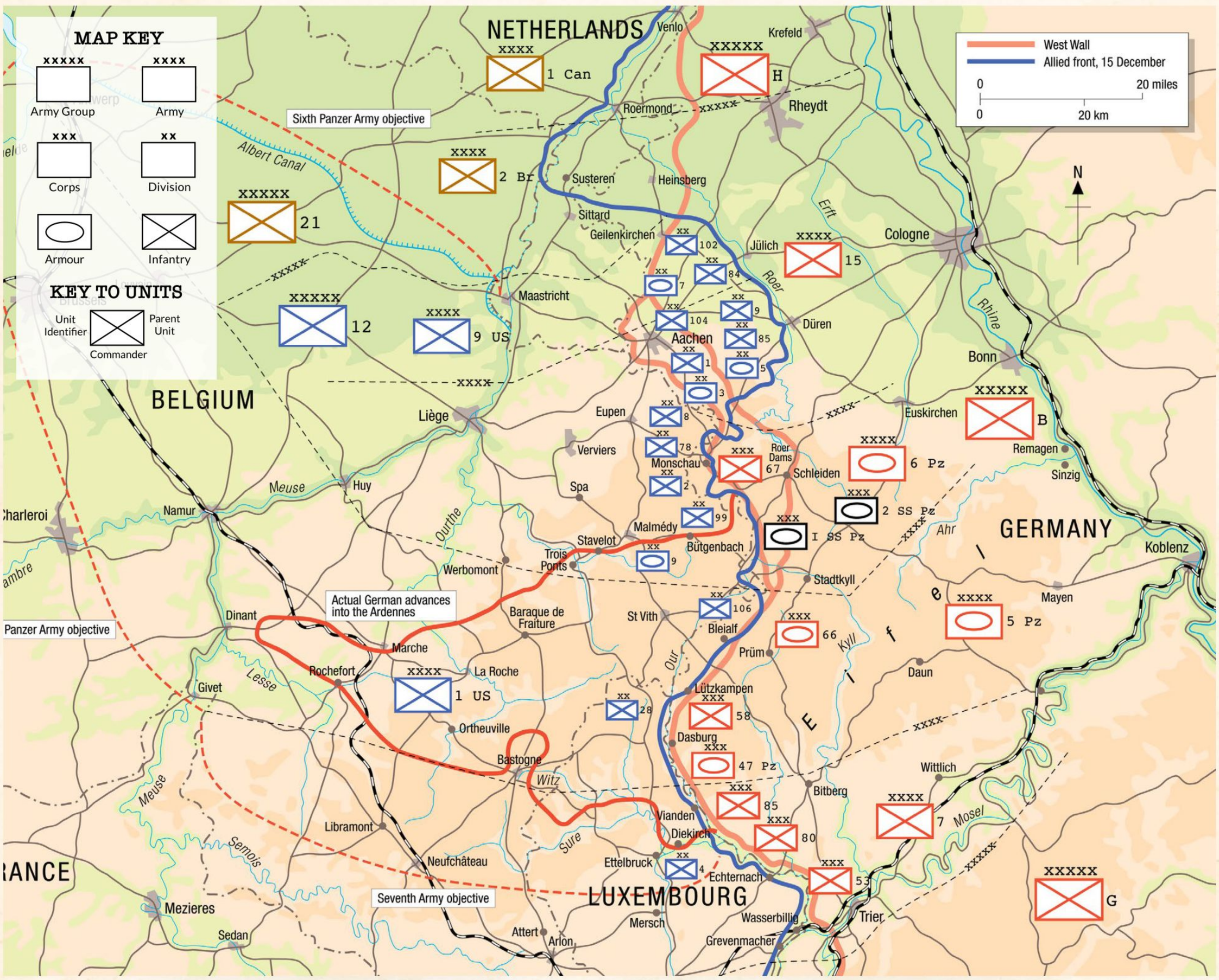
The battle begins

Convinced of their forces' superiority and reluctant to acknowledge that Germany was still capable of a major offensive, the Allied commanders paid scant attention to the build-up of German forces in the area. According to Major General Kenneth Strong, Eisenhower's Chief of Intelligence, "German formations in the area are merely resting and refitting". An intelligence report as late as 12 December, just four days before the offensive began, stated, "It is now certain that attrition is steadily sapping the strength of German forces on the Western Front. The crust of [the German] defences is thinner, more brittle and more vulnerable than it appears." What little build-up was detected was believed to be entirely defensive in nature.

With the pieces in place, the Ardennes Offensive began on 16 December 1944, with the Germans optimistic but aware of how much was being asked of them. As an order to the Volksgrenadiers on the opening day stated, "If you are brave, diligent and resourceful, you will ride in American vehicles and eat good American food. If, however, you are stupid, cowardly and supine, you will walk cold and hungry all the way to the Channel."

Getty Images

***In command:** Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt (front, second from left), the overall commander of the German Army Command in the West, believed that Hitler's plan to push all the way to Antwerp was too ambitious*



***State of play:** Allied and German troop positions at the outset of the Battle of the Bulge*

"The Ardennes Offensive began on 16 December, with the Germans optimistic but aware of just how much was being asked of them"

THE GERMAN ATTACK

Just before 5.30am on 16 December 1944, an American soldier manning an observation post in Hosingen reported numerous flickering pinpoints of light among the German lines. They were the first muzzle flashes of a German artillery barrage. Between 1,600 and 1,900 guns and mortars opened up (reports vary), shelling 80 miles of Allied front. Cannons mounted on railway cars fired 14-inch shells at supply depots well behind the front line, and command posts and artillery positions came under fire from guns and rockets. Radio frequencies were jammed, making it extremely difficult for the American troops at the front to report the attack. The German advance inevitably followed. Searchlight beams aimed at low clouds lit the way as they pressed forward, supported by the new Messerschmitt 262 jet-powered aircraft. ▶

The big push: *An American Sherman M4 tank moves past another gun carriage that slid off an icy road in the Ardennes Forest during the push to halt advancing German troops*

Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images

THE ELEMENT OF SURPRISE

American forces find themselves overwhelmed by the sheer ferocity of the German attack

As predicted, heavy snowstorms, low clouds and dense fog kept Allied aircraft on the ground. But the weather didn't make the advance through the forests of fir trees, steep hills and fast-flowing rivers of the Ardennes any easier for the German advance either. There were few roads of any decent size, and not a single broad road crossing the mountains in the direction in which the advance needed to travel. This caused traffic jams, with tank units struggling to make forward progress and the lead units running low on fuel.

On the northern shoulder, Sepp Dietrich's 6th Panzer Army met savage – if uncoordinated – resistance. The battle for Elsenborn Ridge saw SS Obersturmbannführer Joachim Peiper's 1st SS Panzer Division – one of the best-equipped divisions on the Western Front – lead the assault with 4,800 troops and 600 vehicles. The ridge was a particularly strategic objective, as it gave control to the roads westwards to the River Meuse. With the element of surprise on their side, they soon overwhelmed several American positions, but the GIs from the US 2nd and 99th Infantry divisions soon recovered and fought back tenaciously.

All along the front, minor actions from outnumbered and outgunned American units held back Dietrich's attack. At Lanzerath village, a German battalion of 500 men was held up for ten hours by a single reconnaissance unit of 18 men from the 99th Infantry and four forward air controllers, blocking a key road through the Losheim Gap.

The attack of the 6th Panzer Army was falling behind schedule. Kampfgruppe Peiper's lead forces were tasked with taking an important road, but due to collapsed overpasses they were 16 hours late with their attack. Peiper reached Buchholz Station in the early hours of 17 December but was again held up as an infantry company took cover behind freight cars and a locomotive roundhouse, holding up the German advance with mortars and an anti-tank gun. Peiper eventually broke through, taking prisoners from the 3rd Battalion of the 394th Infantry Regiment. After seizing an American fuel depot at Büllingen, which held around 50,000 gallons, the Germans rested and refuelled before pressing westwards once more.

Intense fighting

The 12th SS Panzer Division and additional infantry units made for a road junction at Losheimergraben, which they took. They then moved on to the villages of Rocherath and Krinkelt, which oversaw the route to the high ground along Elsenborn Ridge. To the north of Peiper's forces, the 277th Volksgrenadier Division came up against units from the 99th Infantry Division and the 2nd Infantry Division, who again fought tenaciously. After ten days of intense fighting the German forces had taken the villages but were unable to capture the ridge, held by the V Corps of the First US Army. Nor had they captured the American supply depots near the Belgian cities of Liege and Spa, or two of the three roads to Antwerp. ▶

"AFTER TEN DAYS OF INTENSE FIGHTING, THE GERMAN FORCES HAD TAKEN THE VILLAGES BUT WERE UNABLE TO CAPTURE THE RIDGE"

Popperfoto/Getty Images

Digging in: *Soldiers of the US 1st Army hack at frozen ground to excavate foxholes near their machine gun position*

Although outnumbered by more than five to one, the 99th Infantry Division and its attached units had inflicted casualties of around 18 to one. But losses were heavy. By the end of the Battle of Elsenborn Ridge, the division had suffered 465 killed and 2,524 wounded. Yet the Germans had suffered over 4,000 deaths and lost around 60 tanks and artillery pieces. The northern shoulder had held.

Lack of experience

Unfortunately for the Allies, this staunch defence could not be matched further south, where the Germans found a softer section of the Allied line defended by less experienced troops. The Losheim Gap formed the boundary between the areas controlled by the VIII Corps, led by Lieutenant General Troy Middleton, and the V Corps under General Leonard Gerow. It was defended by 900 cavalrymen, a light unit designed for reconnaissance and scouting. Against the heavy attack force of General von Manteuffel's advancing 5th Panzer Army they stood no chance. The gap was taken by 9am.

The loss of the Losheim Gap threatened two entire regiments of the American 106th Division (around 9,000 men) located immediately to the south at Schnee Eifel. This division, nicknamed the Golden Lions, was in training and was largely made up of recently drafted men with no combat experience. General Manteuffel split his forces, sending half through the Losheim Gap and half through the Alf Valley further south, attempting to surround the 106th. Although the southern half of the attack met with resistance in the village of Bleialf, progress was swift.

Lieutenant General Troy Middleton had ordered Major General Alan Jones of the 106th to hold the Division's position as reinforcements were on their way but to withdraw if the situation became critical. But due to a poor phone line Jones misunderstood his orders and believed he'd been told to stay put until the reinforcements arrived. The 106th duly stayed put, and within 12 hours it was completely surrounded.

In several areas along the Allied front inexperienced troops found themselves overwhelmed by the ferocity of this sudden German attack, which had managed to maintain the element of surprise. One of these stunned young troops was Lieutenant Tony Moody.

"I wasn't scared at the beginning, but I got more scared," he explained. "It was the uncertainty. We had no mission, we didn't know where the Germans were.

"We were so tired, out of rations, low on ammo. There was panic, there was chaos. If you feel you're surrounded by overwhelming forces, you get the hell ▶

Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images

Heavy attack: *German soldiers run across a muddy road during the Battle of the Bulge while several vehicles block the way in the background*

out of it. I was demoralised, sick as a dog. I had frostbite.

"I kept thinking, 'My God, what have I gotten into? How much of this can I take?' I wandered off, stumbled into a battalion aid station, collapsed and slept 24 hours. The mind washes out a lot of images, but you remember the feeling of hopelessness, despair. You just want to die."

The German advance relied on bad weather, and although it hampered their advance in places, it also affected the Allies. Fog was a major problem. As an infantry company commander wrote about a skirmish at Stoumont in the first week of the Battle of the Bulge, "It was so foggy one of our men found himself ten yards from a German machine gun before he knew it.

"Everyone had been pushed as far as he could be. Nerves were being broken on men whom one would have thought would never weaken."

Climate of fear

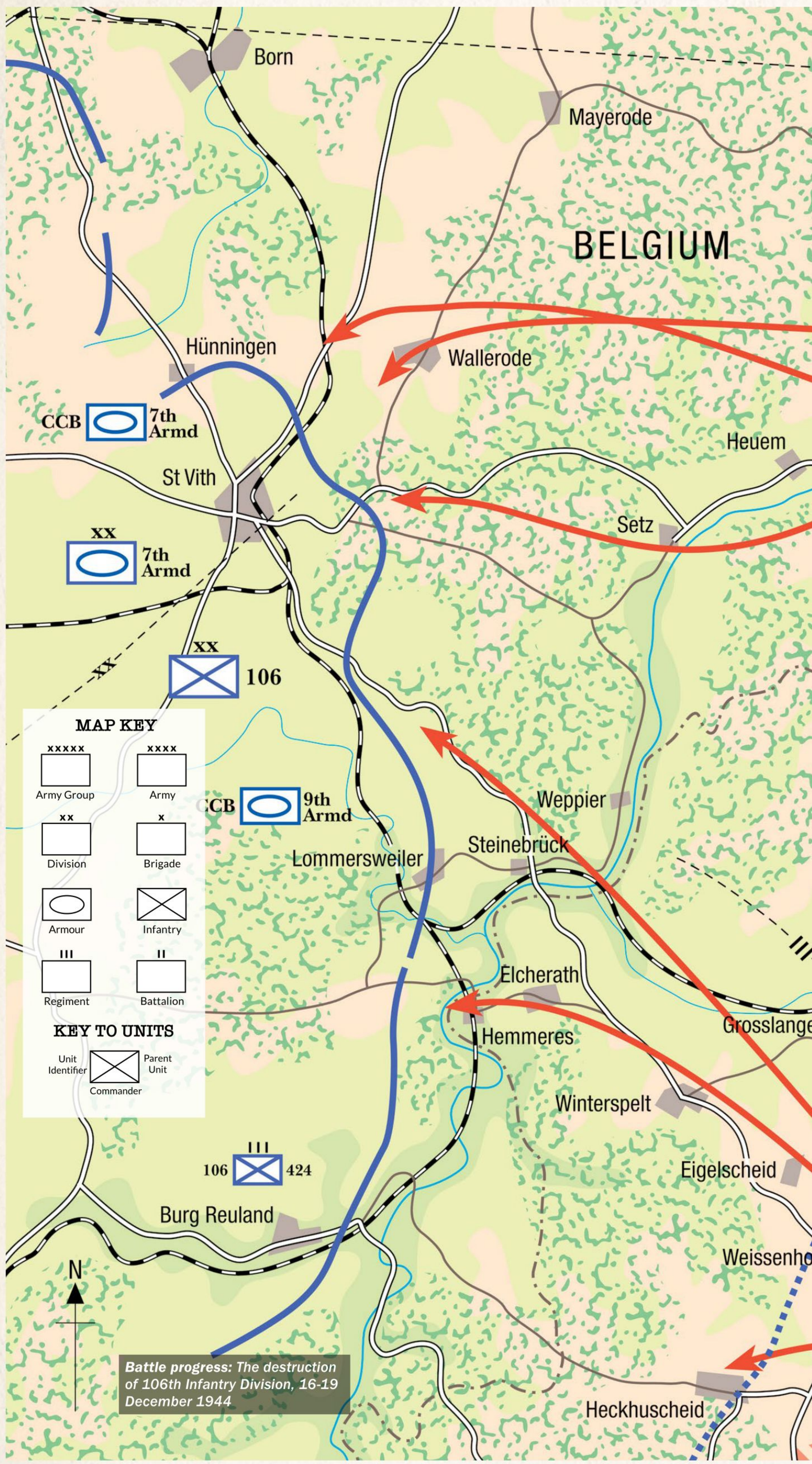
Experienced, battle-hardened formations of the 101st Airborne Division bolstered the less-experienced troops, but they couldn't stop the panic. As 101st trooper Donald Burgett wrote, "Fear reigned. Once fear strikes, it spreads. Once the first man runs, others soon follow. Then, it's all over. Soon there are hordes of men running, all of them wide-eyed and driven by fear."

Morale was low – so low that the living began to resemble the dead, as private First Class Harold Lindstrong observed.

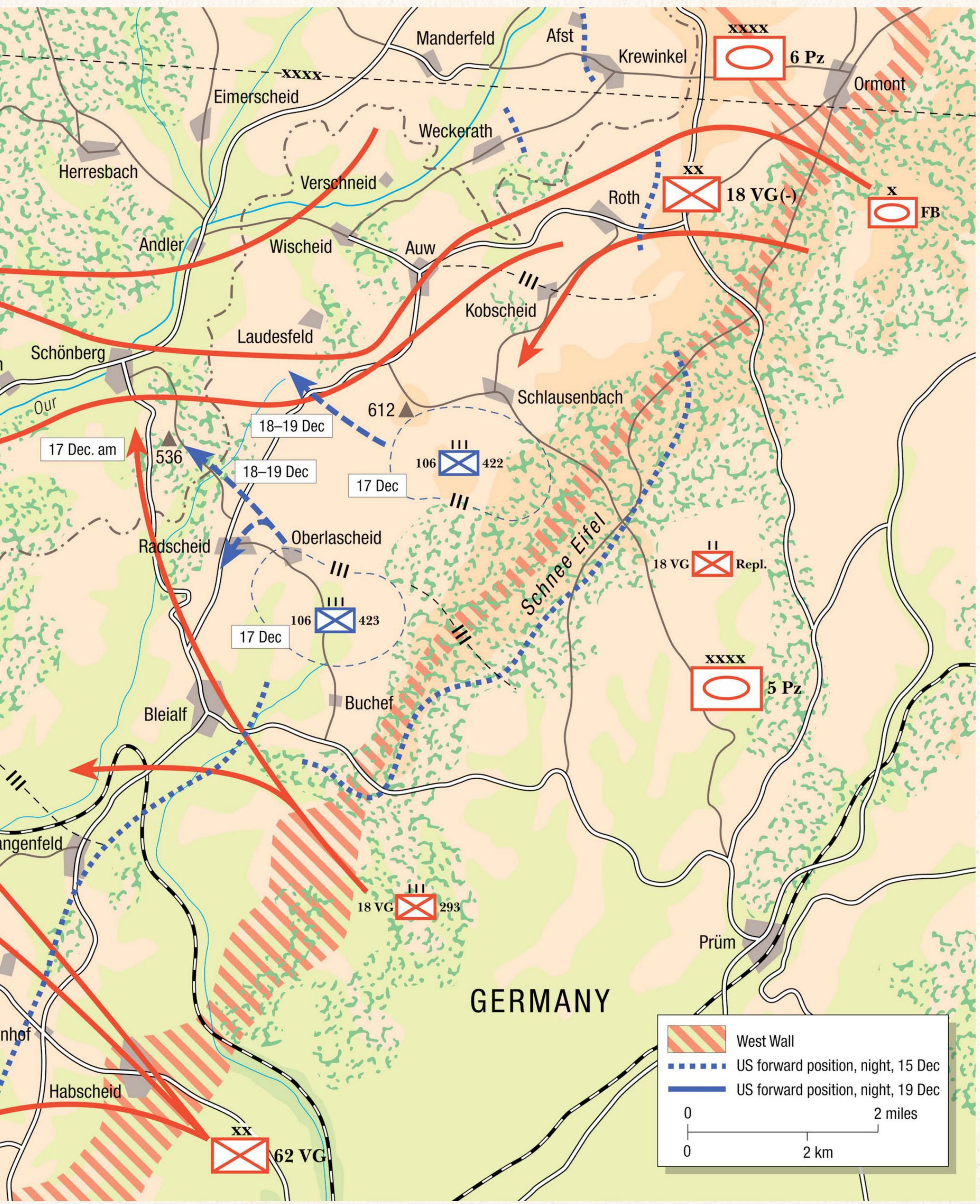
"[The German corpses] looked peaceful. The war was over for them. They weren't cold any more." Lindstrong also noted that some of his comrades were wounding themselves in order to get out of the fighting. "No one would ever know how many accidents were genuine and how many self-made."

General Patton was aware of these self-inflicted injuries. On a visit to a field hospital, he asked a man how he had been injured. "I shot myself in the foot," he explained. Patton was furious, but the wounded soldier, whose ankle was shattered, said, "General, I've been in Africa, Sicily, France and now Germany. If I was going to do this to get out of the service, I'd have done it a long time ago. Patton replied, "Sorry son, I made a mistake."

Despite setbacks on the northern shoulder, the German advance was going well. After the first day's fighting, an excited Adolf Hitler phoned General Hermann Balck and exclaimed, "Everything has changed in the West. Success – complete success – is now in our grasp!" The German soldiers in the Ardennes needed him to be right. ▶



Battle progress: The destruction of 106th Infantry Division, 16-19 December 1944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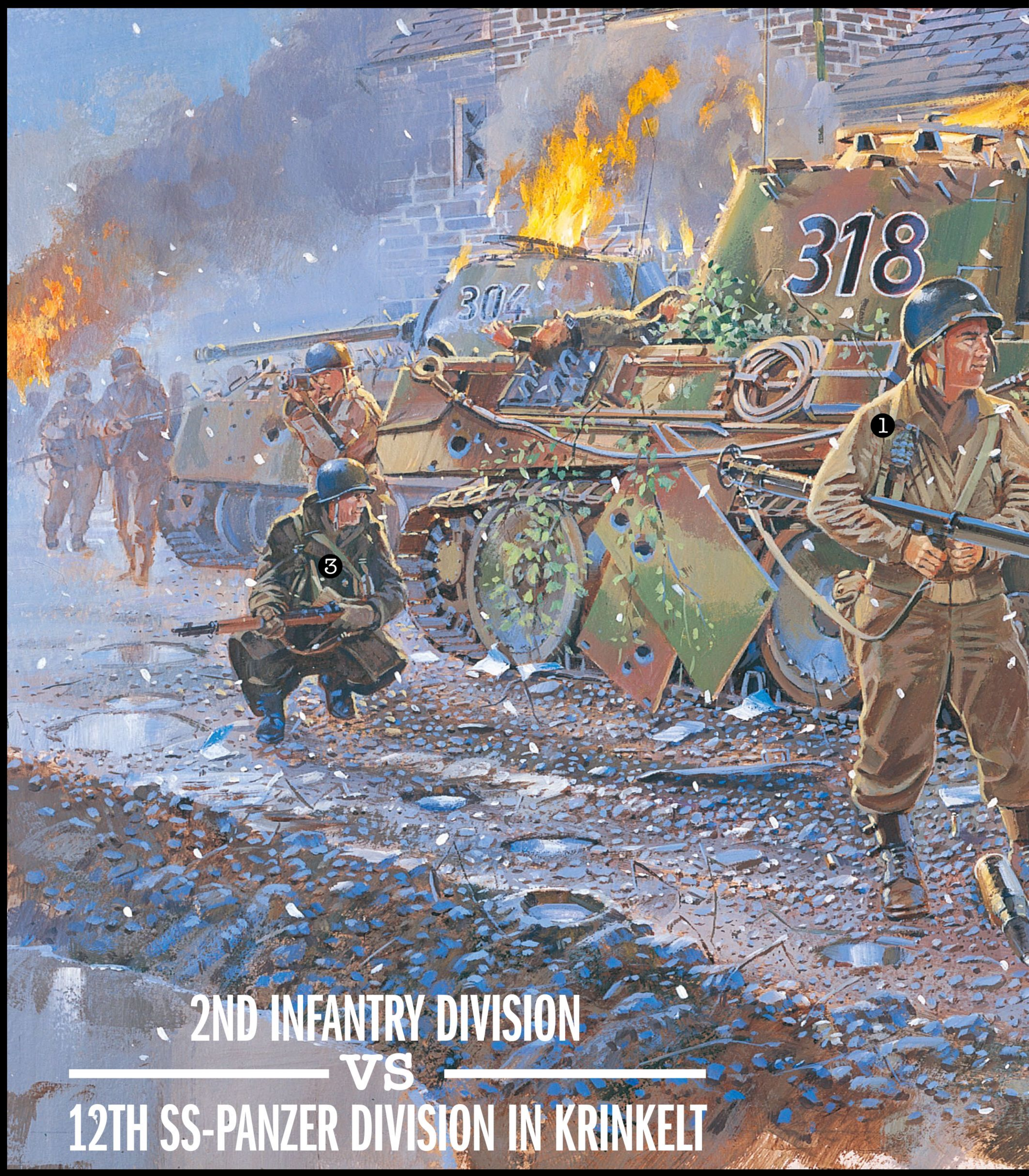


2ND INFANTRY DIVISION VS 12TH SS-PANZER DIVISION IN KRINKELT

In his impatience to get his division back on schedule, the commander of the 12th SS-Panzer Division Hitlerjugend, General Kraas, decided to commit his Panzer regiment to help root out the American infantry in the streets of Krinkelt. The town was shrouded in fog and icy rain, and the green GIs of the recently arrived 99th 'Battlin' Babes' Division were intermixed with the hardened veterans of the 2nd Infantry Division.

The twin villages of Krinkelt and Rocherath were typical of farm communities in this rural region, with sturdy buildings made of stone. They proved to be ideal defensive positions for the US infantry. Most of the German Panzergrenadiers who were supposed to accompany the tanks into the town were stripped away from the Panzers by small arms fire before they reached the village. The Panther tanks blundered down the narrow streets, nearly blind and with no infantry support whatsoever.

Although it was probably the best tank of World War II, the Panther tank was not suited for urban warfare. Its sides and rear could be penetrated by the unreliable bazooka rocket launchers used by the US infantry, and the Panzers were mercilessly hunted by US anti-tank teams all day long.

The bazooka gunner seen here (1) would operate as part of a team, with the other infantrymen providing cover against the small number of German infantry rushing in from the edge of town. The bazooka teams were supported by a number of US tanks and M10 tank destroyers, and the damage to this Panther's gun barrel suggests it was hit by a high-velocity anti-tank round, not a bazooka.

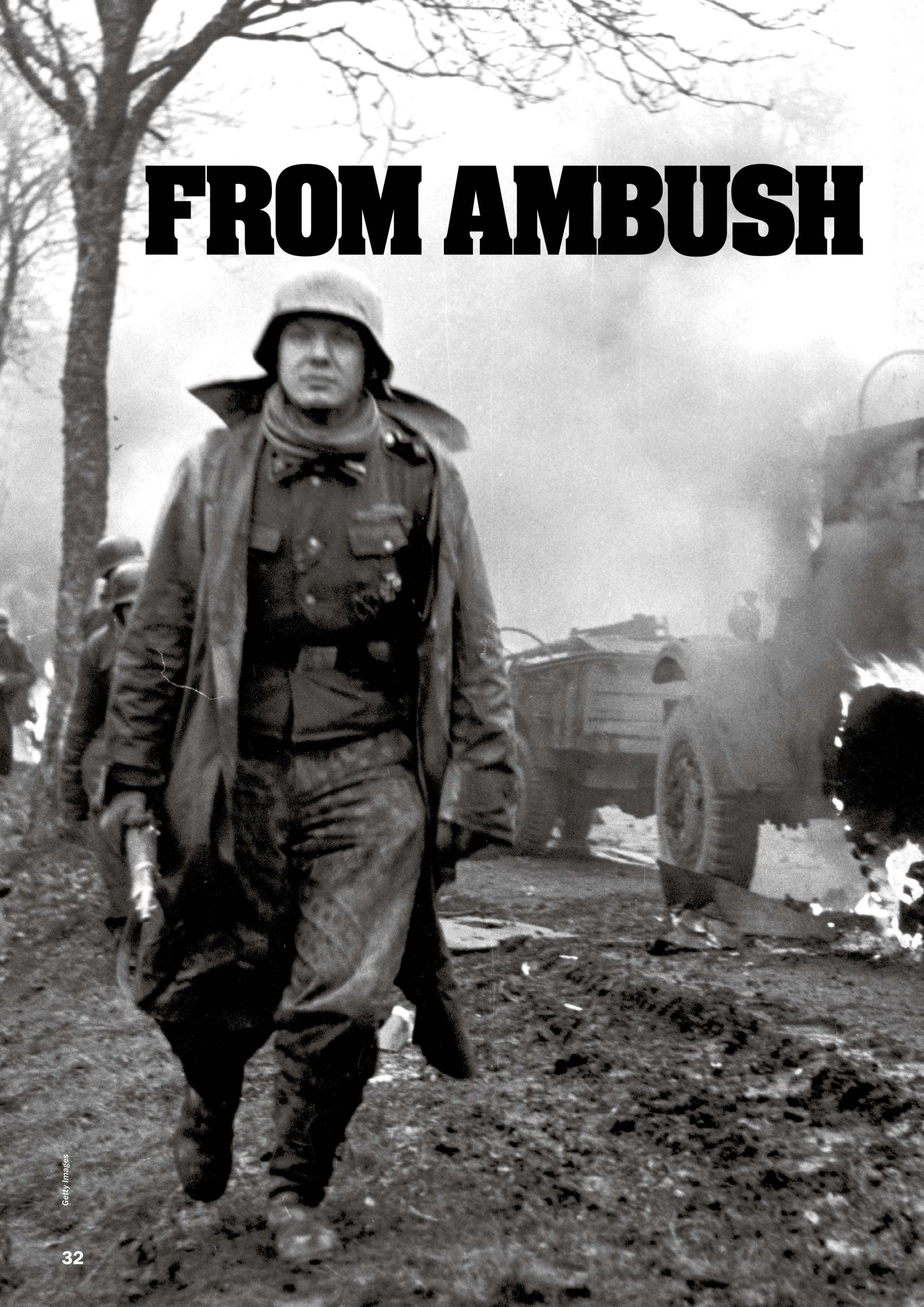
Illustration and caption ©Osprey Publishing

The tank shown here was the most modern version of the series, the Panther Ausf. G and was knocked out and burned on the street opposite the village church. It is painted in the usual German three-colour camouflage scheme, which at this time was a base coat of red lead primer with a pattern of dark yellow and dark olive green. The markings on this tank are also fairly typical and include a three-digit tactical number, with the first digit identifying the company and the second the platoon. The German national insignia was not prominent.

The GIs display the usual motley assortment of autumn battledress found in December 1944. The US Army was not well prepared for the winter weather and issued the troops with a variety of winter clothing. The most practical was the Model 1943 field jacket (2), which was designed to be worn with layers of sweaters and other clothing for added warmth. But this was not available in sufficient quantities, and so many GIs were issued inferior alternatives, including the outdated and cumbersome Model 1942 wool Melton overcoat (3). The overcoat was a particularly poor choice in the early December weather as it tended to absorb the cold rain common during the first days of the battle, and once wet it offered little warmth when freezing temperatures returned in the evening. Some GIs were also issued the older Mackinaw jacket (4), but these were not as common as the overcoat.

The standard infantry weapon was the M1 Garand rifle, and this was supplemented by the squad automatic weapon, the BAR (Browning Automatic Rifle). (Howard Gerrard)

FROM AMBUSH



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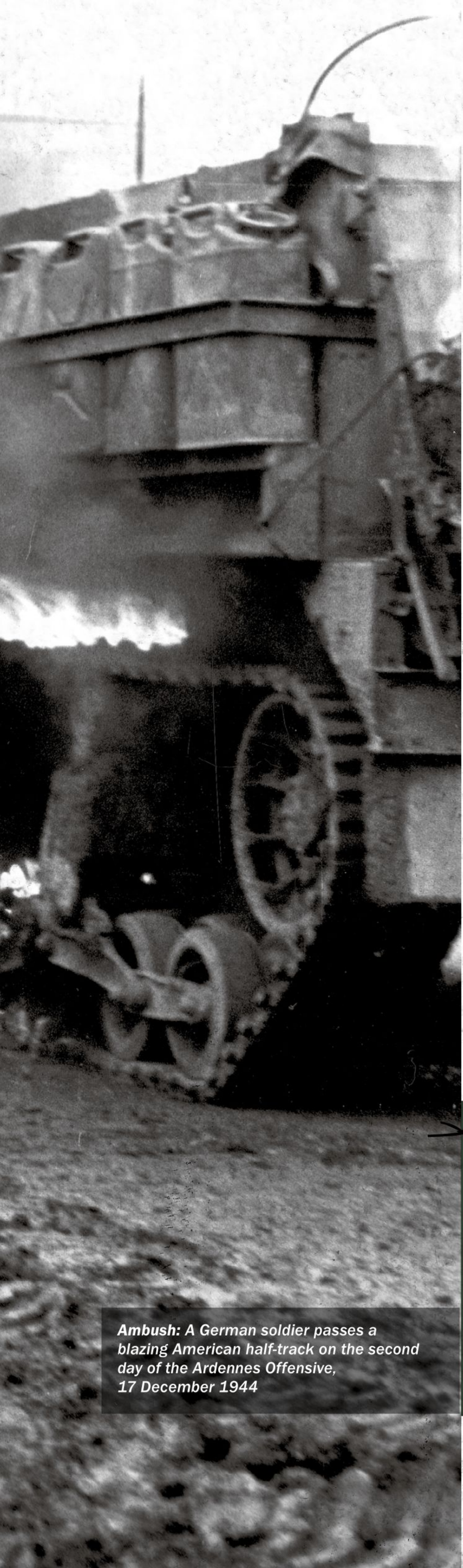
TO ATROCITY

How a German ambush led to the worst atrocity committed on American servicemen in Europe during the whole of World War II



Ambush: A German soldier passes a blazing American half-track on the second day of the Ardennes Offensive, 17 December 1944

On 17 December 1944, at the crossroads hamlet of Baugnez around two miles from Malmedy, a small column from Battery B, 285th Field Artillery Observations Battalion of the 7th Armored was spotted by a group of German tanks and half-tracks from Kampfgruppe Peiper. The Germans attacked, taking out the front and rear trucks to prevent escape and then raking the American column with machine gun fire and mortar shells. Several trucks exploded and more crashed into ditches as they tried to get away. Taking cover behind stricken trucks and in ditches, the Americans fought back as best they could.

SS-Obersturmbannfuhrer Peiper himself arrived at the skirmish driving an American jeep. Rapid progress and good management of limited resources were the key to success for the advancing German armies, so he was not happy to see time and ammunition being wasted on a helpless target. Nor was he pleased that the trucks had been destroyed, when they could have been extremely useful had they been captured. "Those beautiful trucks, which we needed so badly, all shot up," he said.

With difficulty, he called a ceasefire and the Americans came out of cover with their hands up. The Germans herded them into small groups, taking their rings, watches, cigarettes and especially their gloves.

The first shot

A small group of the prisoners were stood in a line. A German put a pistol to their heads one by one, threatening to shoot them in retaliation for American bombing raids on Germany. The battalion's executive officer, Captain Roger L Mills, intervened, despite being mildly wounded. The men, he argued, should be treated as prisoners of war. The German backed down. When the column moved on to Ligneuville, the ten men who had been threatened were sent with them in the back of a half-track. They were kept there under guard and later moved to Germany. Peiper himself then left the scene, in another half-track.

The remaining prisoners from Battery B were herded into a field, along with other prisoners taken that day. All told, there were around 120 to 130 captured men. They were stood in rows around 60 feet from the highway, with their hands above their heads. Their hands, now devoid of gloves, soon grew numb in the cold winter air. Although the prisoners did not relish the idea of spending Christmas in a POW camp, they assumed they were waiting for transportation trucks and were not unduly concerned about their safety.

A German officer then flagged down two Panzer IV tanks and ordered them into a position covering the captured troops. He then ordered them to fire. A young private who already had his pistol ready fired the first shot, causing disorder among the ▶

"THE PRISONERS ASSUMED THEY WERE WAITING FOR TRANSPORTATION AND WERE NOT UNDULY CONCERNED ABOUT THEIR SAFETY"

"THOSE THAT REMAINED ALIVE PRETENDED TO BE DEAD, HOLDING THEIR BREATH FOR FEAR THAT THEIR VISIBLE EXHALATIONS WOULD GIVE THEM AWAY"

prisoners, which their officers tried to quench for fear of provoking more shots. It was to no avail. The machine guns on both tanks opened fire, massacring the prisoners. The firing lasted for around 15 minutes, after which troops from the 3rd SS Pioneer Company walked among the bodies, shooting anyone that moved in the head. Some asked any survivors to identify themselves, promising medical treatment, and shot anyone who responded. The officer who stopped the tanks and gave the initial order to fire was eventually identified as Major Werner Poetschke, commander of the 1st SS Panzer Battalion. However, as he had been killed by then, it is entirely possible he was used as a scapegoat to cover up for the real culprit.

Cut down

A medic called Dobyns made a run for it, getting 25-30 yards before being cut down by machine gun fire. Although wounded several times, he was still alive, unbeknown to the Germans, who let him lie. Several more ran, but most were gunned down before they got far. Around a dozen Americans took refuge in a nearby cafe, which the Germans burned down, shooting the troops as they escaped.

Those that remained alive in the field pretended to be dead, holding their breath for fear that in the cold their visible exhalations would give them away. As First Lieutenant Virgil T Lary Jr remembers, "A bullet went through the head of the man next to me. I lay tensely still, expecting the end. Could he see me breathing? Could I take a kick in the groin without wincing? He was standing over my head. Time seemed to stand still. And then I heard him reloading his pistol in a deliberate manner. A few odd steps before the loading was finished and he was no longer close to my head, then [there was] another shot a little farther away, and he had passed me up."

Aftermath

At around 2.30pm, Colonel Pergrin, commander of the 291st Engineers, left Malmedy and headed to Baugnez in a jeep accompanied by his communications sergeant, William Crickenberger. On seeing the burning cafe, they approached the field and rescued three survivors, who they took back to Malmedy.

After they had recovered from the shock of their ordeal, they were able to explain what had happened. Pergrin got word back to General Hodges in Spa of both the Malmedy massacre and the German troop movements. A few more survivors were then rescued on the following day.

News of the massacre spread quickly through Allied ranks and caused an inevitable uproar. Feelings ran high and vengeance was sought. One American unit ordered that "no SS troops or paratroopers will be taken prisoner but will be shot on sight".

Five days later, a heavy snowfall covered the 86 bodies that remained in the field. Because the Baugnez crossroads by then fell between the Allied and German lines, it was not until after the Allied counter-offensive that they were recovered, on 14 January 1945. They were photographed where they lay and removed to Malmedy for extensive postmortems. It was found at least 20 of the dead were killed by close-range gunshots to the head. In many cases this was their only wound. Around ten had blunt-force trauma injuries, most likely from rifle butts, and most of the bodies were tightly packed together, suggesting they were gathered before being killed. It was the worst atrocity committed on American servicemen in Europe during the whole of World War II.

Some of the SS troops involved in the massacre later argued the prisoners had been trying to escape or had produced concealed weapons and fired on the German troops, but the evidence showed otherwise. After the war, 73 members of the Kampfgruppe Peiper were tried for the Malmedy massacre and other atrocities carried out against soldiers and civilians. 43 (including Peiper himself) were sentenced to death by hanging, although no death sentences were actually carried out. 22 were sentenced to life imprisonment, and eight received lesser prison sentences.

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Harrowing task: *Soldiers near the village of Baugnez dig in the snow to uncover the bodies of GI prisoners killed by German soldiers in the Malmedy massacre*

OPERATION STÖSSER

Hitler was convinced that German paratroopers were vital to his last great offensive, but their involvement rapidly descended into farce

German paratroopers had proved a great asset during its victories of 1940 and 1941. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Hitler was to turn to them again during the Battle of the Bulge, but by then Germany had very few experienced paratroopers and even fewer pilots trained in making airdrops. Their successes of the early war years were not to be repeated.

In Operation Stösser, Hitler planned to use around 1,000 paratroopers to take a strategic road junction approximately seven miles north of Malmedy, blocking American reinforcements and giving General Dietrich's Sixth Panzer Army time to reinforce the thrust's newly created defensive perimeter. They were to hold the junction for 24 hours, after which they would be relieved by the advancing 12th SS Panzer Division.

In charge of the drop was Oberst Friedrich August Freiherr von der Heydte, who would rightly have been considered a surprising choice to lead an important mission in December of 1944. Although an experienced paratrooper who had already fought in France, Crete, North Africa, Italy and France, he was a cousin of Colonel Claus von Stauffenberg, the leader of the attempt to assassinate Hitler in July, and he was peripherally connected to the officers involved in the plot.

The mission unravels

Von der Heydte did, however, command fierce loyalty from his troops. He wasn't permitted to use his own regiment, the 6th Parachute, for the operation, as its movement might tip off the Allies about the impending attack. But when its troopers learned of his mission, around 150 of them immediately left their own units and joined him for the drop. Hitler also ordered every parachute regiment in the German army to send 100 of their best men, but inevitably many chose to rid their regiments of slackers and incompetents instead. As von der Heydte later observed, "Never in my entire career had I been in command of a unit with less fighting spirit."

> "VON DER HEYDTE WAS A COUSIN OF CLAUS VON STAUFFENBERG, THE LEADER OF THE ATTEMPT TO ASSASSINATE HITLER"

The talent available to von der Heydte was a mixed bag, and time was not on his side. He was only told of the mission on 8 December, giving him just eight days to prepare. Over his objections, Dietrich insisted they jump only a few hours before the ground attack started, lest their deployment alert the Americans. This meant a night drop (Germany's only night-time parachute drop of World War II). To make matters worse, aside from the squadron commander, none of the pilots who were to fly them to the drop zone had parachute experience. Around half of them had never flown a combat mission, and some had never even flown the Junkers 52s that were to be used in the drop. When he brought these shortcomings to the attention of Field Marshal Model, von der Heydte was told the offensive as a whole had less than a ten per cent chance of succeeding, but "It must be done because this offensive is the last chance to conclude the war favourably."

After a day's delay due to the aircraft not turning up, Operation Stösser was finally unleashed in the early hours of 17 December, and it quickly unravelled. Over 100 Junkers 52 transport aircraft left for the drop zone, but strong winds and low cloud cover meant fewer than a dozen actually got there. Von der Heydte – his arm in a sling due to an accident a few weeks earlier – was among the first to drop, but he was knocked unconscious as he landed. When he came to and made

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***Groundwork:** US army engineers carry mines over a snow-covered field near Monschau in Germany*

his way to the designated rendezvous at the Belle Croix road junction, he found just 20 men waiting for him. The parachutists had been scattered far and wide, with just ten aircraft having made it to the correct place. Around a dozen planes, with their Inexperienced pilots and navigators, lost their way completely and dropped their paratroopers over Bonn, a German city 50 miles from the target.

Scattered resources

Von der Heydte eventually managed to assemble 250 to 300 men, about a quarter of the force he was supposed to command. They were armed with only what they carried when they jumped, as any heavy equipment that was parachuted in with them was also scattered. The company radio was found, but it had been destroyed. As General Model had refused von der Heydte's request for carrier pigeons, he was unable to communicate with the Sixth Panzer Army, with which he was supposed to rendezvous 24 hours after landing. The whole mission was rapidly degenerating into a farce.

The paratroopers' first encounter with the enemy was when they came across the 1st Infantry and 7th Armored Divisions, but they were too few in ▶

number and too lightly armed to mount an attack. Instead, they formed a base camp and sent out patrols to gather food and tackle any lone vehicles they found. On capturing six Americans, von der Heydte sent them back to their own lines with two of his own paratroopers who had broken their arms during the drop. He sent a note to General Taylor, commander of the 101st Airborne, saying, "Please treat my jump casualties as well as my regiment has treated casualties of your division."

The 12th SS Panzer Division had failed to break through at Elsenborn Ridge, and by 20 December it was clear that they would not arrive to relieve the beleaguered German paratroopers as planned. And their problems didn't stop there.

Food and ammunition were running out rapidly, as they had only taken enough to last the 24 hours until the relief force arrived. Taking and holding the junction would now be impossible, and perhaps pointless, so von der Heydte released the rest of his American prisoners (around 30 men) and made for Monschau, which he assumed was by now in German hands.

They got as far as a creek near the highway leading into the town, where they came across an American outpost that had been established with the intent of keeping the Germans penned in the woods. After a brief fight they retreated.

Allied activity was rife throughout the area. Due to the accidentally wide dispersal during the drop, reports of German paratroopers landing were being made all over the Ardennes, leading the American to believe that they were facing a much larger force than they really were. An entire infantry regiment of 3,000 men, along with an armoured combat command, were sent to search for what they believed to be a division of enemy paratroopers.

Running out of options, von der Heydte divided his troops into three groups and ordered them to sneak back to the German lines. While around 100 of his troops would make it, a frostbitten and starving von der Heydte would soon resort to knocking on the doors of local homes until someone let him in. He then sent a note of surrender to the Americans. His mission had been an utter failure.

December 1944

LIEUTENANT, GERMAN PARATROOOPERS, ARDENNES

As an 'old hand', this paratrooper retains the Fallschirmjager jump helmet; newer members of the two Fallschirm divisions involved in the Ardennes Offensive wore the standard Stahlhelm. His helmet is covered by a string net into which leaves and twigs could be inserted to break up the silhouette, and he wears a woollen toque. Jump smocks had, however, disappeared to a degree by this stage of the war, except for special operations such as 'Stösser'. He therefore wears the combat jacket in splinter camouflage material, which was first issued to the Luftwaffe field divisions in 1942. His trousers, however, are the padded type made of a cotton/rayon mix in the brownish water pattern camouflage that was also used on the 'third pattern' jump smocks. Together with his officer's pattern waist belt he wears the full infantry assault pack (Gefechtsgepack), which carried the mess tin (Kochgesschir), rolled Zeltbahn, bread bag (Brotbeutel), entrenching spade (Schanzzeug), with its Luftwaffe blue-grey cover, water bottle and gas respirator container (Gasmaskebehalter). A pair of binoculars hang round his neck alongside a torch. He is also carrying an FG (Fallschirmgewehr) 42 assault rifle, one of the most remarkable weapons of the war. Its gas-operated mechanism, and the open/closed bolt system that allowed for single-shot or automatic fire, have been copied in most post-war automatic rifles. (1): FG 42 showing box magazine (1a) and spike bayonet (1b). (2): Infantry assault pack as described above. (3): 15cm (5.9in) Panzerfaust 60.

Providing front-line infantry with a light but effective anti-tank weapon was a major challenge. The first practical design to emerge in 1943 from the Hugo Schneider factory in Leipzig was the Panzerfaust ('armoured fist') 30. Production had to be cheap and quick because it was a 'throw-away' design that could only be used once. A simple, hollow steel tube contained an explosive propellant charge, a percussion firing mechanism and a primitive sight; the sight acted as a safety catch protecting the firing button from being depressed accidentally. Into the front end slotted a 15cm (5.9in) diameter bomb whose stem was fitted with flexible fins that unfolded in flight.

The Panzerjager ('tank hunter') companies in German infantry regiments alone carried 54 Panzerfausts, enough to knock out an entire American tank battalion. (4) 8.8cm (3.5in) RPzB 54 (Racketen Panzerbtichse [rocket anti-tank rifle] Modell 54). Nicknamed 'Ofenrohe' ('stovepipe') by the troops, this was the most effective infantry anti-tank weapon of the whole war.

Unlike the Panzerfaust, the RPzB 54 was not a 'throw-away' weapon but could be reloaded with one of the rocket projectiles shown (4a). It was ignited by an electrical discharge from a magneto in the trigger/grip mechanism. The 'stovepipe' needed a crew of two: one to carry it with its simple shoulder strap, aim and fire it, and a second to carry and reload the projectiles. As it was time-consuming and costly to manufacture, however, the RPzB 54 was never available in large quantities.

Illustration and caption ©Osprey Publishing

PEIPER ADVANCES WESTWARDS

The rapid German offensive begins to lose its momentum as SS-Obersturmbannfuhrer Peiper's strategic options narrow

Moving westwards, Kampfgruppe Peiper marched on the Belgian town of Stavelot early in the morning of 18 December 1944. Fierce resistance from the American units in this area blunted the attack, as did their destroying bridges and fuel dumps when forced to retreat. The advance from Eifel to Stavelot had taken 36 hours. In 1940, the Germans had done it in just nine hours. An attack on Stavelot had been anticipated. Although Malmedy seemed to be the prime German objective, the decision was made to reinforce Stavelot by sending in a company of the 526th Armored Infantry Battalion under the 526th's Executive Officer, Major Paul J Solis, and a platoon of tank destroyers.

Burning bridges

The previous day, an attempt had been made to blow up a strategic road bridge, but the charges failed to go off. English-speaking soldiers under Waffen-SS commando Otto Skorzeny had infiltrated the area disguised as Americans and sabotaged the demolition attempt. A second attempt was to be made on 18 December, but Solis delayed the blast in order to set up a roadblock across the river. Two infantry squadrons, a 57mm anti-tank gun and two tank destroyers were on their way, but they ran into Peiper's forces and were forced to retreat.

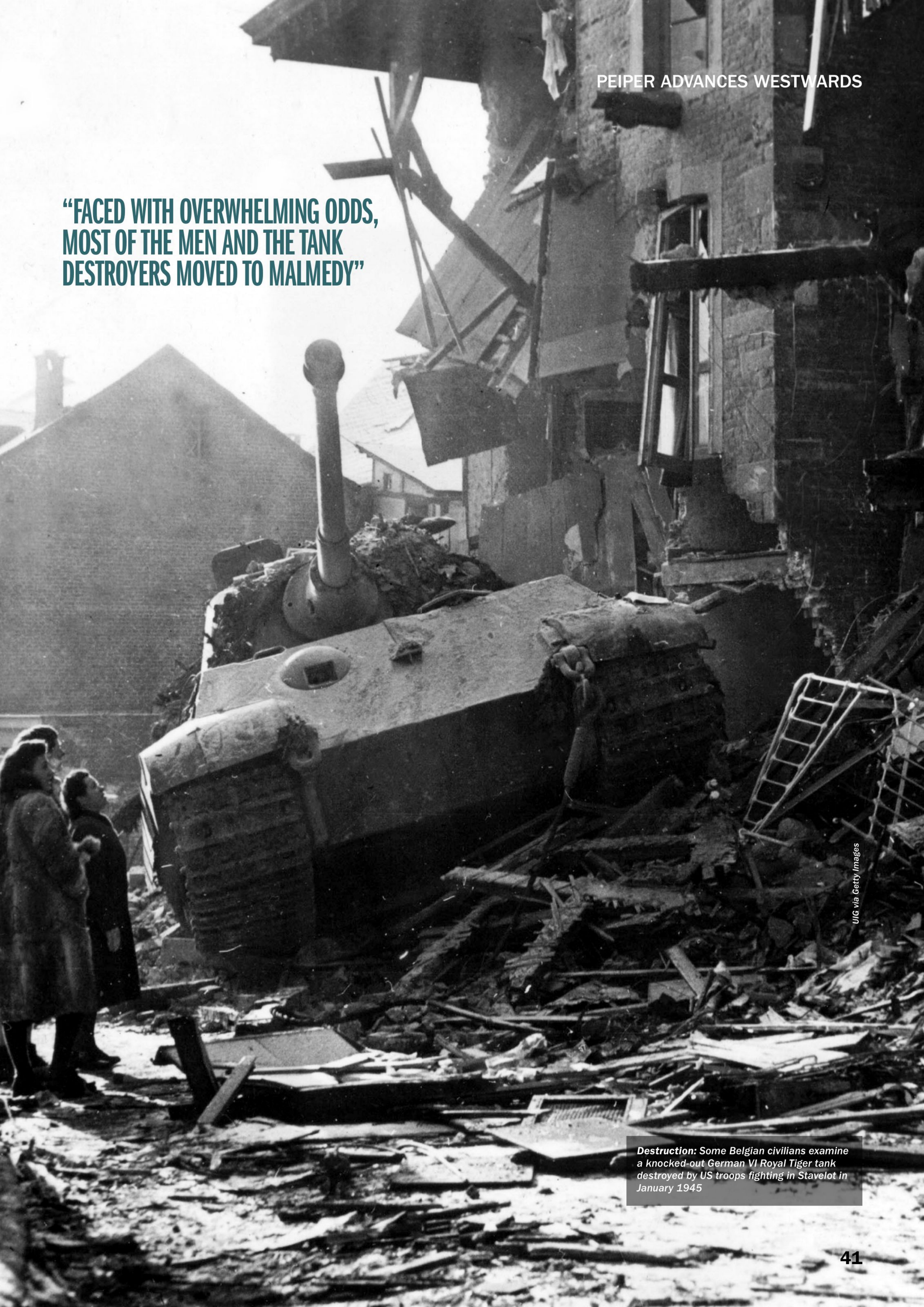
The American First Army's chief fuel depot had been stored near Stavelot and was almost discovered by a small force. Solis deflected the column by building a roadblock. The Germans turned away, finding another route. By the time they entered the town the fuel had been removed. German paratroopers at the spearhead of the attack reached the bridge, but they were forced to take cover from Solis' 57mm anti-tank guns. The tanks soon followed, and although two were halted by the Americans' tank destroyers, the rest managed to cross the bridge, followed by the paratroopers and SS Panzergrenadiers.

The opportunity to blow up the bridge had been lost. Faced with overwhelming odds, Solis withdrew, with most of the men and the tank destroyers moving to Malmedy, with Solis himself going to Spa. Peiper's forces made a belated entry into Stavelot, where he left the bulk of his men while an advance party was sent to take a vital bridge at the nearby village of Trois-Ponts, just 25 miles from the Meuse. This small settlement was a key roadway intersection and the next logical target for Peiper and his troops. According to Peiper, after taking the bridges, "It would have been a simple matter to drive through to the Meuse that day."

The slow advance of Kampfgruppe Peiper allowed 1111th Engineer Combat Group commander Colonel Anderson to reinforce the town. The 51st Engineer Combat Battalion's Company C set about laying charges on three bridges. There were around 140 engineers, lightly armed and inexperienced.

The first vehicle from Kampfgruppe Peiper, a Panzer, reached the railway underpass at around 11am. The 57mm anti-tank gun fired at almost point-blank range. Although the 57mm weapon had proved ineffective against the new German tanks in previous engagements, here the gunners got off to a great start by hitting the lead tank just below the turret, blowing it up. They managed to hold off the German attack for around 15 minutes, until a Panzer found its target, destroying the anti-tank gun and killing all four of its crew. But their actions had bought some valuable time. The engineers detonated ▶

"FACED WITH OVERWHELMING ODDS, MOST OF THE MEN AND THE TANK DESTROYERS MOVED TO MALMEDY"



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Destruction: *Some Belgian civilians examine a knocked-out German VI Royal Tiger tank destroyed by US troops fighting in Stavelot in January 1945*

"THE ENGINEERS DETONATED THE CENTRAL AND NORTHERN BRIDGES, MAKING IT IMPOSSIBLE FOR PEIPER TO GET HIS TANKS INTO THE TOWN FROM THE NORTH"

the central and northern bridges, making it impossible for Peiper to get his tanks into the town from the north.

Death from above

A small company of Panzers accompanied by paratroopers had made their way to the southern bridge, unaware that explosive charges had already been laid along it. They started removing mines that had been laid on the bridges, watched by the engineers from the 291st, who saw their chance and blew the demolition charges, destroying the bridge and killing the German troops that were on it. Another route was lost to Peiper, who was rapidly starting to run out of viable options.

Fortunately for Peiper, there was another bridge over the Ambleve. If Peiper's force could detour north past the village of La Gleize and follow the road to another village, called Cheneux, then he could cross there and join a road that would take him to the Meuse by bypassing Trois-Ponts. This was to be his next goal.

Before pulling out, a group of SS troopers took out their frustrations on the local Belgian citizens, murdering 25 whom they accused of befriending the Americans. A witness later reported seeing the bodies of women and children, one as young as six years old, among the bullet-ridden corpses.

With Peiper on the move again, General Quesada, commander of the IX Tactical Air Command, called for some volunteer pilots to take to the skies and brave the low cloud cover that had until then kept the Allied aircraft on the ground to find the German column.

Two F-6 reconnaissance aircraft were soon on their way. Sometimes flying as low as 100 feet to get under the clouds, they spotted Peiper's column near La Gleize. Fighter-bombers of the 365th and 368th Fighter Groups were scrambled, and an attack was launched. P-47 Thunderbolts dropped 500lb bombs and strafed the column.

Although the amount of damage was relatively little (around ten tanks and half-tracks and a few casualties), the two-hour attack and time spent moving disabled vehicles hit by it that had then blocked the road bought the 291st Engineers some valuable time.

Running out of options

Colonel Wally Anderson, commander of the 1111th Engineer Combat Group, pondered where the convoy was going next. They were already too close to the bridge at Cheneux to stop a crossing there, but if the Germans were moving west towards Werbomont (which they appeared to be), then they would need to cross another river, the Lienne Creek. The obvious crossing point was a bridge near Habiemont, a small Belgian hamlet.

With most of the Company A engineers in Malmedy or Trois-Ponts, only a few were left to tackle this new bridge. While they were setting up the explosives, a small convoy of retreating engineers from Trois-Ponts crossed, followed by some civilian refugees. Peiper's leading tanks were right on their tails, but the bridge was blown just in time.

Peiper then moved his column north and parked his forces into the woods between La Gleize and Stoumont. American reinforcements were arriving, and soon he found himself fighting units from the 30th Infantry and 82nd Airborne Divisions.

Having heard about the brutal massacres at Malmedy and Trois-Ponts, the Americans were desperate to exact revenge on the perpetrators. The fighting that ensued was savage, so savage in fact that the German offensive started to lose the crucial momentum that it had relied upon for any chance of success.

***The pied Peiper:** Joachim Peiper, a personal adjutant to Heinrich Himmler, ultimately led his men into a death trap*

Left: German Federal Archive Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-R65485 / CC-BY-SA 3.0

Road warriors: *An American patrol moves towards the smouldering remains of a German Royal Tiger tank with crew inside during the outset of the Battle of the Bulge*

17 December 1944

ATTACK IN THE ARDENNES – KAMPFGRUPPE PEIPER

Probably the most vivid image to have emerged from the Battle of the Bulge was the sight of King Tiger tanks advancing through the snowy pine forests of the Belgian border, immortalised by a series of photographs taken by a German combat cameraman on the morning of 17 December 1944. In many accounts of the battle, these images have come to symbolise the armoured spearhead of Kampfgruppe Peiper as it steamrollered through American defences. But in reality, the image highlights the underlying problem of the German offensive. The King Tigers (1) of s.SS-Pz. Abt. 501 were not in the vanguard of the German attack but brought up the rear of Kampfgruppe Peiper due to the difficulties of moving such awkward and accident-prone tanks on the narrow country roads of Belgium. Peiper's spearheads were the reliable and more fleet-footed PzKpfw IV medium tanks.

The troops on the King Tiger wear the distinctive camouflage smocks of the elite Fallschirmjager paratroopers (2), long respected by the US Army

Illustration and caption ©Osprey Publishing

as the best of the German light infantry. Troops of this unit, the 3.Fallschirmjager Division, had fought against the US Army in Normandy, where they earned their fearsome reputation. By December 1944, however, they were a pale reflection of their former glory. Decimated in the summer 1944 fighting, the division was reconstructed using surplus Luftwaffe ground personnel and other recruits who would have been rejected in years past by such an elite formation. But the division's real problem was its leadership, with many of its units led by inexperienced Luftwaffe staff officers.

The declining effectiveness of the paratroopers was made clear on 16 December when a paratrooper regiment was held up all day at Lanzerath by a US infantry platoon, delaying the start of Kampfgruppe Peiper's advance by 24 hours. Infuriated, Peiper commandeered a battalion of paratroopers to reinforce his own force. Since the paratroopers could not keep up with his columns on foot, he had them ride on the backs of the King Tiger tanks. The smouldering M4 tank (3) by the roadside is a victim of the earlier passage of Kampfgruppe Peiper; the King Tigers saw very little combat during the opening phase of the offensive. Only a handful of King Tiger tanks made it past Stoumont and on to La Gleize, where Kampfgruppe Peiper was finally trapped by the Americans.

The illustration here is based on the famous photos taken on 17 December. The King Tigers are finished in the typical camouflage pattern from the fall of 1944, called the ambush pattern, with a pattern of small dots over the usual three-colour camouflage finish. The paratroopers are in their distinctive jump smocks and the unique helmets with the reduced rims. (Howard Gerrard)

THE NORTHERN ATTACK FALTERS

Despite the immense resilience of Kampfgruppe Peiper, the Allies manage to retake Stavelot, and the Germans are unable to break through

By the morning of 19 December, the German advance was running out of momentum. Sepp Dietrich, commander of the 6th Panzer Army, faced an angry high command. Field marshals Model and von Rundstedt, and especially Hitler, wanted to know why his elite SS army – with the exception of Kampfgruppe Peiper – was falling behind schedule. Von Rundstedt wanted to call off the attack.

"We have not made the most of our initial surprise. The offensive has never gathered speed, due to the icy roads and the pockets of resistance which forced us to lay on full-dress attacks." Model wanted to press on with a few changes to the original plan. Hitler insisted that no changes be made. American high command was more optimistic. According to Eisenhower, the Supreme Commander of Allied forces in the West, "The enemy has given us a great opportunity... Instead of having to take the Siegfried Line pillbox by pillbox, we can now beat them by defending the Meuse, while preparing our own offensive."

> "EISENHOWER'S DECISION TO GIVE COMMAND OF FORCES IN THE NORTH TO MONTGOMERY WOULD LATER CAUSE CONTROVERSY"

Reinforcements

Eisenhower also shuffled his command structure. The German advance had played havoc with his communication system, with 12th Army Group commander General Omar Bradley finding it difficult to control his forces north of the bulge from his position in the south. Eisenhower decided to divide the battlefield, leaving Bradley in charge south of the German-held area but giving command of those in the north, including Bradley's 1st and 9th Armies, to Field Marshal Montgomery. This decision did not sit well with some American commanders, and while it was not made public at the time due to a news blackout, it would cause controversy later.

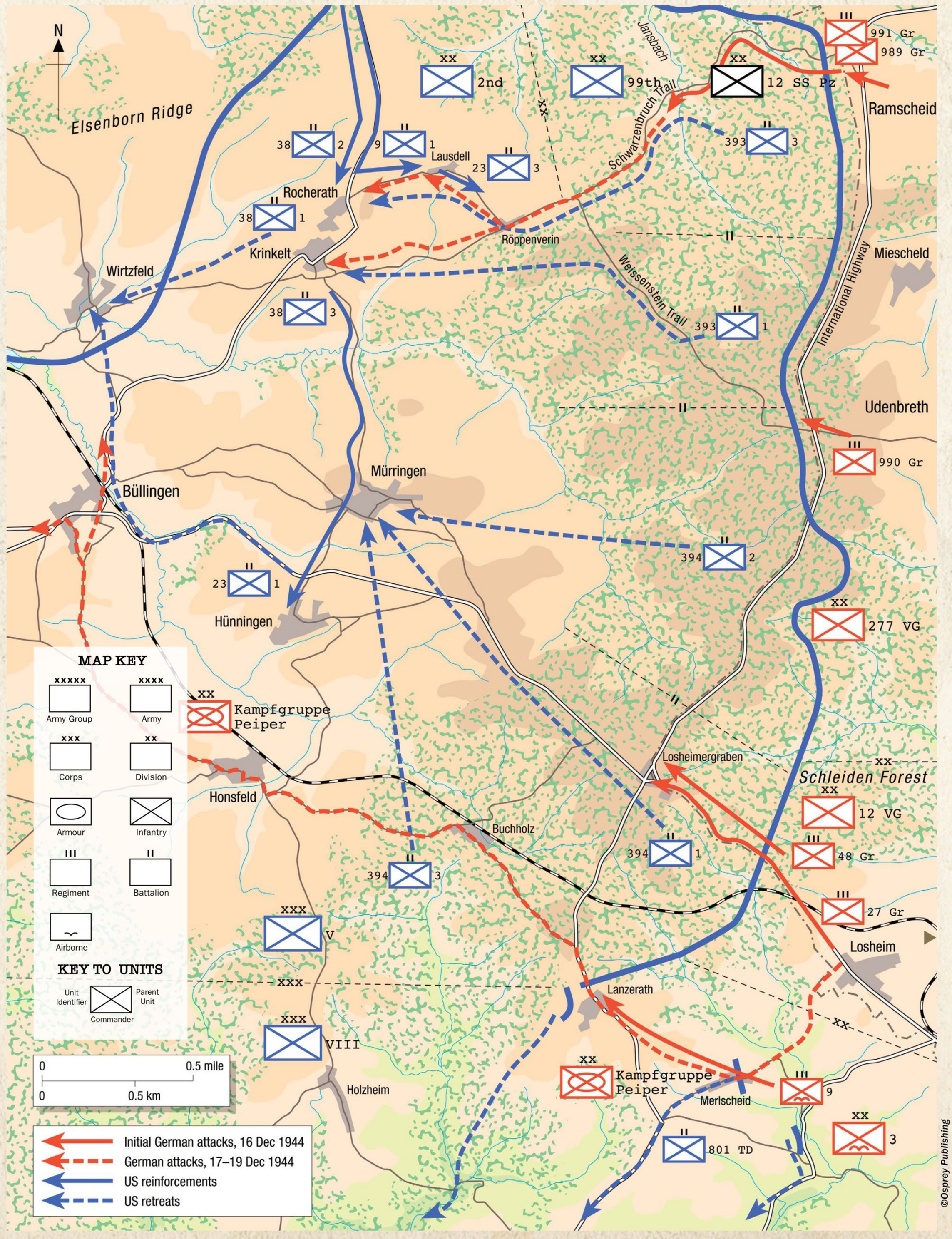
Peiper, meanwhile, launched an assault using infantry from the 2nd SS Panzergrenadier Regiment to attack Stoumont, followed by an armoured attack. After fighting for two hours with an American tank battalion, the town was finally captured at around 10.30am. In the east, the Allies retook Stavelot, and a force sent to recapture it was unsuccessful. Peiper's Kampfgruppe lacked the fuel to advance west from Stoumont, so he withdrew his forward lines back to the village.

American reinforcements were by now arriving in numbers. Major General James Gavin's 82nd Airborne Division, which had played a key role in the doomed Operation Market Garden a few months earlier, was positioned facing Peiper's forces along his intended route to the Meuse through La Gleize. German attempts to reinforce Peiper's position were less successful, with the I SS Panzer Corps unable to break through. American artillery fire from Elsenborn Ridge was forcing the advancing 6th Panzer Army to veer to the west instead of aiming northwest, causing traffic jams as it struggled to use the same roads as General Manteuffel's 5th Panzer Army. Manteuffel himself was making better progress, his three Panzer divisions moving westward between St Vith and Bastogne.

Huge toll

The American artillery was taking a huge toll on the Germans. As SS Senior NCO Karl Leitner said about a shelling on 21 December, "My sergeant and I jumped into a ditch. After ten minutes a shell hit to the right of us, probably in a tree. My sergeant must have been badly wounded in the lung. He just gasped, and after a short time, died. I had taken a piece of shrapnel in my right hip. Then a shell exploded in a tree behind. A piece of shrapnel hit me in my left ankle, other fragments slashed my right foot and ankle. I pushed myself half under my dead comrade, and fragments from another shell hit me in the left arm." But Kampfgruppe Peiper fought on.

When units from the US 2nd Battalion of the 119th Regiment mounted an attack on 21 December, it was pushed back and its commander, Major Hal McCown was captured along with around 300 of his troops. He later said, "An amazing fact to me was the youth of the Kampfgruppe. The bulk of the enlisted men were 18 or 19 years of age, recently recruited but thoroughly trained from years of Russian fighting... Their morale and discipline was very good... The relationship between officers and men was closer and friendlier than I would have expected. Many times I saw Colonel Peiper give a slap of encouragement on the back of heavily loaded men." ▶



***Overview:** The German advance was running out of momentum*

The 82nd Airborne launched a counter-attack and was soon engaged in fierce house-to-house fighting. But the pressure was taking its toll. Expecting reinforcements to be concentrated at La Gleize, Peiper withdrew his forces – situated further west – back to the town. The Kampfgruppe was shelled again on 22 December, by which time they had run out of food and had virtually no fuel. As predicted, lack of supplies was badly affecting the advance.

After dusk on 22 December, the Luftwaffe attempted to resupply Kampfgruppe Peiper from the air. The drop went badly when General Wilhelm Mohnke questioned Peiper's co-ordinates, insisting they were wrong, and duly parachuted most of the supplies behind the American lines near Stoumont. Peiper estimated that only around ten per cent of the drop was recovered by his own troops.

Retreat

General Mohnke's 1st Panzer Division tried to link up with Peiper by wading his troops through the River Amblève, having been cut off by the destruction of the bridges, but mortar fire from the 117th Infantry sent them scurrying back with casualties. Peiper's situation was getting worse. As he later observed, "Our position in La Gleize had become very difficult. The town was surrounded by mountains and offered excellent artillery observation points to the enemy. The forest was very close to the town and offered very good lines of approach for infantry. It was only a matter of days before the whole town would be shot to rubble."

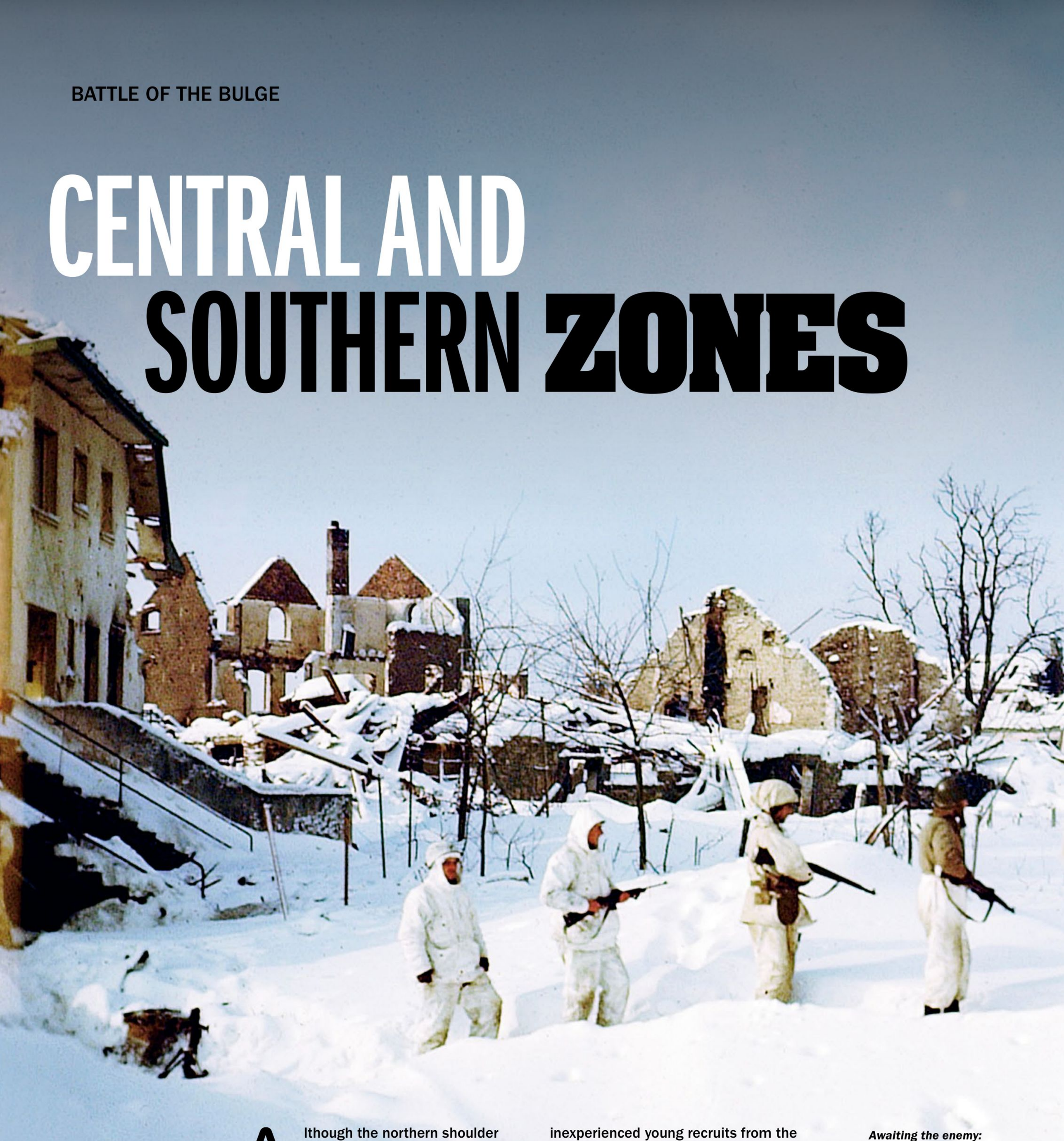
When it became clear reinforcements would not be able to break through any time soon, on 23 December he retreated back to the main German lines. Most of what was left of the Kampfgruppe made it, but they had to leave their heavy equipment. The attack had totally stalled.

"GENERAL MOHNKE INSISTED PEIPER'S CO-ORDINATES WERE WRONG AND PARACHUTED MOST SUPPLIES BEHIND THE AMERICAN LINES"

Popperfoto/Getty Images

***On guard:** An American infantryman stands guard against a knocked-out German tank in the Belgian town of La Gleize*

CENTRAL AND SOUTHERN ZONES



Awaiting the enemy: *Six American soldiers from the 7th Armored Division patrol St Vith during the Wehrmacht's attack on the town*

Although the northern shoulder of the Ardennes Offensive did not go as planned for Germany, the battle in the centre and the south of the bulge went far better.

In the Schnee Eifel sector, General Manteuffel's 5th Panzer Army launched an attack on positions held by the 28th and 106th Infantry Divisions. Manteuffel enjoyed numerical superiority over the thinly spread American infantry, but he did not possess the overwhelming strength enjoyed by German forces further north.

As mentioned earlier, a pincer movement surrounded two regiments of inexperienced young recruits from the 106th Division, who misunderstood orders to evacuate the area should the situation become untenable. Their surrender was therefore inevitable.

According to the records of the official US Army history, "At least 7,000 [US soldiers] were lost here, and the figure probably is closer to 8,000 or 9,000. The amount lost in arms and equipment, of course, was very substantial. The Schnee Eifel battle, therefore, represents the most serious reverse suffered by American arms during the operations of 1944-45 in the European theatre."

Getty Images

To the front: *A convoy of the American 1st Army travels through Belgium near Fosse on the way to St Vith*

Getty Images

THE BATTLE OF ST VITH

A force of 10,000 troops and 200 tanks was deployed in the German's massed attack on St Vith, a road junction of vital strategic value

The surviving regiment of the 106th joined units from the 9th Armored Division and 28th US Infantry Division in defending St Vith, a junction of vital strategic value where six important roads met. It was a prime target for Manteuffel and was very close to the 'boundary line' marking the area covered by Dietrich's 6th Panzer Army.

While the 28th was an experienced, battle-hardened division, it had lost almost half its 14,000 men fighting on the Siegfried Line in November and was in the Ardennes area to rest and induct its replacement recruits.

Manteuffel sent several parties of advance troops over the River Our in boats, where they made a small bridgehead to prepare for the armoured advance to follow. It was a costly penetration. The infantry did not yet have the support of its rocket artillery or tanks, so it was very vulnerable to enemy armoured attack. But a bridgehead was made, and in the predawn hours an artillery bombardment helped clear the way for the advancing German tanks. The 7th Armored Division made its way to St Vith to reinforce the town too, although it struggled to get there through the tide of retreating vehicles. Major Don Boyer, in the staff jeep behind the lead tank battalion, recalled a scene of chaos.

"As we arrived at the road junction we were hit by a sight that we could not comprehend. A constant stream of traffic hurtling to the rear, nothing going to the front. It was a case of every dog for himself. It was a retreat, a rout."

At one stage he was blocked by a gridlock covering the road, which he got through by commandeering a Sherman tank, forcing retreating vehicles off ▶

> "WE WERE HIT BY A SIGHT WE COULD NOT COMPREHEND... IT WAS A RETREAT, A ROUT"
>
> MAJOR DON BOYER

the road to make way for the 7th. They finally arrived in St Vith at 8.15pm on 17 December, having taken two and a half hours to travel three miles.

The American forces in St Vith were led by General Bruce C Clarke, a highly decorated New Yorker who had also seen action in World War I. It wouldn't be long before his courage and leadership would once again be required.

The 2nd Panzer (Armored) Division led the attack on St Vith. They were expected to cross the River Our by the middle of the morning on 16 December using two bridges built by German engineer units, but the equipment didn't arrive in time or in the correct order, so it wasn't until the late afternoon that they crossed.

"AT THE END OF THE FIRST DAY, MOST OF THE GERMAN ARMOUR WAS STILL ON THE WRONG SIDE OF THE RIVER"

Manteuffel was furious. Taking St Vith early was a key requirement for the Ardennes Offensive, and the attack was already falling behind schedule.

On the approach to the town, Steinebruck was captured, giving the Germans access to a bridge over the Our. Schoenberg, six miles east of St Vith, was also taken, giving them another bridge, but at Kobscheid the 18th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron circled the village with barbed wire and used their armoured cars' machine guns to great effect. They held it for a day before destroying their vehicles and retreating to St Vith.

At the end of the first day, most of the German armour was still on the wrong side of the River Our having been delayed by American actions and especially by the miserable weather, which was making progress extremely difficult.

Getty Images

Tank versus tank

Brigadier General Robert Hasbrouck of the 7th Armored had arranged his forces in a 32-mile defensive horseshoe around the town. This was mainly made up of the 7th and 9th Armored divisions supported by troops from the 424th Regiment of the 106th Division (the Golden Lions), whose two sister regiments had been surrounded and taken at the Schnee Eifel pocket, and a regiment from the 28th Division, which had taken casualties defending the approaches to Bastogne, another strategic target for the Germans. The remnants of Troy Middleton's VIII Corps also defended the town.

As the Panthers of a probing German column arrived, a Sherman scored a direct hit on the lead tank, sending the others into retreat. But they were soon to return in a fierce attack on the town. It was a frustrating struggle. The German Panther and Tiger tanks offered superior power to the American Shermans, giving them a definite advantage in a straight shoot-out. However, as any tank commander knows, there's more to tank battles than just firepower. Sherman tanks were more reliable than their German counterparts, and as military historian Steven J Zaloga pointed out, "The popular myth that

Form up: *Three M4 Sherman tanks take up positions near St Vith on 20 December 1944*

Panthers enjoyed a five-to-one kill ratio against Shermans, or that it took five Shermans to knock out a Panther, have no basis in the historical records. The outcome of tank-versus-tank fighting was more often determined by the tactical situation than the technical situation."

Added to that were other factors, such as the experience of the crews, something that Zaloga says played a vital role. "Crew training was an important ingredient in tank engagements since an experienced commander was more apt to spot the enemy first, a well-trained crew more apt to engage the enemy first due to better co-ordination, and the tank was more likely to hit the enemy first due to the gunner's superior accuracy. But in the end, a mediocre crew in a mediocre tank sitting in an ambush position had an advantage over an excellent crew in an excellent tank advancing forwards."

Taking advantage of all of these factors, the Americans managed to hold back the German assault for three tough days. General Clarke ordered his crews to try for flank shots and strike from ambushes rather than get caught up in head-on conflicts. The tactic worked well, though as the days progressed his armour was steadily diminished as they saw off probing attacks and prepared for a major assault. The defenders were very brave, ▶

21 December 1944

THE FORTIFIED GOOSE EGG – REARGUARD DEFENCE IN ST VITH

General Bruce Clarke's approach to defending St Vith was to use the mobility and firepower of his tank units to keep the Wehrmacht at bay for as long as possible. US armoured divisions were weak in infantry, with only three battalions per division, and while they could be used for defence, the type of linear defence in depth practised by infantry units was out of the question. So the tanks and other supporting troops in St Vith held positions for as long as they could and then fell back to more defensible positions.

Here we see a pair of M4 medium tanks conducting a rearguard action in the outskirts of St Vith shortly before Clarke was forced to abandon the town. The M4 medium tank was a durable, reliable design, but by the winter of 1944 it was out-classed when facing the newer German Panzers, such as the PzKpfw V Panther.

Like most of the campaigns of 1944-45, the fighting in St Vith saw very few tank-versus-tank encounters, and the M4 usually fought against German infantry. In such a mission, many experienced tankers preferred the older version of the M4 armed with the 75mm gun, as seen here (1), rather than the newer version introduced in the summer of 1944 with the long-barrelled 76mm gun.

Although the 76mm gun was more effective when pitted against Panzers, it fired a mediocre, high-explosive projectile compared to the older 75mm projectile, which contained almost twice the amount of high explosive.

A significant problem with the M4 medium tank was its middling armour, which had not been

Illustration and caption ©Osprey Publishing

increased since its debut in 1942. While some tank units had begun to add sandbags or other forms of improvised armour to their Sherman tanks, this was not yet common practice in the 7th Armored Division. Actually, the division had used sandbags during the summer and autumn, but when Clarke took over he ordered all the sandbags and camouflage netting removed. Like many veterans of Patton's Third Army, he felt that sandbags made for ineffective protection and adversely affected the tank's automotive performance.

The tank in the background has been hit and the crew can be seen baling out (2). One of the most common causes of US tank losses in the late 1944 fighting was the German Panzerfaust, a small, disposable rocket launcher that fired a shaped-charge grenade. This was capable of penetrating the armour of the M4, but it was not particularly accurate and had to be fired from close range, rendering its user very vulnerable. If it did hit the M4, it stood a good chance of setting off an internal ammunition fire. It is largely a myth that the Sherman burned due to its use of a gasoline engine. Operational studies concluded that most were lost after their ammunition caught fire. Usually the ammunition propellant caught fire when its brass casing was penetrated by a hot shard of metal from an anti-tank projectile. It took about 30 seconds before the propellant fire spread to neighbouring ammunition, and once this occurred the inside of the tank became a blast furnace. Crews soon learned that once their tank was hit, it was a good idea to bale out. (Howard Gerrard)

"IT IS THE WAR OF THE SMALL MEN... THOSE WERE THE DECISIVE PEOPLE HERE"

GENERAL MANTEUFFEL

but their task was enormous. Captain Nathan Duke remembers the terrifying task the Americans faced.

"The 88s, mortars, and buzz bombs were very frightening. Like most of the others, I was scared stiff. I envied those going to the rear on stretchers. Morale stayed good, although we had very little food and the weather was mighty cold."

By 21 December the Germans were ready for a massed attack on St Vith. Artillery units east of the town opened up around 3pm, supporting a force of 10,000 troops and 200 tanks. The artillery took a heavy toll and casualties were high. As a young infantryman caught in a foxhole explains, many died a slow a death.

"Gordon got ripped by a machine gun from roughly the left thigh through the right waist. He told me he was hit through the stomach as well. We were cut off. We were in foxholes by ourselves, so we both knew he was going to die. We had no morphine. We couldn't ease the pain, so I tried to knock him out. I took off his helmet, held his jaw up and just whacked as hard as I could, because he wanted to be put out. That didn't work, so I hit him up by the head with a helmet and that didn't work... He slowly froze to death."

At 4pm, the Germans attacked in force, overrunning American defensive positions. Assault groups of 40 to 50 men, supported by tanks and self-propelled guns, inched their way into the town. Tiger tanks from the 506 Heavy Panzer Battalion attacked from the Schoenberg highway, destroying every Sherman and machine gun crew they encountered. By now the 7th and 9th Armored divisions had lost around half their tanks. Around 9.30pm General Clarke ordered a withdrawal to the high ground behind the town near the River Salm, where they formed a new defensive line. Around 15,000 troops withdrew. Some were captured, but overall the retreat under fire – the most difficult of military manoeuvres – was skilfully executed. Medics remained to attend to the wounded before surrendering to the incoming enemy. German forces poured into St Vith, including units from Deitrich's Sixth Panzer Army. They began looting American equipment. Jeeps proved especially popular.

The battle for St Vith had proved costly for both sides. Around 5,000 Americans were killed, wounded or captured during the defence of the town and the retreat westwards. The 7th Armored alone had lost more than 3,300 men and 88 tanks. German casualties were of a similar number. But although the town had been lost, it had not fallen until 23 December, the eighth day of the Ardennes Offensive.

In denying the Germans access to the road junction at St Vith, its defenders had prevented reinforcements reaching other areas of the breakthrough and the attack as a whole from reaching the Meuse.

General Manteuffel paid tribute to the soldiers on both sides in a 1965 documentary. "It is the war of the small men, the outpost commanders, the section commanders, the company commanders; those were the decisive people here, who were responsible for success or failure, victory or defeat.

"We depended upon their courage; they could not afford to get confused, and had to act according to their own decisions, until the higher command was again in a position to take over. I believe I can say, and I have the right to make this judgment, that the Germans did this admirably well.

"At the same time, however, I am also convinced this was the case with the American forces, who after all succeeded in upsetting the entire time schedule, not only of the attacking unit in St Vith, but also of the 5th and 6th Panzer Armies. That is a fact which cannot be denied."

NARA/US Army

Blending in: *A trooper wraps up against the biting cold in the snowy battlefields of St Vith*

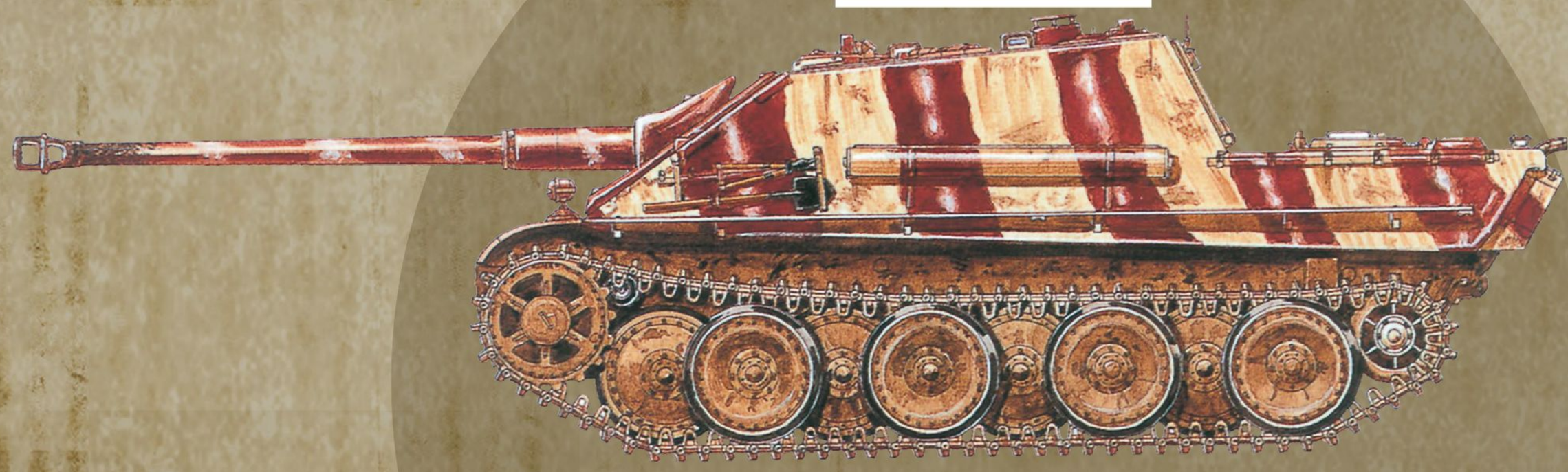
GERMAN HARDWARE IN THE ARDENNES, 1944

German armour played a critical role in the Battle of the Bulge, as Hitler's last great offensive relied on highly mobile tank divisions breaking through Allied lines and rushing towards the Channel to split British and American forces

PZ.BEOBACHTUNGSWAGEN.IV AUSF.J.

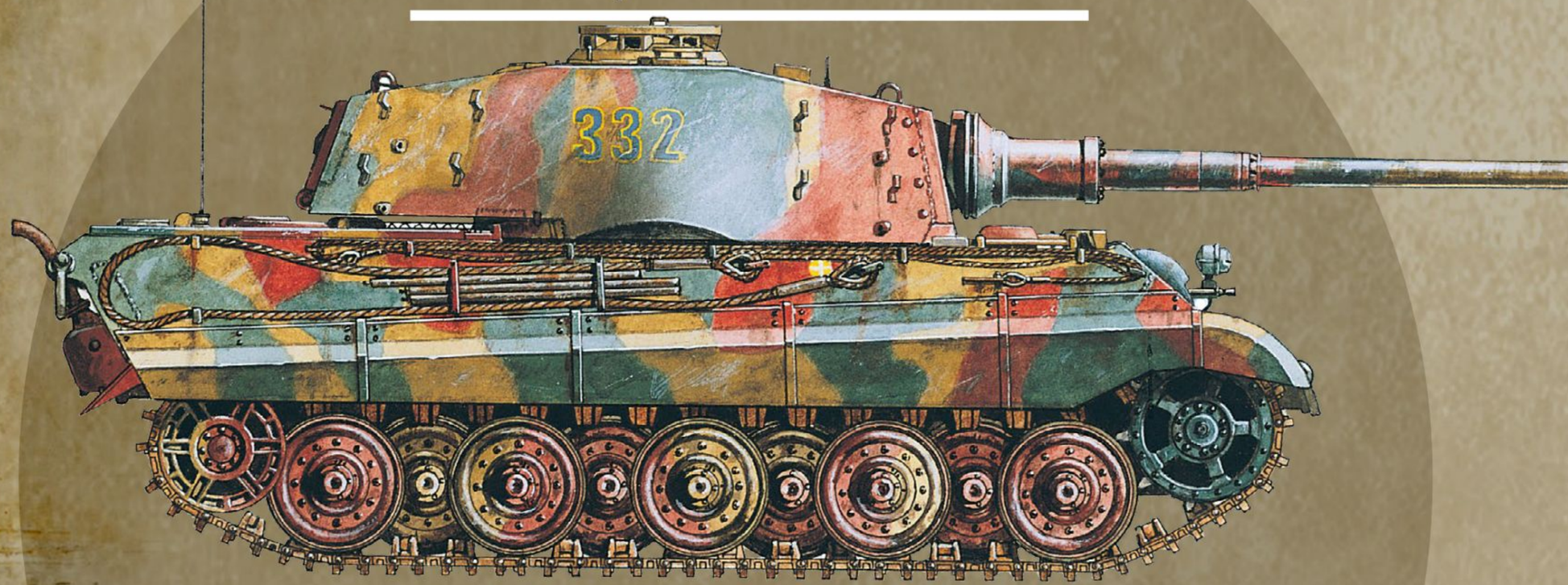
The Panzerbeobachtungswagen (Armoured Observation Vehicle) was created by modifying the Pz.Kpfw.IV Ausf.J. Changes included replacing the commander's cupola with that from a Sturmgeschütz and fitting additional radio equipment. The Sturmgeschütz cupola allowed for the use of a scissor periscope when the main cupola hatch was closed. Pz.Kpfw.IV from this period were delivered from the assembly plant with the camouflage already applied. This consisted of a thin base coat of Rot (RAL 8012), about 50 per cent of which was over-painted with well-thinned stripes and patches, with sharp outlines of Dunkelgelb (RAL 7028) and patches of Olivgrün (RAL 6003). Wheels were always left in a single colour.

JAGDPANTHER



This Jagdpanther (Fgst.Nr. 303018) was completed at MNH, Hannover, at the end of November or the beginning of December 1944 and issued to a schwere Heeres-Panzerjäger-Abteilung, which took part in the Ardennes Offensive. It was captured by the US forces and shipped to Aberdeen Proving Ground, Maryland, where it is still on display. This particular Jagdpanther still had the small diameter idlerwheel. It was also one of a small series that had the fighting compartment exhaust fan mounted over the main gun. The camouflage pattern was applied at the factory and only partially covered the base coat of primer rot RAL 8012 (red). Well-thinned Dunkelgelb RAL 7028 (tan) was painted in vertical stripes, flanked by stripes of thinned weiss RAL 9002 (white).

TIGER II, S.SS PZ.ABT. 501



The Tiger II now on display at the Armour Proving Ground, Aberdeen, Maryland, was captured from the s.SS Pz.Abt. 501. However, it was originally issued to the s.Pz.Abt. 509 and then handed over to the s.SS Pz.Abt. 501 to complete the establishment of 45 Tiger IIs for the Ardennes Offensive. The s.SS Pz.Abt. 501 did not remove the markings of the s.Pz.Abt. 509, a yellow circle enclosing a white cross on the glacis plate, left-upper rear of the tail plate and on both sides of the superstructure. They did, however, apply their call sign numbers (blue outlined in yellow), but the number was five centimetres wide rather than the regulation three. While the base paint is red primer with patches of dark yellow and dark green, the amount of green overpainted was considerable.

Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images

THE WERETH MASSACRE

In the course of the battle, SS troops committed an atrocity on a unit of African-American soldiers now known as 'the Wereth 11'

On 17 December 1944, during the build-up to the Battle of St Vith, SS troops committed an atrocity in the Belgian town of Wereth, about ten miles northeast of St Vith itself. It occurred on the same day as the Malmedy massacre, but it is nowhere near as well known.

Until 1948, the American army was racially segregated. The 333rd Field Artillery Battalion was one of nine African-American field artillery battalions deployed in Europe during World War II. This 155 Howitzer unit had seen action in Normandy in July, earning a reputation for deadly accuracy with the Howitzers before being moved to Schoenberg, Belgium, as part of the US VIII Corps Artillery. Its Service battery was west of the river Our, while the firing batteries (A, B and C) were on the east side of the river in support of the Army VII Corps and the 106th Infantry Division. Typically for African-American units at the time, its officers were white and its enlisted troops were black.

Honour

At the beginning of the Battle of the Bulge, the battalion was 11 miles from the front line, but due to the speed of the German advance it was ordered to withdraw when the Germans started shelling the Schoenberg area. The C and Service batteries remained behind to give support for the 14th Cavalry and the 106th Infantry Division.

When the Germans took the town of Schoenberg on the morning of 17 December, the Service Battery tried to escape to St Vith but came under heavy fire and was forced to surrender, joining the columns of American prisoners being marched back to Germany.

The African-American troops had fought extremely bravely. According to Robert Hudson, a descendant of a 333rd Field Artillery Battalion soldier, "These guys put their country first at a time when their country didn't put them first. All these guys were friends, they mostly came from the South. They fought bravely, and delayed the Germans to help us turn the tide of the war."

In hiding

11 soldiers from the 333rd Field Artillery, who were trapped on the east side of the river having become separated from the rest of their batteries, evaded capture and tried to make their way northwest back to the safety of the American lines.

After walking for hours through deep snow, they came to the small hamlet of Wereth, near Amel, where they knocked on the door of a house owned by a farmer called Mathias Langer. ▶

"THEY WERE COLD AND HUNGRY AND ONLY HAD TWO RIFLES BETWEEN THEM, BUT THEY WERE SHELTERED FROM THE INVADING SS"

"IT'S IMPORTANT THAT EVERYBODY KNOWS WHAT HAPPENED"

HARRY STEWART JR

They were cold and hungry and had only two rifles between them, but they were sheltered from the invading SS and given food. As Langer's son Herman remembers, "They were wet, cold and hungry. My mother and my sister put bread and water on the table for each of them." Not everyone in that particular part of Belgium considered the Americans their allies and liberators, however. It had been a part of Germany until it was given to Belgium after World War I as war reparations, and many of the locals considered themselves German. Mathias Langer was not one of them.

When the 11 troops from the 333rd arrived, he was already hiding two Belgians who had deserted from the German army. But word of their presence got around. When a four-man patrol from Kampfgruppe Knittel's 1st SS Division arrived in the hamlet, a Nazi sympathiser told them there were Americans in the Langer house. They took charge of the eleven without a struggle.

Murder

After being made to sit on the road in the cold until it grew dark, the prisoners were marched into a field. Gunshots were then heard. The soldiers' bodies were spotted in a ditch in the corner of a cow pasture the next day, but fearing the Germans might come back, the villagers made no attempt to retrieve them. They were soon buried by a deep snowfall.

When the area was again liberated by American troops the following January, villagers directed them to the ditch where the bodies lay. Soldiers from the 99th Infantry Division dug them out. It soon became apparent that before they died, the Wereth 11 (as they came to be known) had been tortured by their SS captors. There were multiple facial and jaw fractures, along with broken legs and bayonet wounds to the head. Some had even had their fingers cut off. One man was killed while apparently trying to bandage another soldier's wounds. But despite the torture, the captured GIs didn't tell the SS about the Belgian-German deserters or the help they had from the Langer family. 50 years later, Maria Langer (who was 17 at the time of the murders) told an American reporter that their silence saved her family's lives.

The bodies of the dead GIs were photographed as evidence, and a War Crimes Investigative Team began an enquiry. Yet despite taking testimonies from both the troops who found the bodies and the locals who had hidden them, frustratingly the identity of the murderers could not be ascertained.

No one has ever stood trial for the torture and murder of the Wereth 11. Harry Stewart Jr is the great-nephew of Sergeant James Aubrey Stewart, one of the Wereth 11, whose family didn't discover his fate until 1996. He was unimpressed with the investigations.

"So many things are swept under the carpet, but it's an important fact that everybody knows what happened," he said. "The importance wasn't there. It wasn't relevant to the government at the time, or to the individuals that were able to make the decisions." The investigation into the deaths of the Wereth 11 was closed on 19 February 1947.

Never forgotten

In 2001, Belgian campaigners raised money to buy the land and erect a monument to the Wereth 11, replacing a small cross put in place in 1994 by Herman Langer, the son of the farmer who had hidden them. A dedication ceremony, with full military honours, was held in 2004. It's believed to be the only memorial to African-American GIs in the whole of Europe.

Laying a wreath in a remembrance ceremony in 2007, Brigadier General Dennis L Via, commander of 5th Signal Command, said, "What happened on 17 December 1944 should never be forgotten. However, we are not here today to focus on the crime and the pain; we are here today to focus on the heroic lives of these 11 Americans."

Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images

Scene of a war crime: *For many years the woodlands of Wereth hid a terrible secret, but the fate of the 11 US troops killed there, most likely by the SS, has slowly emerged since the war*

Time & Life Pictures/ Getty Images

ASSAULT ON THE MEUSE

The German forces were forging ahead and had almost reached the river. But progress was impeded by delaying tactics and a stroke of luck

Numb: *An exhausted American army medic of 2nd Division, K Company trudges through the snow near the Siegfried Line*

The bridges over the Meuse River were prime targets for the German assault, so the Allies needed to reinforce them as quickly as possible. With most fighting units tied up holding back the expanding bulge in the front line, this task fell to reserve troops and those not usually deployed in combat. On 19 December, Field Marshal Montgomery – who was in charge of the British forces held in reserve – ordered what units he had to hand to defend the crossings at Namur, Dinant and Givet.

The German assault was still a long way short of reaching the Meuse by then, but as they were clearly aiming to cross, protecting the bridges was of the utmost importance. The rag-tag assembly put together for the job consisted of rear-echelon soldiers, including administrators and support staff, military policeman and air force personnel. The newly re-equipped British 29th Armoured Brigade was ordered to the area, and Lieutenant-General Brian Horrocks' XXX Corps, which was in the Netherlands holding the captured Nijmegen salient after the failure of Operation Market Garden, began to move towards the Meuse on 20 December. They arrived the following day. The British 6th Airborne Division, at the time in Britain, was moved to the ports ready to be ferried to France. In the centre of the bulge, where the German forces were enjoying the most success, they almost reached the river; the Fifth Panzer Army, with Colonel von Lauchert's 2nd Panzer Division at the front, with the Panzer Lehr Division following in support.

While the main force was engaged in a battle at Noville, the division's reconnaissance units went on ahead. They reached the Ourthe River just before dawn on 20 December at Ourtheville, around 30 miles from the Meuse. The crossing there was a sturdy bailey bridge, quite capable of allowing the 2nd Panzer Division to ford the river.

> "AT MIDNIGHT, PANZERGRENADIERS WADED ACROSS THE RIVER AND TOOK CONTROL OF HOUSES AROUND THE BRIDGE"

The bridge is captured

A platoon of the 299th Engineer Combat Battalion and a Company of the 158th ▶

Engineer Combat Battalion were rushed to the bridge, supported by eight tank destroyers from the 705th Tank Destroyer Battalion. They managed to get the charges laid along the bridge, but luck was on the German's side. When the leading light tanks from the reconnaissance unit arrived, the engineers tried to set off the charges, but they failed to explode. Instead, the tank destroyers took out the first light tank to attempt to cross the bridge, forcing the rest of the unit to retreat and wait out the daylight hours. At night they returned, shelling the bridge's defenders with mortars and artillery.

At midnight, panzergrenadiers waded across the river and took control of houses around the bridge. The charges failed to go off again, and the engineers withdrew. The bridge had been captured, but the 2nd Panzer Division – which had arrived in force on 21 December – was not in a position to make use of it. It had run out of fuel.

For the rest of 21 December and the whole of 22 December, the attack was halted until more fuel could be brought up. This allowed the 84th Division to reach Marche, where they blocked the road with trees and blew large craters in its surface before withdrawing.

After the tanks had refuelled, the advance resumed on 23 December. The 2nd Panzer Division's reconnaissance units bypassed the areas of road that were blocked by using woodland trails before returning to the road and pressing on towards the Meuse. The main force was delayed for four hours while they cleared the debris. The German forces took the town of Hargimont the same day but found Marche heavily defended. Instead of delaying the strike for the Meuse by getting involved in another battle, General Luttwitz ordered the division to veer to the west and avoid the town. The assault was making good progress but only along a narrow corridor.

The narrowness of the western-most area controlled by the advancing Germans caused problems, because it left their flanks exposed to Allied attack, as the Panzer Lehr Division discovered when it was attacked by an American artillery unit near the village of Tillet.

Pressing on to Rochefort, which was reached on 23 December after the refuel, a kampfgruppe led by Lieutenant Colonel Joachim Ritter von Poschinger sent in patrols to report on how well it was defended. They incorrectly reported that it was clear. In fact, the 3rd Battalion of the 335th Infantry was dug in there, led by Major Gordon A Bahe. Taking positions above the approach to the town, the 3rd Battalion attacked with small arms and anti-tank weapons, forcing a German retreat. The size of the town made it impossible for Major Bahe to defend all of it, so the Germans infiltrated and fought house to house. The Americans withdrew, their delaying tactics having once again been successful.

On 24 December, reconnaissance units from the Panzer Lehr Division arrived at the village of Celles, where the leading Panther hit a mine at the town's main crossroads. The explosion attracted the attentions of the landlady of the local inn. Two Germans knocked on her door and asked how far it was to Dinant, where they intended to cross. Seeing no point in lying, she answered, "ten kilometres". When asked about the state of the road, she chanced a lie. "The Americans mined the whole road. They've been working night and day, burying mines in the road for miles."

The Germans proceeded cautiously. While they encountered no mines, they came across five British-operated Shermans from the 3rd Royal Tank Regiment, blocking the road. It was intended that the Shermans hold off the Germans for long enough for the bridge to be blown, a suicide mission from which none were expected to return. But the British got a lucky break.

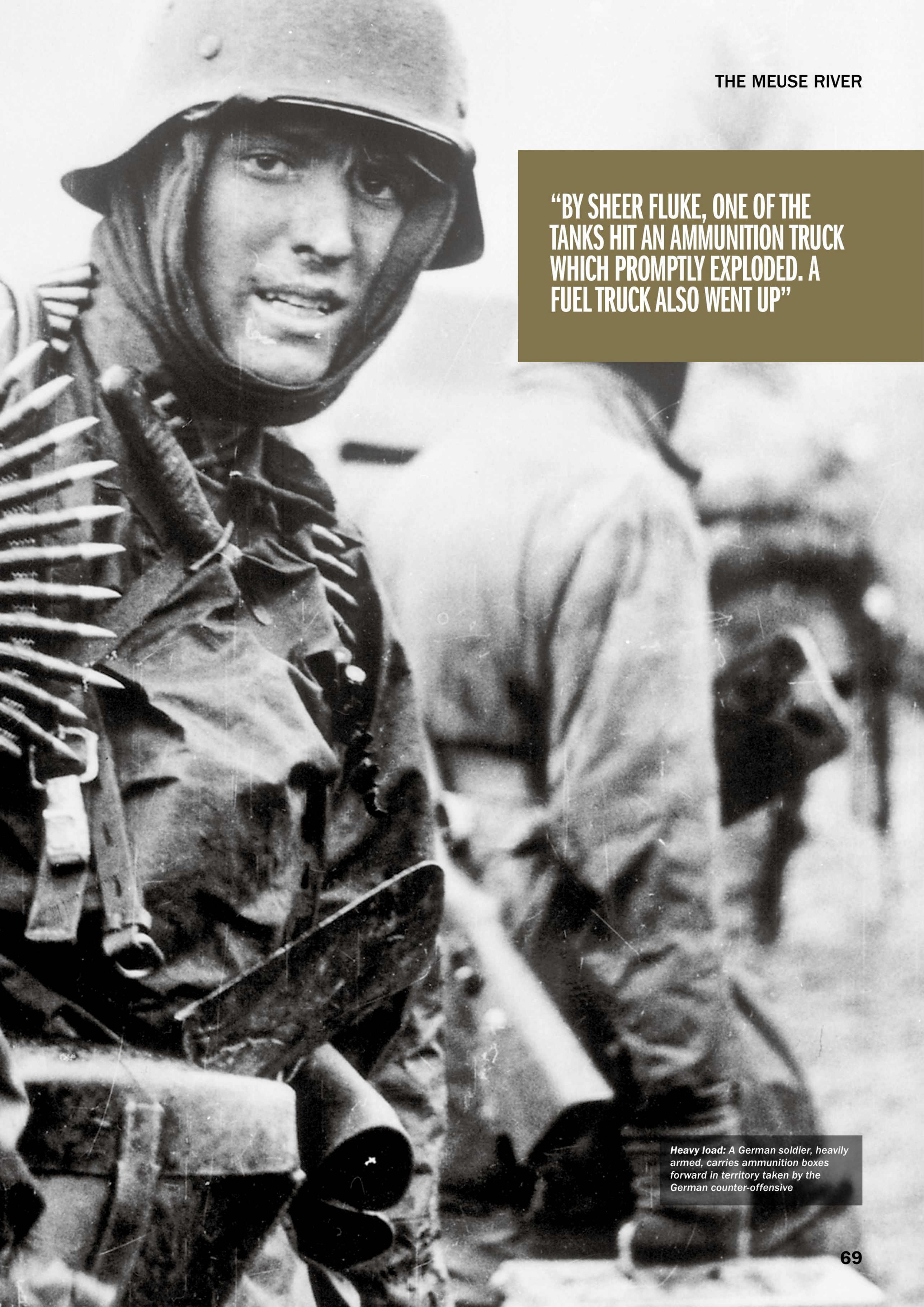
Surprised by the advancing column, one of the tanks got off a shot before the gunner had properly taken aim. Missing the lead tanks completely, by sheer fluke it hit an ammunition truck further back, which promptly exploded. A fuel truck also went up, and the Lehr Division was already low on fuel. Retreating, they took cover in the village of Foy-Notre-Dame, three miles from the Meuse. The next day – Christmas Day – Model ordered them to continue on foot to the river. No one did.

Allied blocking force

The main body of the 2nd Panzer Division and Panzer Lehr Division approached the Meuse near Dinant on Christmas Day. They were almost out of fuel and being harassed by fighter-bombers flown by both the British and the Americans. The Allies put together a blocking force on the east bank of the river, assisted by the five British Shermans, whose defence of the bridge had turned out not to be the expected suicide mission after all. The Allies were prepared to surround and neutralise the Panzer attack, whose only hope seemed to lie in reinforcements, but these too ran into concentrated, targeted tank fire and air attacks from the RAF.

With the attack clearly going no further and their armour under fire, General von Manteuffel allowed his troops to retreat on foot. Around 600 of them escaped, but without their vehicles and equipment. The German attack had been halted just a few miles from the Meuse. Could this be the end of the Ardennes Offensive?

NARA/US Army



"BY SHEER FLUKE, ONE OF THE TANKS HIT AN AMMUNITION TRUCK WHICH PROMPTLY EXPLODED. A FUEL TRUCK ALSO WENT UP"

Heavy load: *A German soldier, heavily armed, carries ammunition boxes forward in territory taken by the German counter-offensive*

December 1944

SPEARHEAD TO THE MEUSE

Kampfgruppe Bohm raced to the Meuse before Christmas 1944. This battle group was based around the 2nd Panzer Division's reconnaissance battalion, Panzer Aufklarungs Abteilung 2, but its combat power was reinforced by Panther tanks from its Panzer regiment, Pz.Rgt.3. This was necessary as its reconnaissance battalion had been only partially refitted prior to the Ardennes operation. Its first company was absent due to refitting, while its third company was equipped mainly with bicycles. Ill-equipped or not, one of the reasons for the success of 5th Panzer Army in penetrating deep behind American lines was the more effective use of their reconnaissance units.

Model's Army Group B headquarters was critical of poor use of reconnaissance units by the neighbouring Waffen-SS Panzer divisions, which usually employed them like any other Panzer or Panzergrenadier formation. The regular army Panzer divisions had learned from hard experience that the primary job of the reconnaissance elements was to move fast and avoid unnecessary combat in order to fulfil their mission. The armoured patrol seen here is

Illustration and caption ©Osprey Publishing

led by a Sd.Kfz. 234 Puma armoured car (1). This was one of the most effective scout vehicles, armed with a 50mm gun (2). Each of its eight wheels was independently sprung, and it had excellent mobility for a wheeled vehicle and high travel speeds of over 50mph when on roads. In the Ardennes, the division had ten of these armoured cars as well as two of the related Sd.Kfz. 234/1 armed with a 20mm cannon, and two Sd.Kfz. 233 armed with a 75mm short gun. Following behind the Puma is a Panther Ausf. G tank (3).

The 2nd Panzer Division started the offensive with 51 Panthers and 29 PzKpfw IV tanks. Behind the Panther is the lead Sd.Kfz. 251 armoured half-track (4). Although more commonly associated with the Panzergrenadier regiment, this jack-of-all-trades was also used by scout units, and there were 13 of these on hand at the beginning of the offensive. The more common armoured half-track in the reconnaissance battalion was the Sd.Kfz. 250 light half-track, with 33 of these vehicles in service in December 1944.

The vehicles seen here mostly lack any distinctive tactical unit insignia since the division was re-equipped just before the offensive. The Panther and Puma both lack the usual tactical numbers on the turret, and the division's trident emblem is not present. The use of foliage for camouflage was common, especially after 23 December 1944, when the clear weather marked the return of Allied air support and the American P-47 Thunderbolt fighter-bombers, dreaded by the Germans, who called them 'Jabos'. (Peter Dennis)

public domain author:Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe.

Hitler's henchman: *Otto Skorzeny, seen here in his Waffen-SS uniform and sporting a fencing scar on his left cheek, would survive the fall of the Reich*

CLANDESTINE OPERATIONS

Disinformation and deception were tools used in two clandestine operations undertaken by the Germans to spread panic and confusion among the Allied lines

During the Battle of the Bulge, Germany attempted two operations designed to sow confusion among the Allies. Operation Greif ('griffin') involved English-speaking German troops dressing in captured US and British uniforms and driving Allied vehicles. They sought to disrupt the Allied defence against the Ardennes Offensive by spreading rumours, giving false orders and preventing vital bridges from being destroyed before moving on to capture a bridge over the Meuse ahead of the main advance. An offshoot of Operation Greif, Operation Wahrung ('currency') saw disguised Germans trying to bribe dock and railway workers into disrupting Allied supply lines.

The operations were put into effect by Waffen-SS commando Otto Skorzeny, who was to recruit and train the new Panzer Brigade 150 for the task. He was an experienced operator who had previously been wounded on the Eastern Front and had also led the mission to rescue the deposed Italian dictator Benito Mussolini. He was a favourite of Hitler's, who greatly respected his abilities.

"I want you to command a group of American and British troops and get them across the Meuse and seize one of the bridges," the Führer told him. "Not, my dear Skorzeny, real Americans or British. I want you to create special units wearing American and British uniforms. They will travel in captured Allied tanks. Think of the confusion you could cause! I envisage a whole string of false orders which will upset communications and attack morale."

It was a risky mission. Under the terms of the 1907 Hague Convention, his undercover commandoes could be executed as spies if captured. Time was not on Skorzeny's side either. He had a little over a month to prepare for the mission and recruitment was a problem.

"There was great difficulty in finding suitable men and equipment to form 150 Brigade, the formation to perform Greif," he later recalled. "Category One, comprising men speaking perfectly and with some notion of American slang, was ten strong and most of them were sailors."

Also at his disposal were 30-40 men who spoke English but had no slang, 120-150 who spoke the language moderately well and about 200 who learned a little English at school.

Spreading rumours

The hunt for Allied equipment and uniforms also went poorly. Although he requested a total of 3,300 men, Skorzeny got only 2,500. As a result, he scaled back his brigade from three battalions down to two and formed a commando unit, Einheit Stielau, from the 150 best English speakers. The brigade had just 15 American trucks and about 30 jeeps. Skorzeny asked for 20 American tanks but only got two, one of which immediately broke down. Instead, they relied on 12 Panthers. "We camouflaged their guns and turrets to make them look like Shermans. They could only deceive very young American troops, seeing them at night from very far away."

Uniforms were also in short supply. When the first batch of American field jackets arrived, they had large triangles painted on the back, indicating the wearer was a POW. There were not enough rifles to go around either. It seemed only the commando unit could be disguised as Americans. To make matters worse, Skorzeny's request for English-speaking volunteers had found its way into Allied hands, so a clandestine operation was suspected. It was confirmed when a captured German officer was found to be carrying instructions on how German troops in American uniforms should identify themselves to other Germans, although these instructions did not outline the goals of the operation. While in training, the brigade was not told of its intended role, which led to wild rumours and speculation among the men. One young lieutenant heard they were to march into Paris and seize the Allied headquarters and so volunteered for the job as he spoke fluent French. By the time they were ready to be deployed, many of the men thought their mission was ▶

> "TIME WAS NOT ON SKORZENY'S SIDE EITHER. HE HAD LITTLE OVER A MONTH TO PREPARE, AND RECRUITMENT WAS A PROBLEM"

"SECURITY INCREASED. AT CHECKPOINTS, OFFICERS OF ALL RANKS WERE SUSPECTED"

to kill General Eisenhower. Skorzeny was happy to let the rumours flourish.

"We decided to let the rumours increase and multiply, while apparently doing our best to suppress them," he said. "We calculated enemy intelligence would not know what to make of the medley of lurid and conflicting information."

Although only partially successful (it was never likely to capture the bridges over the Meuse, for example), Operation Greif did much to spread panic and confusion among the Allied lines. On 17 December, a group of Skorzeny's men reached the Mont Rigi road junction ahead of the 16th Infantry. By changing the road signs, they sent the American convoy on a detour, costing them about an hour.

Telephone lines were cut, supply dumps found and their locations reported, roads blocked with trees, movements disrupted and false warning signs planted. Operation Greif troops even persuaded a US Army unit to withdraw from Poteau.

Wreaking havoc

A clandestine unit attached to Kampfgruppe Peiper was to travel ahead of the main convoy and take one of the bridges. On 17 December, a three-man jeep was sent ahead. About an hour after they left the main force, they were stopped by a military policeman, who arrested them when they were unable to give the correct password. Their uniforms and gear were not wholly correct either. They wore no leggings, their footwear was wrong and only one of the group had a US Army belt. More damning, they all carried the Soldbuch, a German soldier's personal document. They were soon identified as Unteroffizier Manfred Pernass, Oberfahnrich Günther Billing, and Gefreiter Wilhelm Schmidt.

On 18 December, another small unit from 150 Brigade was captured while transporting two prisoners to Malmedy, which they wrongly believed to be in German hands. Another group was arrested near the Meuse when their driver failed to produce a valid trip ticket and they were found wearing Nazi armbands under their jackets.

Captured members of Skorzeny's brigade repeated the rumours about an assassination attempt on Eisenhower and a push for Paris to take the Allied headquarters. Security around the general and other key Allied officers was tightened. His HQ was moved, his routines changed and an officer who bore a likeness to him was even recruited as a decoy double.

At checkpoints, officers of all ranks were suspected even if they had given the correct password. To prove they were not German they were asked things like state capitals, who Betty Grable was married to, which sports team was known as 'dem bums' or who is Mickey Mouse's girlfriend. Even Montgomery found himself under scrutiny. When he drove his staff car to Malmedy, he was halted at a checkpoint by suspicious guards who had heard the Germans had an operative who looked just like him. When he angrily ordered his driver to drive on, they shot out his tyres and detained him for several hours until he was identified by a British captain.

The confusion and paranoia Skorzeny's men had caused was out of all proportion to what their efforts deserved. As General Bradley later wrote, "Most of these GI-uniformed enemy troops were cut down before they reached the Meuse, but not until a half-million GIs played cat and mouse with each other each time they met on the road." Skorzeny later observed their actions "set off a real spy mania in the American back areas".

All 18 members of Skorzeny's Panzer Brigade 150 who were captured wearing Allied uniforms were tried as spies and shot, despite claims from Skorzeny's advisers that wearing an enemy uniform as a ruse de guerre (ruse of war) was perfectly legal as long as you didn't actually fight in it. But the same fate did not await Skorzeny himself.

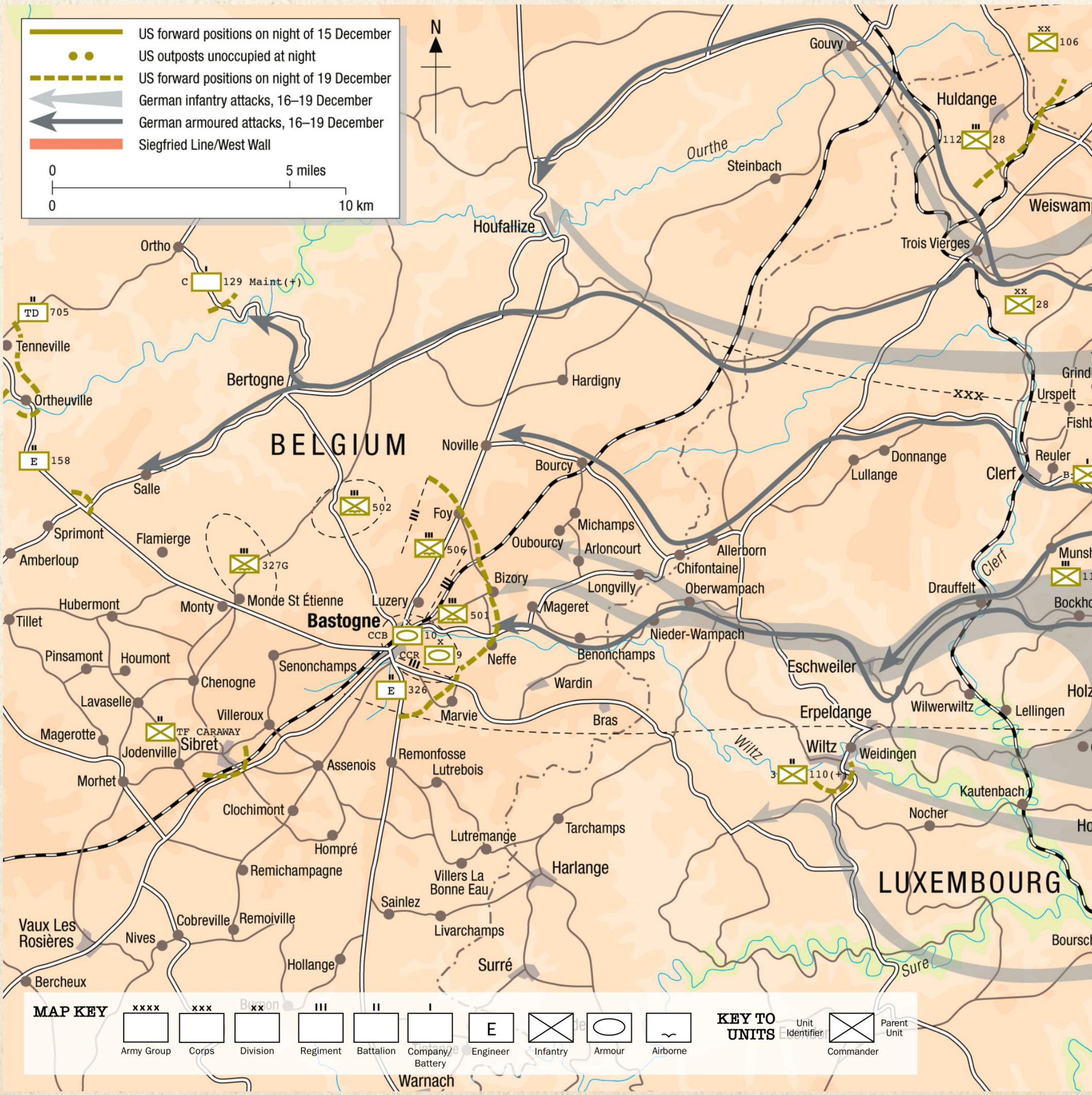
He was charged with war crimes at the Dachau Trials in 1947 but acquitted when it could not be proved that he gave orders for German troops to engage the enemy while in US uniforms.

Former Allied Special Operations Executive Wing Commander FFE Yeo-Thomas gave evidence in Skorzeny's defence, pointing out that he and his fellow operatives wore German uniforms while they were behind enemy lines.

Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images

Keeping warm: *American soldiers of the 1st Army huddle around a campfire in the snowy northern Ardennes Forest during a lull in the fighting*

THE SOUTHERN FLANK



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***The Advance:** The German troops' objectives included crossing the River Our and taking Bastogne*

Fierce fighting ensues as German troops attempt to cross the River Our as American forces struggle to push them back

The German troops on the southern flank of the bulge, under the command of General Hasso von Manteuffel, had three immediate objectives to achieve. Firstly, they needed to cross the River Our. They were then to support the attack on the road junction at St Vith in the central zone before going on to take Bastogne, another important road junction. Units from two divisions were to seize the bridge over the Our at Ouren.

General Walter Krüger's LVIII Panzer Corps was spearheaded by Generalmajor Siegfried von Waldenburg's 116th Panzer Division, partnered by the 560th Volksgrenadier Division. The 116th was an experienced, veteran division, and in March 1945 was described as "the famed and best German Panzer Division" by the commander of the 9th Army talking to *The New York Times* reporter John MacCormac. But it had suffered heavily in Normandy.

Refitted in the autumn, it now had a strength of 11,500 men with 139 Panzers, but some of these were relatively new recruits. The 560th was made up of newly enlisted troops, mostly from Denmark and Norway, and was extremely inexperienced. The 5th Parachute Division was once an elite unit but by now was understrength. Although it had its full complement of troops and officers, its anti-tank battalion had lost most of its equipment due to air attack, and losses had been replaced by undertrained Luftwaffe ground support and navy battalions. This division was tasked with taking two bridges either side of the village of Ouren, but it was up against regiments from the veteran 28th Infantry Division and the inexperienced 106th Infantry Division.

The 28th's 112th Infantry Regiment held positions on the east of the Our. It put up a dogged defence supported by the Golden Lions of the 106th, inflicting heavy casualties. Private First Class Paul Rosenthal, supporting the Golden Lions with a towed tank destroyer, achieved an excellent success rate, taking out five Panzers with only 18 shots. By the end of the first day, the green 560th Volksgrenadier Division had lost almost 1,000 men. The 116th Panzer Division was down 13 tanks and several hundred troops, including around 80 that had been taken captive.

Advancing Germans

The German attack had been held up for over a day. The American forces then withdrew westwards, but one battalion found enemy troops had got behind them and taken the southernmost bridge, over which they planned to retreat. At the other bridge the Americans also retreated, but the advancing enemy was too close for them to be able to lay demolition charges. The bridges had been taken, but it was found they were too fragile to support an armoured crossing. Instead, General Krüger crossed his tanks and half-tracks at Dasburg using a bridge captured by the 47th Panzer Corps. This inevitably caused further delays.

Elsewhere, on the southern end of what was to become the bulge, the 109th and 110th Regiments of the 28th Division struggled to hold back the onslaught. Although they put up a terrific fight and managed to disrupt the advance, they were too thinly spread to hold their ground. Dug-in defensive positions could be bypassed by the advancing Germans, who enjoyed numeric superiority. The 110th alone had to cover an 11-mile perimeter without its 2nd Battalion, which was held in divisional reserve. Village after village fell, forcing the Americans ▶

"THE 116TH WAS AN EXPERIENCED, VETERAN DIVISION, AND WAS DESCRIBED AS 'THE FAMED AND BEST GERMAN PANZER DIVISION'"

back, until four days into the battle the attacking Panzer columns were closing on the prime target of Bastogne. But the 28th's struggle had not been in vain. The delays it had inflicted on the enemy advance allowed the Allies to bring forward reinforcements, most notably veteran parachute and armoured divisions.

At the very southern end of the front were General Erich Brandenberger's four 7th Army Volksgrenadier divisions. They were used to protect Manteuffel's left flank should the Allies launch a counter-attack from further south. Brandenberger considered the 212th Volksgrenadier his most capable division, assigning it a vital role on the southern flank. According to military historian Stephen W Sears, Brandenberger was "a small, balding, potbellied soldier who was careful and meticulous, well suited to carry out his unspectacular but vital mission."

On the first day of the battle (16 December), they managed to surround four companies from Lieutenant Colonel Robert Chance's 12th Infantry. But the advance struggled due to a lack of tank support. Reaching the rivers Our and Sauer, crossing proved problematic, with the German engineers struggling to install bridges due to American artillery fire. This meant Brandenberger's divisions couldn't deploy what little artillery and tank destroyer units they had, leaving the advancing divisions vulnerable against enemy armour. A request to use the Panzer Lehr Division's bridge a mile to the north was turned down as it was "too busy". Naturally, this slowed progress. As

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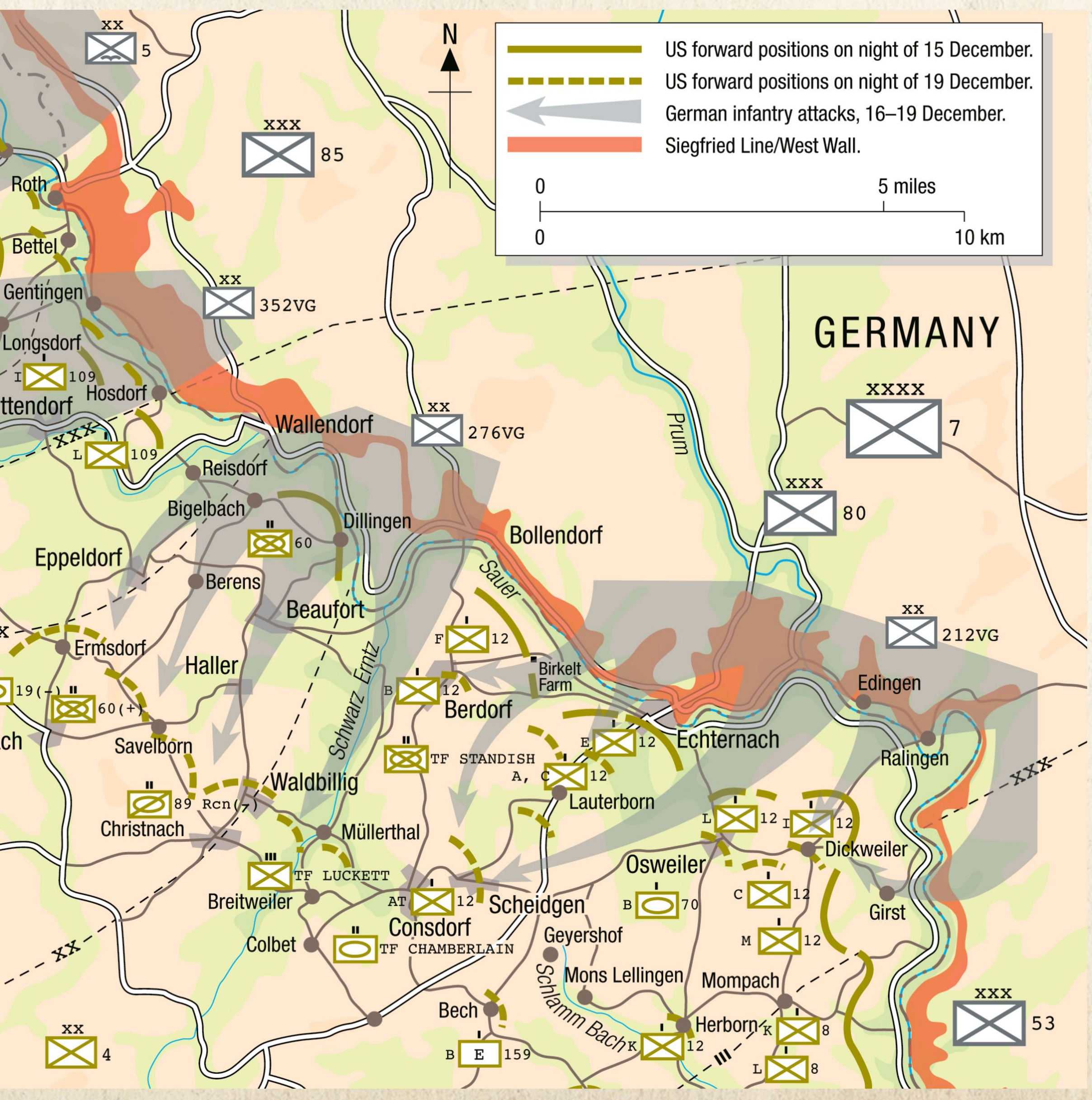
Oberst Schmidt put it, "Young soldiers succeeded without heavy weapons, using light anti-tank weapons to fight off tanks, once they had overcome their initial fear."

The German infantrymen were surprised to discover that German-born, but America-based actress Marlene Dietrich was to put on a show for the front-line troops. Dietrich had been invited to return to Germany before the war by representatives of the Nazi Party, but she held strongly anti-Nazi views and therefore promptly declined.

She had become a US citizen in 1939 and often performed shows for Allied troops. As Hollywood producer AC Lyles said, "She went pretty far out there, really close to the actual front lines... I would think the War Department and the studios were certainly worried about where she was, because she went to places where it was really dangerous. I mean, my God, she almost got caught in the Battle of the Bulge. There was even one newspaper article that said she was captured. Then that was retracted, and in its place they published a picture of Marlene with a soldier and a puppy he had found in the rubble somewhere."

The main advance of the 7th Army was held after making progress for only four miles by divisions of the US VIII Corps. Only one of Brandenberger's divisions advanced any further; the 5th Parachute Division managed to get 12 miles west on the inner flank.

***Thwarted:** The main advance of the 7th Army was held after making progress for only four miles*



Left to right: *Exhausted US infantrymen Adam H Davis and Milford A Sillars of 110th Reg. take a break during the eight-day German siege*

Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images

CRUCIAL ENGAGEMENT

The stubborn defence of Bastogne by American forces raised morale across Allied lines and ensured the German army would soon lose momentum

Along with the battles to hold St Vith and the Elsenborn Ridge, the Siege of Bastogne was one of the most important engagements in the Battle of the Bulge. A small market town of around 4,000 people, it was of vital strategic importance due to the network of solid roads that connected there. Its capture was therefore of prime concern for the Germans. As Panzer commander General Heinrich Freiherr von Lüttwitz put it, "Bastogne must be taken, otherwise it will remain an abscess in our lines of communication. We must clean out Bastogne and then march on." But the attack was falling behind schedule.

When he realised just how big the German Ardennes Offensive was, General Eisenhower called on the SHAEF reserve, the 82nd and 101st Airborne divisions, which were in France, near Reims. Although elite divisions, they were at the time resting and training replacement recruits when called upon to defend the Allied lines. Their orders on 17 December were blunt, to the point and lacking in explanation – 'Get to the front fast'. As the 101st's Brigadier General Tony McAuliffe put it, "All I know of the situation is that there has been a break and we have got to get up there."

> "BASTOGNE MUST BE TAKEN... WE MUST CLEAN OUT BASTOGNE AND THEN MARCH ON"
>
> GENERAL VON LÜTTWITZ

The original plan was for the 101st Airborne to go to Werbomont on the northern section of the bulge, but it was rerouted to Bastogne. Instead, the 82nd was sent to Werbomont to block the advance of Kampfgruppe Peiper. Transportation proved problematic.

The airborne units were equipped to be deployed by glider or parachute drop and therefore had to borrow trucks for the over-land journey. Equipment and ammunition was in short supply. The 705th Tank Destroyer Battalion, which was held in reserve around 60 miles to the north, was also moved to Bastogne to provide anti-tank support. It was joined by the 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment, which arrived by the morning of 20 December. The 28th Division command post was moved to Bastogne from Wiltz on 19 December, where it was soon joined by the 44th Engineer Battalion, which had established a position north of the town but been driven back, blowing up a bridge behind them. Lax security meant the Germans were aware of the airborne divisions' deployment and that Eisenhower had committed his reserves. But they underestimated the speed at which the paratroopers would arrive.

Although they anticipated that it would take them two or three days, Lieutenant General James Gavin of the 82nd and Brigadier General Tony McAuliffe of the 101st moved as quickly as possible and managed the journey in just 24 hours. It was not a comfortable trip. As a reporter travelling with the 101st wrote, "The ordeal went on and on. Except for the muffled sound of the engines and grinding gears, the column moved in utter silence. Not a shout was heard. They crawled along, sunk in a vast coma, a nightmare of misery, despondency and dread." ▶

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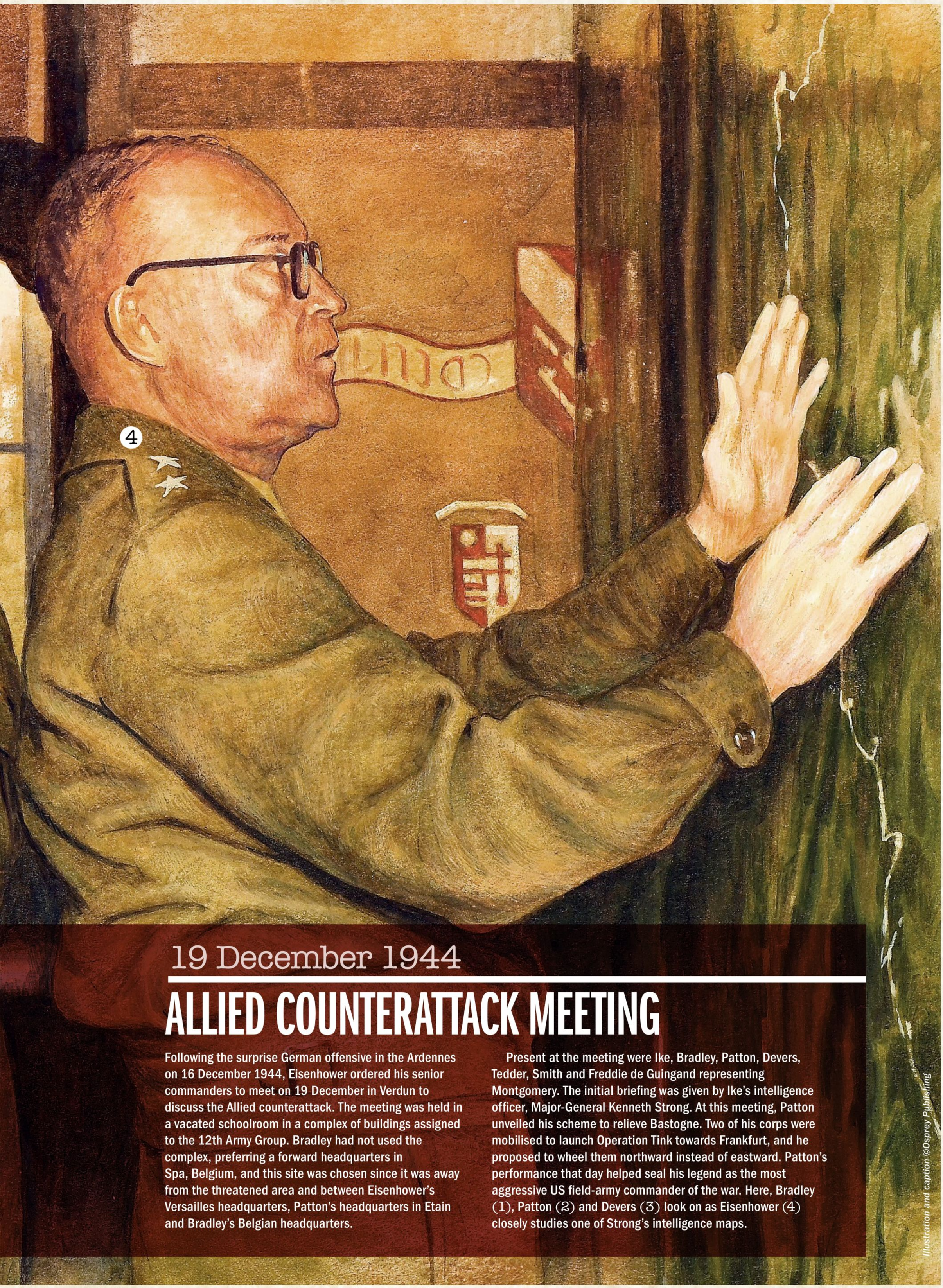


19 December 1944

ALLIED COUNTERATTACK MEETING

Following the surprise German offensive in the Ardennes on 16 December 1944, Eisenhower ordered his senior commanders to meet on 19 December in Verdun to discuss the Allied counterattack. The meeting was held in a vacated schoolroom in a complex of buildings assigned to the 12th Army Group. Bradley had not used the complex, preferring a forward headquarters in Spa, Belgium, and this site was chosen since it was away from the threatened area and between Eisenhower's Versailles headquarters, Patton's headquarters in Etain and Bradley's Belgian headquarters.

Present at the meeting were Ike, Bradley, Patton, Devers, Tedder, Smith and Freddie de Guingand representing Montgomery. The initial briefing was given by Ike's intelligence officer, Major-General Kenneth Strong. At this meeting, Patton unveiled his scheme to relieve Bastogne. Two of his corps were mobilised to launch Operation Tink towards Frankfurt, and he proposed to wheel them northward instead of eastward. Patton's performance that day helped seal his legend as the most aggressive US field-army commander of the war. Here, Bradley (1), Patton (2) and Devers (3) look on as Eisenhower (4) closely studies one of Strong's intelligence maps.

Illustration and caption ©Osprey Publishing

Under threat

The town was threatened by three German divisions; the 26th Volksgrenadier infantry division and two armoured divisions, the 2nd Panzer and Panzer Lehr. The plan was that Panzer Lehr and the 26th Volksgrenadiers were to take the town, while the 2nd Panzer division pressed on to the Meuse.

Combat Command B of the US 10th Armored Division arrived at Bastogne just ahead of the German advance and was immediately deployed to the east of the town, reinforcing the VIII Corps roadblocks. The 2nd Panzer's advance units were held off, but the perimeter couldn't hold. The American forces retreated at great cost in both lives and vehicles. Some German units had simply evaded the roadblocks and defensive positions. This included the vanguard of Panzer Lehr, led by Major General Fritz Bayerlein. He manoeuvred his 15 tanks and four companies of infantry with half-tracks down side-streets and muddy paths until he reached the village of Mageret, around three miles from Bastogne, early in the morning of 19 December. Had he advanced and attacked straight away, he would probably have taken the town. It was still only ▶

December 1944

US ARMY UNIFORM, BASTOGNE

The 28th Infantry Division Rifleman uniform (1) was originally a National Guard outfit from Pennsylvania, the `Keystone State'. Its red keystone patch was nicknamed by the 28th's GIs the 'Bloody Bucket' after its losses in Normandy and – with the 4th and 8th Divisions – in the meat grinder of the Hürtgen Forest; the 28th was then sent to the 'quiet' Ardennes sector to rest... Its two-day stand in the face of the advancing 5th Panzerarmee gave the 101st Airborne time to occupy Bastogne.

This soldier, wearing a 'home-ripped' snow camouflage cape and helmet cover made from a bedsheet, is probably from the Quartermaster company or some other divisional support unit, pitched into the fighting at short notice. Under his sheet he wears a first-pattern mackinaw with wool-faced shawl collar, a five-button sweater, the usual drab wool trousers, a pair from the new M1943 uniform (1944). His equipment is minimal: a rifle belt and a musette to carry his other gear.

(2): Bazooka gunner, 327th Glider Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division. The standard issue enlisted men's wool melton overcoat was much used by the Airborne during the Battle of the Bulge. (One paratrooper of the 82nd is reputed to have said to a worried tank crew, 'Looking for a safe place? Well, buddy, just pull in behind me.')

Under his coat this 'glider-rider' wears the standard M1943 combat jacket and buckle boots now becoming common throughout the ETO. His baggy trousers with cargo pockets are the only remaining sure sign of his Airborne status, although his belt equipment includes one of the limited-issue 'rigger's' ammunition pouches peculiar to the Airborne. He is armed with the M1 carbine and a M3 trench knife strapped to his boot; some photos show civilian knives carried as well. His main weapon, however, is the latest M9 folding version of the 2.36in anti-tank rocket launcher, or 'bazooka'. A white 'club' helmet symbol identifies his regiment.

(3): T/5, 20th Armored Infantry Regiment, 10th Armored Division. Active in the capture of Metz in November 1944, the 10th Armored Division had its Combat Command B inside Bastogne throughout the siege. This GI wears the new four-pocket, sateen-shell M1943 field jacket, introduced as a universal garment for all branches of service; he has not yet received the matching trousers but is fortunate in having secured himself a pair of M1944 shoepacs. He is armed with the MI Garand and grenades including a smooth-cased Mk III concussion type.

Among his belt equipment is the folding-head entrenching tool based on a German design, with a cut-down haft. His web equipment is in the new, greener OD shade 7 now reaching the front in quantity, although existing stocks of items in the sandier shade 9 would continue to be issued for years.

Since it is of little practical use this GI has dispensed with his bayonet. More useful is the blanket just visible tucked through the back of his belt. He is carrying the baseplate for an 81mm mortar.

Along with the 101st Airborne and 10th Armored, the Bastogne garrison included elements of the 9th Armored and 28th Infantry divisions, the 705th Tank Destroyer Bn, 1128th Engineer Combat Group and five corps-level artillery battalions.

Illustration and caption ©Osprey Publishing

UIG via Getty Images

January 1945: *Two troops of the 3rd US Army keep a close eye on a pair of German soldiers (centre) captured on the outskirts of Magerotte, Belgium*

MP

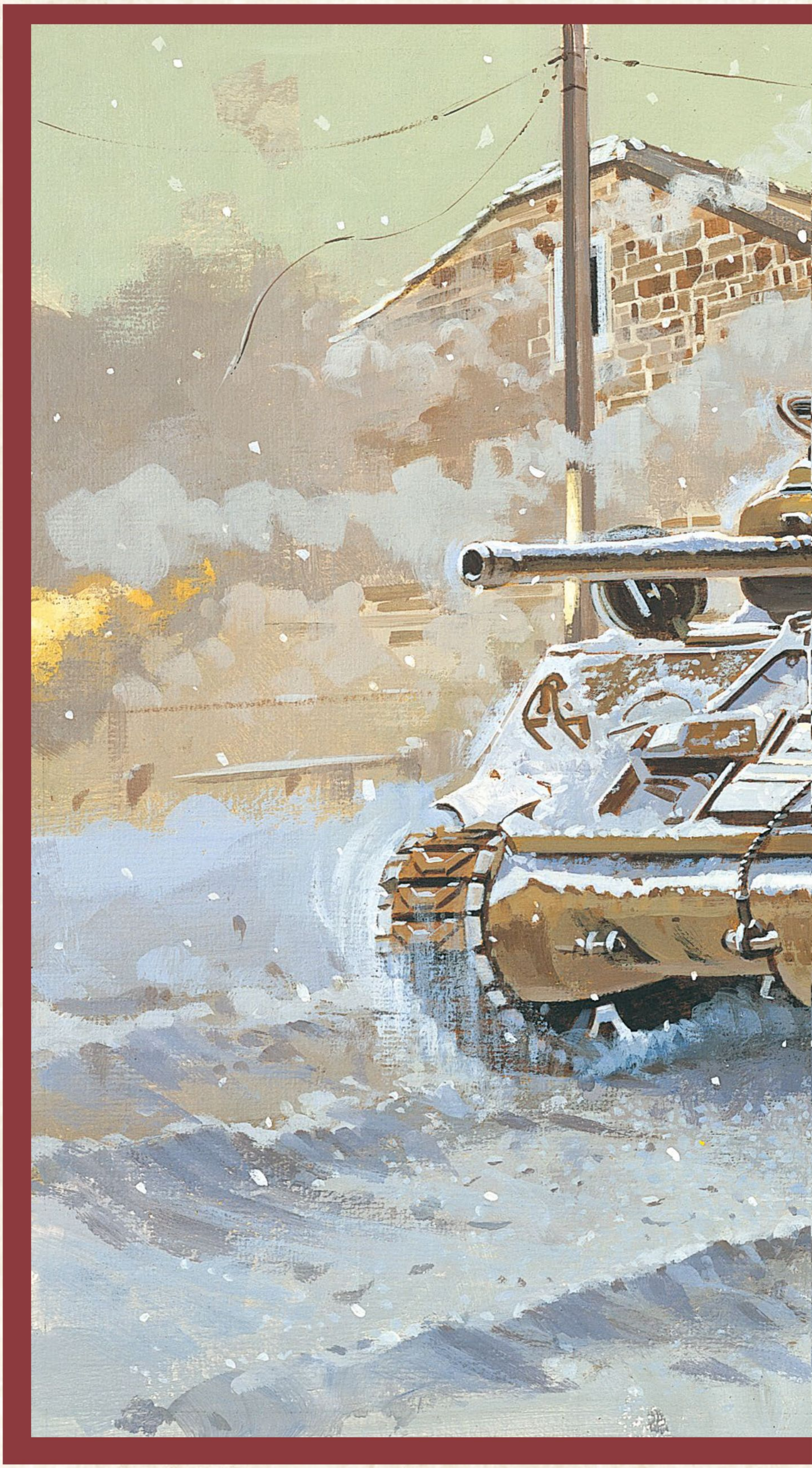
lightly defended, with the paratrooper reinforcements not yet in a battle position. But hampered by bad roads and fog and misinformed about the town's defences by a Belgian civilian, Bayerlein decided to wait for daylight before making his move.

The town of Noville, around four and a half miles to the north of Bastogne, came under attack from the 2nd Panzer Division on 19 December. It was defended by a task force of tank infantry from the 10th Armored Division under Major William Desobry and supported by the 1st Battalion of the 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment and four M18 Hellcat tank destroyers from the 705th Tank Destroyer Battalion. Desobry moved his units at great speed to intercept the 2nd Panzer advance, attacking its lead units. At least 30 German tanks were destroyed and between 500 and 1,000 casualties inflicted. The 705th used the Hellcats' high speed (they could reach 55mph) to great effect, with tank destroyers firing and moving, giving the impression that they were deployed in greater numbers than was actually the case. At the end of 19 December, the Americans were still in possession of Noville.

Outnumbered

The American forces withdrew to Bastogne on 20 December, but by then they had to fight their way through the village of Foy, which had been captured by the Germans. By the time they got back to American lines, the 1st Battalion had lost 13 officers and 199 men from a force of around 600, and Desobry's task force had lost around a quarter of its men and was down to four medium tanks. The 2nd Panzer Division continued to the Meuse, but its failure to take Noville and capture fuel dumps, and Panzer Lehr's delay in Mageret, had given the 11,000-strong 101st Airborne time to deploy. As daylight broke, Bayerlein moved Panzer Lehr into Bastogne only to come up against a regiment from the 101st under Lieutenant Colonel Julian Ewell.

A defensive perimeter was formed around the settlement. Defences were strongest to the north and east of the town, so General von Lüttwitz attempted to encircle it and strike from the south and southwest. By midday on 21 December, all seven major roads to Bastogne were cut off by German forces, and by midnight the American units in the town were surrounded. They were outnumbered by around five to one and lacked cold-weather clothing. They were also so low on supplies and ammunition that by 22 December artillery ammunition was restricted to ten rounds per gun per day. Due to one of the worst winters in living memory, the town's defenders could not be supported or resupplied from the ▶



THUNDERBOLT AT BASTOGNE

This plate shows a column of tanks led by Abrams in Thunderbolt VI advancing towards Bastogne around Christmas 1944.

Abrams switched to a M4A3 (76mm) medium tank in the autumn of 1944 after the Arracourt tank battles at the request of the CCA commander, Col. Bruce Clarke. As in the case of his previous tanks, this one carried the Thunderbolt cartoon on the hull side. The tank is fitted with duck-bill extended-end connectors for better traction in snow and mud.

Illustration and caption ©Osprey Publishing

"IF THIS PROPOSAL IS REJECTED, THEN WE WILL ANNIHILATE US TROOPS"

GENERAL VON LÜTTWITZ

air. To make matters worse, raids early in the attack had captured most of the Allied medical supplies and personnel. The situation looked grim, but the perimeter held. Paratroopers were experienced in fighting behind enemy lines, so they were not unduly worried by being surrounded. As one member of the 101st noted in a report, "The cutting of the roads "had no effect upon our present situation except to make travel hazardous."

In an attempt to break the stand-off, at 11:30am on 22 December, General von Lüttwitz sent a message to 'The USA Commander', delivered by four of his troops under a flag of truce. It read, "The fortune of war is changing. This time the USA forces in and near Bastogne have been encircled by strong German armoured units. More German armoured units have crossed the river Our near Ortheuville, have taken Marche and reached St. Hubert by passing through Hompre-Sibret-Tillet. Libramont is in German hands.

Go to hell

"There is only one possibility to save the encircled USA troops from total annihilation: that is the honourable surrender of the encircled town. In order to think it over, a term of two hours will be granted beginning with the presentation of this note.

"If this proposal should be rejected, one German Artillery Corps and six heavy AA Battalions are ready to annihilate the USA troops in and near Bastogne. The order for firing will be given immediately after this two hours term.

"All the serious civilian losses caused by this artillery fire would not correspond with the well-known American humanity. The German Commander."

McAuliffe read the note and exclaimed, "Aw, nuts," throwing it on the floor. Realising the message was a formal military communication that demanded an answer, he reconsidered and asked his staff what he should write in reply. Operations officer Lieutenant Colonel Harry Kinnard suggested McAuliffe's initial comment would suffice. And so it was. "To the German Commander. NUTS! The American Commander."

The note was delivered by Colonel Joe Harper, who commanded the sector in which the envoys were held. On reading it, the Germans failed to understand its American slang, so Harper explained. "It's the same as 'Go to Hell!' And I'll tell you something else. If you continue to attack, we'll kill every goddam German that tries to break into this city!" ▶

Vital role: *The pathfinder unit of the 101st Airborne Division, dropped by parachute, sets up radar equipment near Bastogne*

NARA/US Army

10 January 1945: *A US, Army sergeant (35th Inf, Div, 320th Inf, Regt, Co C) fighting in the Bastogne area*

UIG via Getty Images

UIG via Getty Images

Camouflage: *One of the 105mm self-propelled field pieces of the 212th Armored FA Bn, 6th Armored Div, is kept hidden under a snow-covered camouflage near Bastogne*

The Americans' stubborn refusal to surrender the besieged town was not only holding up the German advance; it was also raising morale across the Allied lines.

Uplifting drop

Morale in Bastogne was lifted further on 23 December, when the fog cleared enough for a fleet of C-47s from England to parachute in supplies. A few were brought down by German anti-aircraft fire, but the drop was extremely successful, with 144 tons being dropped and around 95 per cent of them recovered. German positions were bombed and strafed from the air too. This continued over the Christmas period, with supplies being dropped on most days. Countess Rene Greindel, wife of the Governor of Luxembourg Province, lived near Bastogne.

"Shortly after 3pm, we could watch a real fairy tale sight which, for three days, was to be repeated several times a day; the first parachutes," she later wrote.

"From the southeast, we saw at least 150 Dakotas, flying at about 600 feet high, and which dropped over a plain, situated between our home and Bastogne, a swarm of yellow, red, blue, green and white parachutes. The plain was indicated to the pilots by a pink cloud. The scene cannot be described; the dazzling snow under bright sunshine, and in perfectly blue sky the dropping of lovely shades."

By Christmas 1945, both the 2nd Panzer Division and Panzer Lehr had moved on, leaving Panzer Lehr's 901st Regiment and the 26th Volksgrenadier Division behind. On Christmas Eve, the Volksgrenadiers were joined by a regiment of the 15th Panzergrenadier Division for a Christmas Day all-out assault, assisted by the XLVII Panzer Corps. During the night Luftwaffe bombers softened up the defences inside. The American command post was bombed, killing four officers.

For the main assault, Lüttwitz attacked the so-far untested northwestern corner of the perimeter at the village of Champs. His tanks and grenadiers burst through the defensive line. But by mustering every possible fighting man, including the wounded and backroom staff such as clerks and cooks, and some excellent work from the tank destroyer battalion, the Americans managed to throw back their attackers. They faced the best the Germans had to offer and won.

The siege is broken

On Boxing Day 1945, Lieutenant Colonel Creighton Abrams of the 4th Armored Division of General Patton's Third Army led his 20 Sherman tanks and infantry units in half-tracks towards Bastogne from the south. Blasting its way through the siege lines, his force reached the American defensive perimeter at 4.30pm. The siege of Bastogne had been broken.

Although no longer surrounded, fighting around Bastogne continued for the duration of the Battle of the Bulge. But the town had not been taken, as was the plan for the Ardennes Offensive. Although the defenders had lost around 2,500–3,500 troops, the cost to the Germans was far higher. Their attack had stalled, their momentum irretrievably lost. ▶

(Right) Under siege: *Refugees evacuate the Belgian town of Bastogne as US forces dig in*

NARA/US Army

December 1944

CHRISTMAS IN BASTOGNE

In the early morning of Christmas Day, Kampfgruppe Mauke of the newly arrived 15th Panzergrenadier Division launched an attack against the positions of the 502nd Parachute Infantry (1) and the 327th Glider Infantry on the northern side of the Bastogne perimeter. The attack was beaten decisively in savage skirmishes in the woods and villages outside the city. This scene shows the aftermath of the skirmish as the paratroopers try to reinforce their positions for a possible renewed German onslaught.

The most vivid memory for most American veterans of the Battle of the Bulge was the misery of life in the foxholes. Units would move every day or so, which necessitated the digging of another set of foxholes and defensive positions (2).

While foxholes were useful in providing protection from German infantry attack, the main killer in the Ardennes fighting on both sides was artillery. Artillery was particularly deadly in wooded areas, since detonations in the trees tended to spray the area with wood splinters. Not only were these splinters deadly against unprotected infantry, but even if an infantryman was only lightly wounded (3), the small splinters of wood were difficult for medics (4) to find and remove and so often led

Illustration and caption ©Osprey Publishing

to life-threatening infections. The best protection against this scourge was the foxhole. The standard US Army practice was a two-man foxhole, deep enough to stand in. If a unit was stationary for any period of time, the practice was to create two sets of defences – a deep fighting foxhole, and a long, shallow trench for sleeping, with overhead cover such as logs. GIs were issued either the pre-war style 'T'-handled entrenching shovel, or the later M1943 type (5) that had a folding blade. Neither was particularly effective.

The 101st Airborne Division was hastily deployed to the Ardennes after months of fighting in the Netherlands. By this stage, their paratrooper garb had given way to the same uniforms worn by other US infantry. This was especially true of new replacements and the glider infantry.

One of the major scandals of the Ardennes was the poor preparation of the US Army in providing adequate winter clothing. A particular problem in the winter of 1944-45 was the inadequate supply of water-resistant winter boots. This led to high levels of trench foot in US infantry units.

In the background are a pair of burning PzKpfw IV tanks (6). Although overshadowed by the larger Panther tank, the PzKpfw IV was still the most common German tank type deployed in the fighting in the Ardennes.

Hidden in the tree line is an M18 76mm gun motor carriage (7). This tank destroyer was the fastest tracked combat vehicle of World War II, and it was designed to fulfil the Tank Destroyer Command's motto of "Seek, strike, destroy". However, its effectiveness was undermined by the poor performance of its gun against German armoured vehicles such as the Panther and the Jagdpanzer IV/70. The more powerful M36 tank destroyer, with its 90mm gun, was the preferred choice in the winter of 1944-45. (Peter Dennis)

THE CHRISTMAS COUNTER-ATTACK

Bad weather and a lack of fuel heralds the beginning of the end for the German forces struggling through the Ardennes

By 23 December, the eighth day of the Battle of the Bulge, the Germans' territorial gains (the eponymous 'bulge') was around 45 miles wide and 60 miles across, with its most westerly line around four miles from its key objective, the River Meuse. But the advance was stalling. Already way behind schedule, German armoured units were running out of fuel and key objectives had yet to be taken from the enemy.

St Vith and Bastogne were still in American hands, and after the initial element of surprise was lost, resistance was intense. The battle was reaching its critical period. Both Model and Manteuffel now realised that taking Antwerp was impossible, so they proposed a new plan that limited their advance to the Meuse. Hitler declined, demanding a renewed push to cross the river. It was a short-sighted decision.

Not only was the attack on the ground running out of steam, but the fog and snow that had shielded it from Allied air attack was lifting, allowing British and American aircraft to operate in the Ardennes. Naturally, the Allies took full advantage of this change in the weather. Not only could they resupply and support the besieged defenders at Bastogne, but bombing raids targeted German supply points to the rear of the main advance as well as taking out bridges, roads and railway lines to disrupt their movement. P-47 Thunderbolt fighter-bombers, P-38 Lightning heavy fighters and rocket-firing British Typhoons strafed and harassed enemy troops and vehicles.

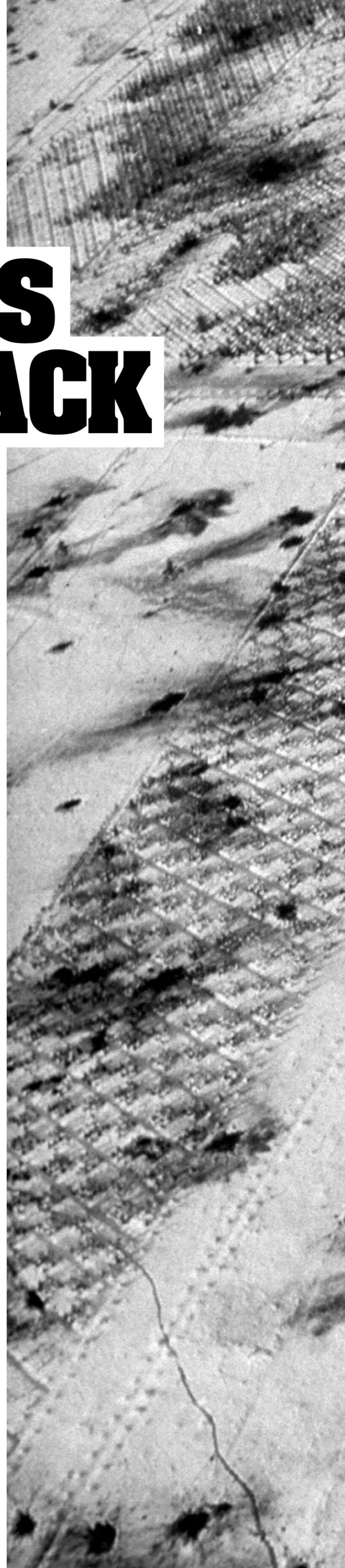
Friendly fire

On 23 December, 28 B-26 Marauder medium bombers took off for Zülpich, just over 30 miles northeast of Malmedy. The skies weren't totally clear by then, and after becoming lost the pilots either aborted the mission or bombed alternative targets. Six of these bombers attacked American-held Malmedy in error. Major General Leland Hobbs, commander of the 30th Division holding the town, made a frantic call to the First Army HQ. "Planes are bombing Malmedy. We haven't a line left to anyone in the town. Get them off." The bombs landed in the middle of the town, killing soldiers and civilians and starting fires. The 291st Engineers had to dynamite buildings to create fire breaks in order to bring the flames under control.

Winter takes its toll

By the afternoon of Christmas Eve, survivors were still being dug out of the rubble when eighteen B-24 Liberators flew over the town and bombed it again. Then on Christmas Day, four B-26 bombers mistook Malmedy for St Vith, which was by then in German hands, and bombed it with 64 general-purpose, 250lb explosives. Over the three accidental bombing raids, at least 125 Belgian civilians were killed. The American forces in the town suffered 37 dead and another 100 or so wounded.

The cold weather was also a problem. Trench foot was causing infantry casualties on both sides, and the drop in temperature associated with the clearing skies compounded the problem. As medic Private Lester Atwell put it, "Their chapped hands split open, their lips cracked, their feet froze. They had heavy colds, trench foot, pneumonia, and dysentery; they became exhausted and stiff from too prolonged exposure, but they could not be relieved. Larger and larger numbers arrived daily... After trudging several miles through deep snow, in they came, their uniforms white with snow, their faces pinched, astonished, red and mottled. Even the very young looked old." ▶



Time & Life Pictures/ Getty Images

Death from above: *This aerial view shows shell bursts in a snowy plantation in a clearing of the forest near Langlire*

"TRENCH FOOT WAS CAUSING INFANTRY CASUALTIES ON BOTH SIDES, AND THE DROP IN TEMPERATURE COMPOUNDED THE PROBLEM"

Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, in charge of the northern section of the bulge, had come up with a plan to tidy up the battle zone and prepare for a counter-offensive. The front line, he thought, was not stable and secure enough for piecemeal counter-attacks. Instead, the First Army should make a series of 'voluntary withdrawals' to straighten the defensive line and draw the German forces further westwards, expending their fuel and lengthening their supply lines. The Elsenborn Ridge should be held to prevent them widening their territorial gains.

Internal conflicts

The Americans didn't quite see things Montgomery's way, preferring to hold their positions. Generals such as Bradley, Patton, Hodges and Bedell Smith all felt he was throwing away a golden opportunity to strike back at the enemy and finish them once and for all. But the British commander was unmoved. He strengthened the defences of the bridges over the Meuse and began to put together a reserve for a counter-attack that was to be led by Major General J Lawton Collins. His orders were to establish a force of four divisions in the northwest corner of the Ardennes and avoid combat until he was ordered to commit to action. Yet staying out of the fight proved impossible, as actions around the American 'voluntary' retreats gradually sucked his forces into the battle. By Christmas Eve, units from all four divisions were fighting.

The spearhead of the Fifth Panzer Army was stuck at Celles, four miles from the river and very low on fuel, and almost three Panzer divisions were on the way to reinforce it. Should they be given time to rebuild and rearm, they could strike for the Meuse and either cross it or stay on its east bank and flank the First Army. Collins felt neither outcome should ▶

UIG via Getty Images

Dinner is served: *A group of the 87th US Division line up for much-needed food on their drive towards La Roche, Belgium, on 13 January 1945*

"NOTHING WILL MAKE THE SLIGHTEST CHANGE IN MY DECISION TO FIGHT ON"

ADOLF HITLER

be allowed. The 2nd Armored Division commander Major General Ernest Harmon reported to Collins that his patrols had spotted the 2nd Panzer at Celles, in a bad shape and almost out of fuel. "We've got the whole damned 2nd Panzer Division in a sack," he said. "You've got to give me immediate authority to attack!"

Collins was unavailable to clear the attack, so Harmon made initial preparations and waited for the go-ahead. When it came, a deliberately ambiguous phrase appeared to give Harmon full permission to take whatever action he felt was necessary, so at 8am on Christmas Day, an attack on the 2nd Panzer Division was launched.

Collins' plan was straightforward. The 2nd Panzer Division, by now almost immobile, would be trapped by two forces positioned to stop reinforcements arriving. One would block the advance of the Panzer Lehr, and the other would halt the advance of the 9th Panzer Division.

Combat Command B split into two and struck at the main body of the 2nd Panzer Division in a woodland near Celles. The Germans were quickly overcome, with around 200 of them taken prisoner. Further to the west, the 2nd Panzer's reconnaissance battalion was also taken, trapped between British units on one side, Harmon's tanks on the other and Allied aircraft from above.

No peace for Christmas

The coming of the festive season offered the harassed Germans nothing in the way of respite, as Gefreite Guido Gnilsen, a radio operator in the 2nd Panzer grenadier regiment, 2nd Panzer Division, lamented.

"We were hoping for a bit of peace over Christmas. It was a wonderful Christmas Day, the sun was shining and it was very quiet. We moved farther west, the convoy making a hell of a lot of noise – no wonder the enemy artillery was landing shells right in the middle... The tanks were stranded at Celles. No petrol, and the enemy was preparing to surround us."

Harmon's blocking forces did their jobs admirably, supported by Allied air forces. Neither Panzer Lehr or the 9th Panzer Division were able to break through and reinforce the 2nd Panzer Division at Celles. Late on Christmas Day, General Heinrich Freiherr von Lüttwitz ordered them to pull back to Rochefort, leaving the 2nd Panzer at the mercy of the Americans.

Two attempts at breaking out and returning to German lines were made on 26 and 27 December, but they met with little success. Surrounded and abandoned, around 600 eventually managed to escape, leaving their equipment in Allied hands: 82 German tanks were captured or destroyed, along with 83 anti-tank or artillery guns and 500 vehicles. A total of 900 German troops were killed and another 1,213 captured. In contrast, the 2nd Armored Division had 43 men killed and 201 wounded. Of the 28 tanks that were hit, 26 were soon back in action.

Hitler presses on

It seemed the Ardennes Offensive was falling apart, at least as Hitler had originally planned it. The initiative had been lost, but the battle was to continue. By 28 December even Hitler finally realised that the German position was desperate, but he was convinced that victory was still achievable.

"As much as I may be physically tormented by worries and even shaken by them," he said, "nothing will make the slightest change in my decision to fight on until at last the scales tip to our side."

Emboldened by his fanatical faith in Germany's ability to turn the tide of the war (despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary), Hitler began to plan new operations. The Ardennes attack, he claimed, had forced the Americans to withdraw 50 per cent of their forces to other areas, leaving vulnerabilities in key areas that could be exploited in the New Year with two new offensives: Operations Bodenplatte and Nordwind.

Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images

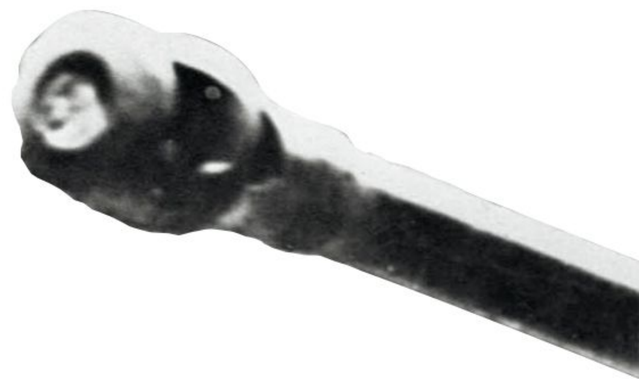
Captured: *Members of the US 1st Army closely guard German prisoners captured during winter fighting in the forests of the Ardennes*

NEW YEAR MANOEUVRES

Hitler was down but not out. Despite the disarray the Ardennes Offensive was in, the Führer held a firm belief that the two operations he ordered to take place as the first days of 1945 arrived would have a decisive effect on the fortunes of the German army. This turned out to be only half true, with his forces suffering badly for the small victories that could be claimed in January...

21 January 1945: *US military vehicles circumvent shell craters in a snowy field in the Ardennes as they bring supplies and ammunition to the front*

Getty Images



NORDWIND AND BODENPLATTE

In desperation, Hitler launched two offensives aimed at "destroying and exterminating enemy forces wherever we find them"

On New Year's Day 1945, Hitler – still convinced that victory was possible – launched two new offensives designed to reclaim the initiative and turn the tide of the Battle of the Bulge, which was definitely going against him. Operation Norwind (North Wind) was to be an attack on the Alsace-Lorraine region of northern France, territory captured by Germany after the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71 but returned to France after World War I.

Hitler's rationale for the new offensive was that the conflict in the Ardennes had drained American troops from Alsace-Lorraine, which lay around 125 miles south. As the Führer himself put it, "The Americans have been forced to withdraw something like 50 per cent of the forces from their other fronts to the Ardennes. [The result] is that their line in Alsace has become extraordinarily thin. There we shall find a situation which we could not wish to be better. Its success would bring about the collapse of the threat to the left of the main offensive."

Hitler's aims were simple. By breaking through the front occupied by the US 7th Army and French 1st Army in the Upper Vosges mountains and Alsatian Plain, a pincer movement could trap and destroy the US 3rd Army.

Outlining the operation to around 20 of his generals at his Ziegenberg Castle HQ on 28 December, he said, "This attack has a very clear objective, namely the destruction of the enemy forces. There is not a matter of prestige involved here. It is a matter of destroying and exterminating the enemy forces wherever we find them.

"The question of liberating all of Alsace at this time is not involved either. That would be very nice, the impression on the German people would be immeasurable, the impression on the world decisive, terrific psychologically, the impression on the French people would be depressing. But that is not important. It is more important, as I said before, to destroy his (the Allies') manpower."

A bitter contest

To release his own manpower for this new offensive, troops were removed from the Western Front, most notably the Maginot Line, and replaced with ad hoc units. For the attack, the Germans raised five Volksgrenadier Divisions (the 36th, 559th, 257th, 361st and 256th), the 17th SS Panzergrenadiers and the 6th SS Mountain Division. In reserve were the 21st Panzer Division, the 653rd Anti-Tank Company and the 25th Panzergrenadier Division. The under-strength US 7th Army was very thinly spread, covering 125 miles with only six infantry divisions, namely the 103rd, 44th, 100th, 45th, 79th and 36th, with the 14th Armored Division, which had just arrived in the area, in reserve.

Also just arrived were the 42nd, 63rd and 70th infantry divisions, which were without their armoured and artillery units, which were all still in transit. These were divided into three task forces and would plug gaps in the American line wherever they arose.

The German forces attacked around midnight on 31 December and immediately faced stiff resistance. The Americans were dug in well and quick on the counter-attack. Even so, the Volksgrenadiers achieved early successes, penetrating the American defences from Bitche to Neunhoffen. Captured American Shermans were used against French forces, causing confusion among the Allies. By 4 January, a ten-mile salient had been opened. Eisenhower ordered the Allied commander, General Jacob Devers, to pull back the 7th Army to Vosges, but the leader of the Free French, General Charles de Gaulle, objected, as this would leave Strasbourg vulnerable. Eisenhower reluctantly agreed to limit the withdrawal to the Maginot Line, leaving it well defended. The battle became one

"EISENHOWER ORDERED THE 7TH ARMY TO PULL BACK TO VOSGES, BUT CHARLES DE GAULLE OBJECTED"

Ride to war: *German paratroopers cling to the roof of a Tiger tank churning its way towards the front lines*

Getty Images

of attrition. According to the official US history, "As American reinforcements met German attacks the battle quickly turned into a bitter winter infantry fight focusing on the towns that lay along the snow-covered mountain roads."

Significant attacks north of Strasbourg followed on 5 January. On 6 January the Luftwaffe took advantage of a break in the poor weather to fly 175 sorties over the battlefield. 7 January saw a renewed attack on Strasbourg. Again, according to official US history, "[There was] bitter hand-to-hand [fighting] in the small towns, with the dismounted Panzer grenadiers and armoured infantrymen fighting side by side with the more lowly foot infantry. Almost every structure was hotly contested, and at the end of every day each side totalled up the number of houses and buildings it controlled. Often in the smoke, haze and darkness, friendly troops found themselves firing at one another and few ventured into the narrow but open streets, preferring to advance or withdraw through the blown-out interior walls of the gutted houses."

Strasbourg is saved

Despite more fierce attacks and the Nazi boast that the swastika flag would fly over Strasbourg on the anniversary of Hitler's chancellorship of Germany on 30 January, the offensive petered out. American defences had held. Strasbourg was saved.

Around 25 January, the 21st Panzer, 7th Parachute and 25th Panzer divisions quietly withdrew, abandoning the 20 miles of flat land (which had no strategic value) that they had taken during the last month.

Operation Nordwind had proven to be a failure. The battle had also been incredibly costly for both sides in terms of manpower. Germany had suffered around 25,000 casualties, while the Americans counted 15,600 casualties.

This last German offensive of World War II did not cause the Americans to thin out their forces in the Ardennes to reinforce the new front as Hitler had hoped. In fact, as military historian Charles B MacDonald explains, it had the opposite effect.

"Lest the German operation expand to the north, Eisenhower and Bradley on 10 January ordered Patton, over his strenuous objections, to send a division to back up his overextended XX Corps in defensive ▶

9 January 1945

ATTACK ON THE MAGINOT LINE

The advance by Kampfgruppe Feuchtinger towards Haguenau Forest was blocked by a string of Maginot Line fortifications built by the French army in the 1930s.

Hatten had several casemates (1) on its eastern side as well as observation bunkers and personnel shelters behind the town in the direction of Rittershoffen. When 25. Panzergrenadier-Division was given the assignment of breaking through this line on 9 January, they began their preparations by calling forward their divisional Pionier units (engineers), who were equipped with portable flame-throwers and explosive charges. In addition, Panzer-Flamm-Kompanie 352, which was equipped with ten Flammpanzer 38(t) tanks (2) had been attached to the Kampfgruppe specifically for these sort of situations.

The usual tactic for dealing with these pillboxes was to attempt to cut through any barbed-wire obstructions in the pre-dawn hours as well as to make a preliminary sweep for mines.

Minefields posed an unusual threat in the January fighting as the rain has thoroughly soaked

Illustration and caption ©Osprey Publishing

the ground, and the sudden frost that arrived in the third week of December 1944 froze the ground and the mines with it.

The US infantry defences on the outskirts of Hatten did not rely on the casemates alone but on infantry trenches and emplaced 57mm anti-tank guns. These were suppressed in advance by German artillery, and there were often assault guns or tanks present to deal with any surviving defences outside of the bunkers. Once it appeared that the exterior defences had been suppressed, the bunkers would be attacked either by a Pionier team, or in some cases by a Flammpanzer 38(t) as seen here.

The Flammpanzer 38(t) in the background has a Pionier team (3) accompanying it as it was often necessary to use explosive charges to pry the American defenders out of the bunkers, even after being hit repeatedly by flame-throwers.

The Flammpanzer 38(t) had been ordered by Hitler specifically for Nordwind on 27 November 1944. It consisted of the usual Jagdpanzer 38(t) but with a Kobe Flammenwerfer fitted in place of the usual 75mm gun. It was fed from a 185-gallon tank inside the vehicle, which was enough for about 60-70 flame bursts (4), and it had an effective range of about 50 metres.

The Hatten attack saw the first use of these vehicles by this company, which took heavy losses during the Hatten-Rittershoffen fighting, and several were later deployed in street fighting in Rittershoffen, France, where two of them were lost to American fire. ▶

"SECURITY AROUND THE OPERATION WAS TIGHT. SOME GERMAN GROUND AND NAVAL FORCES WEREN'T INFORMED OF THE ASSAULT, LEADING TO FRIENDLY FIRE"

UIG via Getty Images

***Down and out:** An American soldier inspects the wreckage of a German plane knocked down by 3rd US Army anti-aircraft fire near Asselborn, Luxembourg*

positions facing the Saar; Patton chose the 4th Armored Division, which was down to 42 medium tanks and badly needed a rest in any case. That was all."

Operation Bodenplatte (Baseplate) fared better. Originally planned for 14 December but delayed until New Year's Day, the plan involved ten elite Luftwaffe formations flying 1,035 sorties against 27 airfields in France, the Netherlands and Belgium, destroying Allied fighter and fighter-bomber capabilities on the ground. The benefits would be two-fold.

The diminished Allied air forces would be unable to offer support to units fighting in the Battle of the Bulge, and German cities and factories would get a respite from the nightly bombings. Security around the operation was tight – so much so that some German ground and naval forces weren't informed of the assault, leading to friendly fire.

Allied intelligence was aware of a build-up in the region, but it didn't get any forewarning of the operation. German orders read, "Maintaining complete radio silence up to the moment of the attack. All squadrons will fly low over the frontier simultaneously in the early hours of the morning to take the enemy air forces by surprise and catch them on the ground."

By this stage in the war, mustering enough pilots was a major problem for Germany. Every available pilot was used for Bodenplatte, even senior staff who by now directed operations but did not usually fly themselves. Inexperienced pilots were used and given orders to follow the more experienced fliers to the targets.

JU-88s operated as pathfinders, with most of the aircraft involved in the attack being Messerschmitt Bf 109 and Focke-Wulf Fw 190 fighters. The pilots were underbriefed, often knowing only the bare essentials of the operation. While this lack of information reduced the risk of leaks, it also sowed confusion among some ranks.

Surprise attack

On 1 January, the pilots were up at 5am. A cloudless sky was predicted, and the planes took off without a hitch. Flying at treetop height to avoid Allied radar, due to a planning blunder some squadrons flew over the V2 rocket launch sites around The Hague, which caused most of the friendly fire losses. Even so, 16 Allied airfields were attacked, with hundreds of fighters, bombers and transporters destroyed.

Although many of the inexperienced German pilots weren't very good at strafing shots, they still managed to inflict a lot of damage before they ran out of ammunition and turned for home. As one Luftwaffe pilot remembered, "I gave the order to regroup. Then one more glance at the smoking piles of debris and the occasional columns of flames. The snow had melted and dirty grey pools of water had formed between the burning aircraft. One solitary ack-ack crew fired in vain as we left."

A pyrrhic victory

The damage inflicted by the German bombers was severe. An airfield near Brussels was left with 123 Spitfires and Typhoons destroyed, along with C-47 transporters and Flying Fortress heavy bombers. At Metz-Frescaty, the USAAF had 22 P-47 Thunderbolts destroyed and 11 damaged. In total, around 300 Allied aircraft were lost to Operation Bodenplatte. But nor did the Luftwaffe emerge unscathed.

Around 90 German planes were lost to Allied anti-aircraft fire, friendly fire and hastily scrambled allied aircraft. Many of the pilots that were killed or captured were veteran, experienced fliers, which put even greater pressure on the novices now serving in what was left of the Luftwaffe.

For a week after Operation Bodenplatte, Allied air power in the Ardennes region was nullified, but replacements soon poured in. Given the pressures being exerted on German factories and her severe shortage of pilots, Luftwaffe losses could not so easily be replenished. Despite its successes in destroying Allied aircraft, Bodenplatte had weakened German air power well beyond its capabilities to rebuild. As General of Fighters Adolf Galland would later lament, "We sacrificed our last substance."

Despite its limited short-term successes, Operation Bodenplatte was purely a pyrrhic victory that left Germany unable to defend her airspace for the remaining 17 weeks of the war. As German historian Werner Girbig explains, the operation proved extremely costly in the long run for a nation struggling to fight a war on two fronts.

"It was not until the autumn of 1944 that the German fighter forces set foot down the sacrificial path; and it was the controversial Operation Bodenplatte that dealt this force a mortal blow and sealed its fate. What happened from then on was no more than a dying flicker."

New Year's Day 1945

OPERATION BODENPLATTE

At 09.30am on New Year's Day, the Luftwaffe staged its long-delayed attack on Allied airfields, codenamed Bodenplatte (baseplate). Among the participants were the Me-262A-2a fighter-bombers (1) of KG51, one of Hitler's new wonder weapons. 21 of these aircraft took part in attacks on RAF airfields at Eindhoven and Heesch in the Netherlands. The Eindhoven strike was conducted in conjunction with Bf-109 and FW-190 fighters (2) of Jagdgeschwader 3 and was the more successful of the two missions, destroying or damaging about 50 of the Typhoons (3) and Spitfires stationed with the three wings there. The attack on Heesch with Jagdgeschwader 6 had little effect, and one Me-262 was lost to ground fire.

Kampfgeschwader 51 was the principal Luftwaffe unit operating the fighter-bomber version of the Me-262 at the time, and it was responsible for the majority of Me-262 sorties in late 1944. The I Gruppe flew from the Rheine and Hopsten airbases while II Gruppe flew from Hesepe. They were used repeatedly in ground-attack missions in the Ardennes, though there is little evidence to suggest they were effective in this role given the

Illustration and caption ©Osprey Publishing

difficulty of delivering unguided bombs at high speed and low altitude. KG 51 lost a total of five aircraft during the Ardennes missions in December: four to fighters and one to flak.

The origins of the fighter-bomber version of the Me-262 were controversial. Although the aircraft had been designed from the outset as a fighter, Hitler was insistent it should be used as a fighter-bomber as well. This version could carry two 550lb bombs (4) under the nose and additional fuel to extend its range. However, two of its four 30mm cannons were removed to save weight (5). It was far from ideal as a fighter-bomber, since the pilot had a difficult time aiming against the target except in risky, low-altitude strikes or from a shallow dive.

The first of these aircraft were deployed with Erprobungskommando Schenk (test detachment Schenk) in France in late July 1944, becoming redesignated as I/KG 51 in mid-August. The handful of aircraft were used in occasional ground-attack missions against the Allies throughout August, and one of the new jet fighter-bombers was downed by a US P-47 fighter on 28 August 1944 near Brussels. The Me-262A-2a seen here wears the distinctive markings of KG 51. The unit markings include the white tip on the nose and tail (6). The unit codes on the fuselage side (7) are the four-letter style, in this case 9K+CP with the 9K identifying KG 51, the third enlarged letter identifying the individual aircraft, and the final letter indicating the Staffel (H, K, L, M, N, P).

The aircraft's camouflage finish is typical of this period: RLM 76 light blue on the undersides, with RLM 81 brown-violet and 82 dark green on the upper surfaces and extending down the sides in an irregular spray-painted mottled pattern.

THE CHENOGNE MASSACRE

The killing of POWs and civilians by SS troops prompted a desire for revenge among US forces. On 1 January 1945, a unit of the 11th Armored Division allegedly went too far

The German forces fighting the Battle of the Bulge gained a reputation for savagery, especially Kampfgruppe Peiper on the northern shoulder. At Malmedy, 84 American prisoners of war were shot by Waffen-SS troops. At Wereth, 11 African-American GIs were tortured and killed after surrendering to the Germans. And nor did civilians escape their attentions either. In Stavelot, 92 men, women and children were murdered by members of the battalion commanded by Major Gustav Knittel, allegedly for helping the Americans, and at Bande, 32 young men were killed by the Gestapo as a reprisal for the village's role in the resistance movement.

According to military historian and former army intelligence officer Hugh M Cole, "By 20 December, Peiper's command had murdered around 350 American prisoners and at least 100 unarmed Belgian civilians, this total derived from killings at 12 different locations along Peiper's line of march." At his trial in 1946, Peiper claimed Hitler had ordered "a wave of terror and fright and that no human inhibitions be shown."

No surrender

Naturally, news of these massacres and atrocities spread among the Allies, some of whom were keen for revenge. One unit issued orders that "No SS troops or paratroopers will be taken prisoner but will be shot on sight." As Cole put it, "It is probable that Germans who attempted to surrender in the days immediately after the 17 [December, when the Malmedy massacre became known] ran a greater risk than would have been the case during the autumn campaign." But on 1 January 1945, a unit of the American 11th Armored Division fighting in the Belgian village of Chenogne allegedly went too far.

At the end of an intense battle, German troops occupying houses in the village came out to escape the fires started by shellfire from tanks. According to author Joseph Cummins, "The first to come out were German medics waving Red Cross flags. The Americans shot them down immediately. More and more Germans rushed out and they, too, were machine gunned." Worse was to follow. Around 60 Germans were taken prisoner, and lined up in the street. A sergeant shouted, "Not here. The others in the woods [Germans who had not yet surrendered] will see. Take them over that hill." Behind the hill, they were machine-gunned to death.

Dark day

John Fague of B Company, 21st Armored Infantry Battalion (of the 11th Armored Division) was an eyewitness to the massacre. In *Thunderbolt Unit Histories*, he says, "Some of the boys had some prisoners line up. I knew they were going to shoot them, and I hated this business. I hid behind one of our tanks so that they would not see me and ask me to help with the slaughter. Fortunately one of the fellows decided not to shoot them in the open where Germans hiding in the woods could witness this atrocity. They marched the prisoners back up the hill to murder them with the rest of the prisoners we had secured that morning."

> **"NEWS OF THE MALMEDY AND STAVELOT MASSACRES SPREAD AMONG THE ALLIES. SOME WERE KEEN FOR REVENGE"**

He continued. "As we were going up the hill out of town, I know some of our boys were lining up German prisoners in the fields on both sides of the road. These boys were to be machine gunned and murdered. We were committing the same crimes we were now accusing the Germans of doing. The terrible significance of what was going on did not occur to me at the time.

"I didn't want any share in the killing. My chief worry was that Germans hiding in the woods would see this massacre and we would receive similar treatment if we were captured. I turned my back on the scene and walked on up the hill."

The aftermath

The Chenogne massacre has received scant attention since the war. No one was prosecuted, and many books on the Battle of the Bulge deny the killing of German prisoners by Americans ever took place. For example, Hugh M Cole, writing the official history as published by the US Government, says "There is no evidence, however, that American troops took advantage of orders, implicit or explicit, to kill their SS prisoners."

This might have surprised General Patton. He wrote in his diary on 4 January 1945, "The Eleventh Armored is very green and took unnecessary losses. There were also some unfortunate incidents in the shooting of prisoners. I hope we can conceal this."

An eye-witness report from later in the battle seems to imply the 11th Armored wasn't the only division that was loath to take prisoners, as Private Dennis C Racicot of the 30th Division recalled.

"Six German soldiers came up the stairwell [from a cellar] and surrendered. None had weapons and all were scared we would kill them. They had good reason to be, as we had been told that we did not need any prisoners.

"We took these guys out of the house and marched them down the street where we met our company sergeant... he bawled us out for bringing in prisoners and asked us why we did not grenade them when they were in that cellar."

Time & Life Pictures/ Getty Images

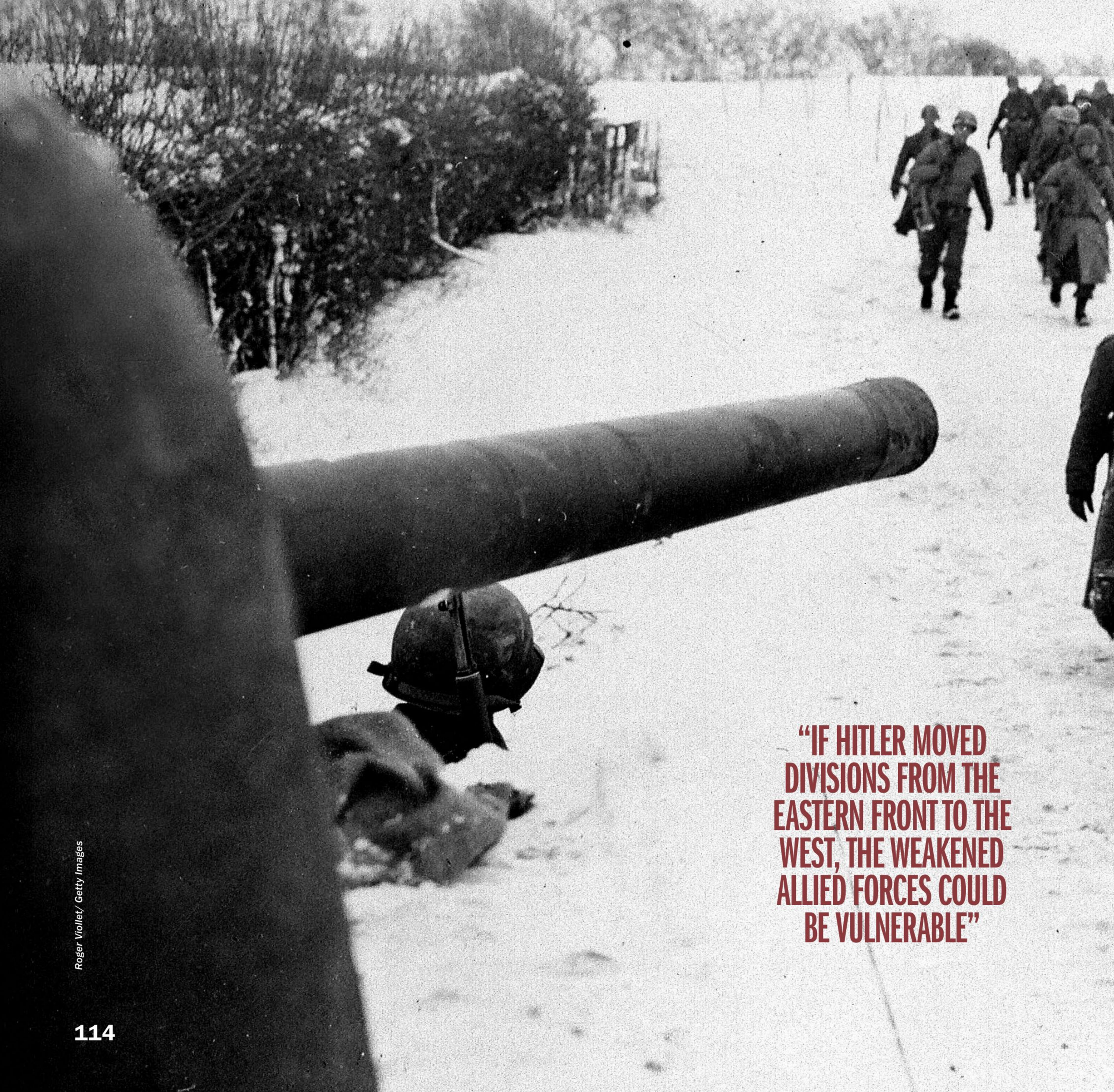
Capture: *A wounded German soldier lies on bedding after being taken prisoner during an attack on an American fuel depot*

THE ALLIES PUSH BACK

Limited manpower and poor weather were among the concerns of Eisenhower and Patton as they prepared for the Allied counter-attack

By early January 1945 the Ardennes Offensive had ground to a halt. The 2nd Panzer Division had been stopped short of the Meuse; Kampfgruppe Peiper had halted on the north shoulder; and key German objectives, such as the town of Bastogne, remained in Allied hands. It was time for the Allies to counter-attack, pushing back the bulge and restoring the front line to its December 1944 shape. A plan was formed.

General Patton's 3rd Army in the south would strike north, while Montgomery's forces in the north would press south, with the two coming together around Houffalize on the River Our. Yet there were concerns



Roger Viollet/ Getty Images

"IF HITLER MOVED DIVISIONS FROM THE EASTERN FRONT TO THE WEST, THE WEAKENED ALLIED FORCES COULD BE VULNERABLE"

within the corridors of Allied power. Both Eisenhower and Patton were worried about the limited manpower available. For example, the US 1st Army had lost over 41,000 in the second half of December, but only 15,295 replacements had been delivered. Although the attack was for the moment halted, if Hitler moved divisions from the Eastern Front to the West, the weakened Allied forces in the area could be vulnerable. Eisenhower had persuaded Washington to speed up the deployment of an airborne, three infantry and three armoured divisions, but they wouldn't arrive until February.

Preparing to attack

Eisenhower wanted Montgomery to launch his attack on 1 January, but the British general was loath to commit his infantry, which was underprepared, during the bad weather due over the New Year period. Temperatures had fallen so low that trucks had to have their engines switched on every half an hour to stop the oil from congealing. Instead, movements commenced on 3 January.

Eisenhower was optimistic, believing that the Allies could crush the Germans in the bulge, and afterwards continue into Germany through the Ardennes. As the counter-operation began, the 1st Army under General Hodges attacked in the north, striking along a 25-mile front. The VII Corps pushed southeast; the XVIII Airborne Corps headed for St Vith; and V Corps moved past the Elsenborn Ridge. In the south, Patton's 3rd Army headed for Wiltz, with his VIII Corps moving north from Bastogne. Further west, the British XXX Corps pressed eastwards.

Air support was poor due to the weather, although 366 US Fighter Corps claimed that 200 enemy vehicles were destroyed near St Vith. Artillery support was also weak due to overcast conditions making observation hard. On top of the inclement conditions, the enemy was proving equally problematic.

General von Manteuffel pulled back his Fifth Panzer Army towards Bastogne and prepared to receive the Allied attack. His divisions were exhausted and well below strength, undermanned and with limited armour and artillery. Above all, they lacked fuel. Falling back cost them most of their heavy equipment, as the retreating ▶

Liberation: *A column of American footsoldiers near Mont-le-Ban on 20 January 1945 after the Siege of Bastogne*

"UNLESS HITLER WITHDREW HIS FORCES FROM THE EVER-THINNING BULGE, THEY FACED CERTAIN ANNIHILATION"

troops were forced to abandon their vehicles and proceed on foot.

As von Manteuffel himself said later, "An enemy counter-attack made on 3 January 1945, and recognised as such, changed events and the conduct of the army front lines completely. I informed the troops of my decision to fall back by fighting delaying actions, stressing the fact that by their mutual co-operation, liaison within the army was to be maintained to prevent a breakthrough by the enemy within the zone of our army.

Lack of fuel and the huge lack of recovery and repair services of all kinds forced us to destroy or leave behind considerably more armour than was put out of action by the enemy during the entire attack. In this way artillery too fell into the hands of the enemy without firing."

Despite the mounting crisis, Hitler remained as intransigent as ever, refusing requests for a general withdrawal to the Rhine, though he did pull back the Waffen SS divisions of Sepp Dietrich's Sixth SS Panzer Army for duties on the Eastern Front, expecting the 6th Army to fill in the gaps they left, to Manteuffel's dismay.

Making progress

The British and American forces made good progress despite constant quarrelling between the Allied generals. Both sides were affected by the cold and the icy conditions on the ground, which made tank movements treacherous. Trying to steer around a stricken vehicle or debris in the road without sliding into a ditch was especially problematic. As Hans Behrens, a wireless operator with the 5th Panzer Army recalled, "The Americans had rubber pads on their tank tracks, and the roads were either in snow or icy; they just slid all over the place."

A tank trooper from the 23rd Hussars regiment of the British 11th Armoured Division found steel tracks just as troublesome. "The roads were getting into an appalling state, and our awkward, top-heavy Shermans skated about on their steel tracks like drunken elephants."

Fearing the Germans would withdraw divisions from the Eastern Front to bolster their armies in the Ardennes, on 6 January, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill personally wrote to the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin and urged him to begin the long-promised winter offensive.

"The battle in the West is very heavy," he wrote. "You know yourself from your own experience how very anxious the position is when a very broad front has to be defended after the temporary loss of the initiative. I shall be grateful if you can tell me whether we can count on a major Russian offensive during January. I regard the matter as urgent."

Stalin was keen to reach Berlin before the British and Americans got there, and as it was clear the counter-attack might well press on into Germany, he launched a massive advance across the Upper Vistula six days later.

The Russians attack

By 8 January, the northern and southern Allied spearheads were about 12 miles apart. Unless Hitler withdrew his forces from the ever-thinning bulge they faced certain annihilation. Historian Stephen W Sears explains Hitler's predicament.

"The Führer at last faced the stark reality. His great dream – the Meuse, Antwerp, the collapse of the Western Allies – was dead."

All German forces west of Houffalize were pulled back to a line five miles north of Bastogne, with the withdrawal again blighted by the cold and a lack of fuel. Many vehicles were abandoned, with roads strewn with trucks and tanks.

That same day, Allied ULTRA code-breakers intercepted a message ordering all new tanks coming off the Ruhr production lines were to be diverted to the Eastern Front, a clear indication that Hitler's priorities were no longer in the Ardennes. The Battle of the Bulge had effectively ended as a German offensive, but the fighting continued in the salient.

On 12 January, the same day that Russia launched its massive attack ▶

Getty Images

Digging in: *US soldiers man a mortar emplacement (from left to right: Private R W Fierdo, Staff Sergeant Adam J Calinca, and Technical Sergeant W O Thomas)*

on the Eastern Front, three of Patton's divisions trapped and destroyed a force of 15,000 German paratroopers. But the Germans fought with incredible courage to keep open the escape route through Houffalize, even when the town came within range of Hodges' artillery, which soon tore it apart with devastating shellfire. The American soldiers too battled with bravery, but many were young and inexperienced, lacking the skills needed to push forwards against a determined enemy.

Patton recorded in his diary on 13 January, "Attitude of troops completely changed. They now have full confidence that they are pursuing a defeated enemy. This in spite of the fact that the Germans north and northeast of Bastogne are resisting viciously in order to preserve their escape routes."

After the extremely expensive successes of Germany's Operation Bodenplatte, the Allies enjoyed total air superiority. Over 1,000 sorties a day were flown on ten of the first 15 days in January, attacking the retreating German columns and blowing apart bridges and railway lines, further hampering the withdrawal.

Late on 15 January, General Patton sent reconnaissance units north, tasking them with slipping through the German lines and meeting up with the 1st Army. These included Major Michael Greene's Task Force Greene, 450 troops with light tanks, armoured cars, half-tracks and jeeps. As it reached Houffalize it was spotted, but it managed to fight off its attackers and move on to a ridge in the north, where it sighted a column of troops. A patrol sent out to investigate soon returned with the news that it was the US 2nd Armored – contact between the 1st and 3rd armies had been made. The bulge had been cut in half, trapping around 20,000 German troops.

The Germans retreat

The German forces that remained east of Houffalize could now only retreat to the Siegfried Line. It was a painful withdrawal carried out in the bitter cold and mostly on foot. According to historian John Holand, "The will of the German soldier was broken. No one who survived the retreat believed there was the slightest chance of German victory. Each refugee of the Battle of the Bulge brought home a story of doom, of overwhelming Allied might, and of the terrible weapon forged in the Ardennes: the American fighting man."

As the Allies pressed on, St Vith was finally recaptured on 23 January by the US 7th Armored Division, the same unit that had defended it during the initial German push. By 25 January, the last retreating German soldiers had fallen back to beyond the pre-December front line. The battle was over, the bulge was eradicated.

***End in sight:** How Allied forces finally eliminated the bulge during January*

Malmedy
Waimes
Stavelot
Trois Ponts
Ambleve
Lienne
Bra
(11 Jan)
(20 Jan)
Vielsalm
Salmchateau
St Vith
Tailles Plateau
Salm
Our
Ourthe
Houfallize
GERMANY
EIFEL
Noville
Bourcy
Oubourcy
Foy
Longchamps
Bastogne
Mageret
Longvilly
Wardin
Marvie
Bras
Clerf
ARDENNES
Fuhrer
Wiltz
HIGH
Dahl
Sure
Lehr
Vianden
LUXEMBOURG
Diekirch
Sauer
Ettelbruck
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Watchful: A 6th Airborne Division sniper on patrol in the Ardennes, wearing a snow camouflage suit, 14 January 1945

IWM via Getty Images

THE FINAL ASSESSMENT

The Battle of the Bulge was over. While other Allied forces were involved, this was an American victory. But what was the human cost?

As January 1945 drew to a close, the Allied forces closed the gap in their front line that had been created by the Ardennes Offensive. By the start of February, the front line in the West was roughly where it was at the start of December. The Allies then pressed their advantage, launching an attack throughout the Western Front, with Montgomery in the north, Hodges in the centre and Patton in the south, all looking to push back the German lines.

A massive assault on the Eastern Front had already started in mid-January, taking advantage of the relocation of resources to the Ardennes and further squeezing what was left of Germany's military and production facilities. If the D-Day Landings can be considered the beginning of the end for the Third Reich, the failure of the Battle of the Bulge was the start of its final, grim chapter. Just three months later, in May 1945, Hitler's 'Thousand-Year Reich' collapsed after less than a decade.

Accurate casualty figures for the battle as a whole are difficult to find. According to the US Department of Defense, there were 80,500 American casualties, but other estimates vary between 70,000 and 108,000. Of the 89,500 official figure, 19,000 were killed, 47,500 wounded and 23,000 missing. What is clear is that the Battle of the Bulge saw the heaviest American casualties of any engagement in World War II.

While other Allied forces were involved, the Bulge was very much America's victory, and America made the biggest sacrifice to ensure the Allies triumphed. Britain's casualty figures, for example, were around 1,400. The German High Command recorded their casualties at 84,834, with other sources putting the figure at between 60,000 and 100,000.

Although the casualty figures were very similar, their effect on Germany was much more severe. Drawing together such a formidable force for one last throw of the dice drained her reserves, starved the Eastern Front of armour and all but paralysed the Luftwaffe. The Russian offensive that began on 12 January certainly benefitted from Hitler prioritising the Ardennes during the last month of 1944. On the Eastern Front, they outnumbered the Germans by around six to one and consequently made rapid progress towards Germany during the opening months of 1945.

> "DRAWING TOGETHER SUCH A FORMIDABLE FORCE FOR ONE LAST THROW OF THE DICE DRAINED GERMANY'S RESERVES"

After effects

After the Battle of the Bulge, America's generals grew more cautious. According ▶

"THIS IS THE LAST CHANCE TO CONCLUDE THE WAR FAVOURABLY"

FIELD MARSH MODEL

to British General Sir Frederick Morgan, "Americans are not brought up on disaster as are the British, to whom this was one more incident on the inevitably rough road towards final victory."

So is this a vindication of Montgomery's cautious approach during the Battle of the Bulge? Possibly. His bringing order to the previously chaotic northern part of the battlefield is certainly to be lauded, but there were times when he could be over-cautious, failing to seize the initiative and take advantage of developing situations.

Montgomery's tactlessness certainly did nothing to endear him to his American counterparts. His assuming command of the American 1st and 9th Armies was a sound military decision that rationalised the overall command structure in light of the disrupted communication lines, but it infuriated their previous commander, General Bradley. Although the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) issued a statement saying this command reshuffle was "absolutely nothing to do with failure on the part of the duce American generals," Montgomery's undiplomatic press conference on 7 January suggested the exact opposite.

Although he paid tribute to the American troops, he also used phrases such as "it looked as if it might become awkward," descriptions of how he had been "tidying up the battlefield," how his forces had "headed off," "seen off," and "written off," the opposing forces and concluded by saying, "The battle has been the most interesting, I think possibly one of the most interesting and tricky battles I have ever handled."

Many in the US felt he was trying to take the credit, as though he had been brought in to rescue the American forces.

Ending segregation

One positive outcome of the Battle of the Bulge is that it hastened the end of segregation in the American army. During World War II, outside of a handful of African-American regiments, most black soldiers were used in support roles such as driving trucks or labouring. But with front-line fighting units falling short of manpower, Eisenhower allowed African-Americans to go into combat alongside their white countrymen. In July 1948, President Harty S Truman issued Executive Order 9981, which desegregated America's armed forces.

No-win situation

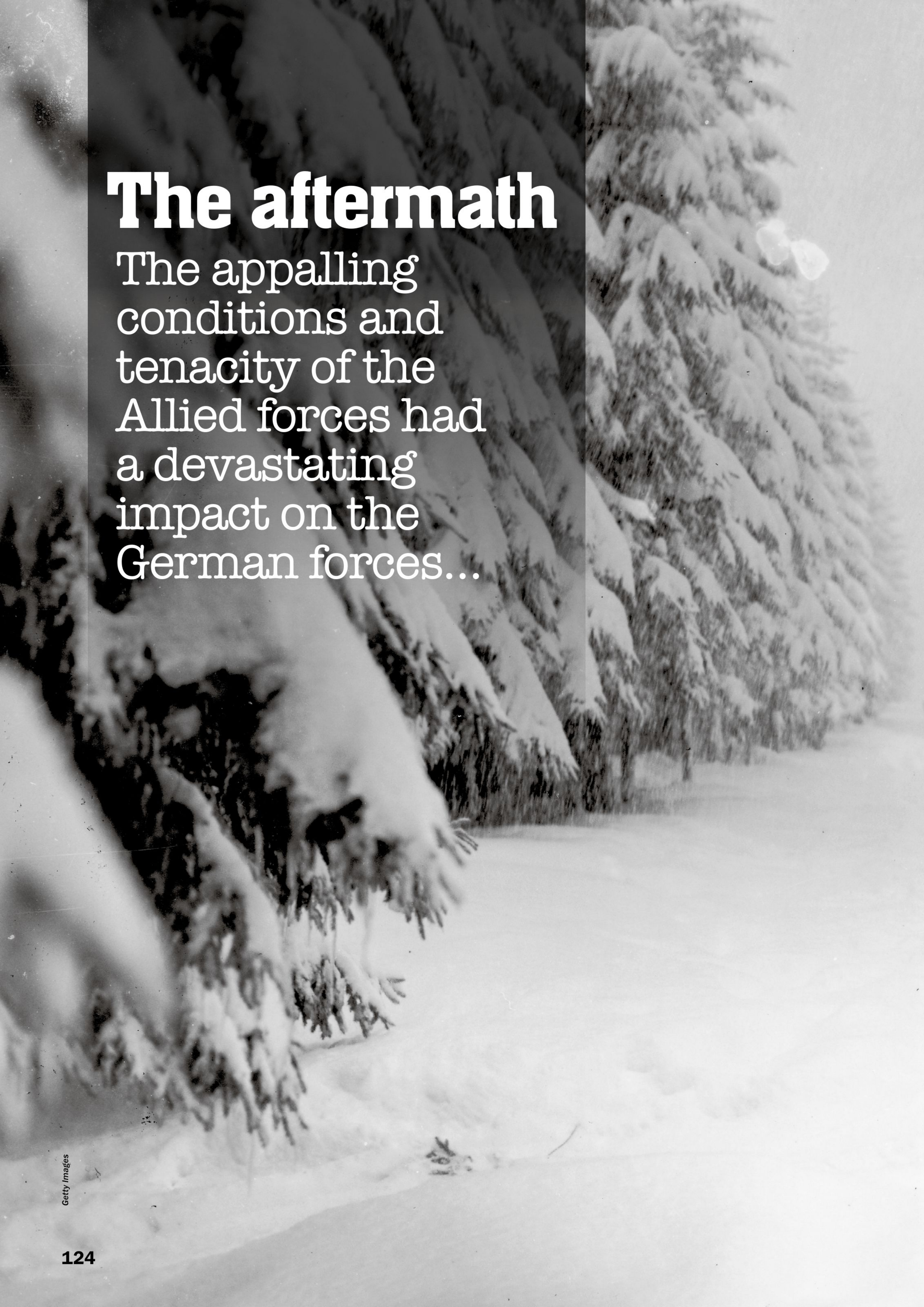
Germany's overall aim of driving a wedge between the Western allies, on and off the battlefield, and causing them to sue for peace instead of continuing the war was certainly ambitious, but could it ever have worked? Almost certainly no. As Field Marshal Model said, the operation had only around a ten per cent chance of succeeding, but "It must be done because this offensive is the last chance to conclude the war favourably." From the start the operation faced obstacles.

Fuel was desperately short. The entire operation depended on finding and capturing Allied supplies during the advance. When it was not captured in sufficient quantities the attack petered out. Hitler's insistence on sticking with his initial, over-optimistic plan against the advice of his generals made it impossible to downscale the offensive into something more achievable. And although he correctly identified a weak section of the Allied front, Hitler simply underestimated the veracity of the American soldier. If he expected the average GI to be unwilling to risk his life in combat far from home, he was in for a rude awakening. After the initial onslaught, even raw recruits fought with incredible courage.

Even if the Ardennes Offensive had succeeded, thereby prolonging the war and extending the life of the Third Reich, the result would not have been a peace on better terms but annihilation. America was working on a new weapon, which by the end of 1944 was getting very close to fruition. In August 1945 it was finally used when atomic bombs were dropped on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Had the Ardennes Offensive prolonged the war, they surely would have been used on Germany too.

UIG via Getty Images

Taking over the town: *American infantrymen of the 87th Division enter the town of St-Hubert in Belgium during the final days of the Battle of the Bulge*



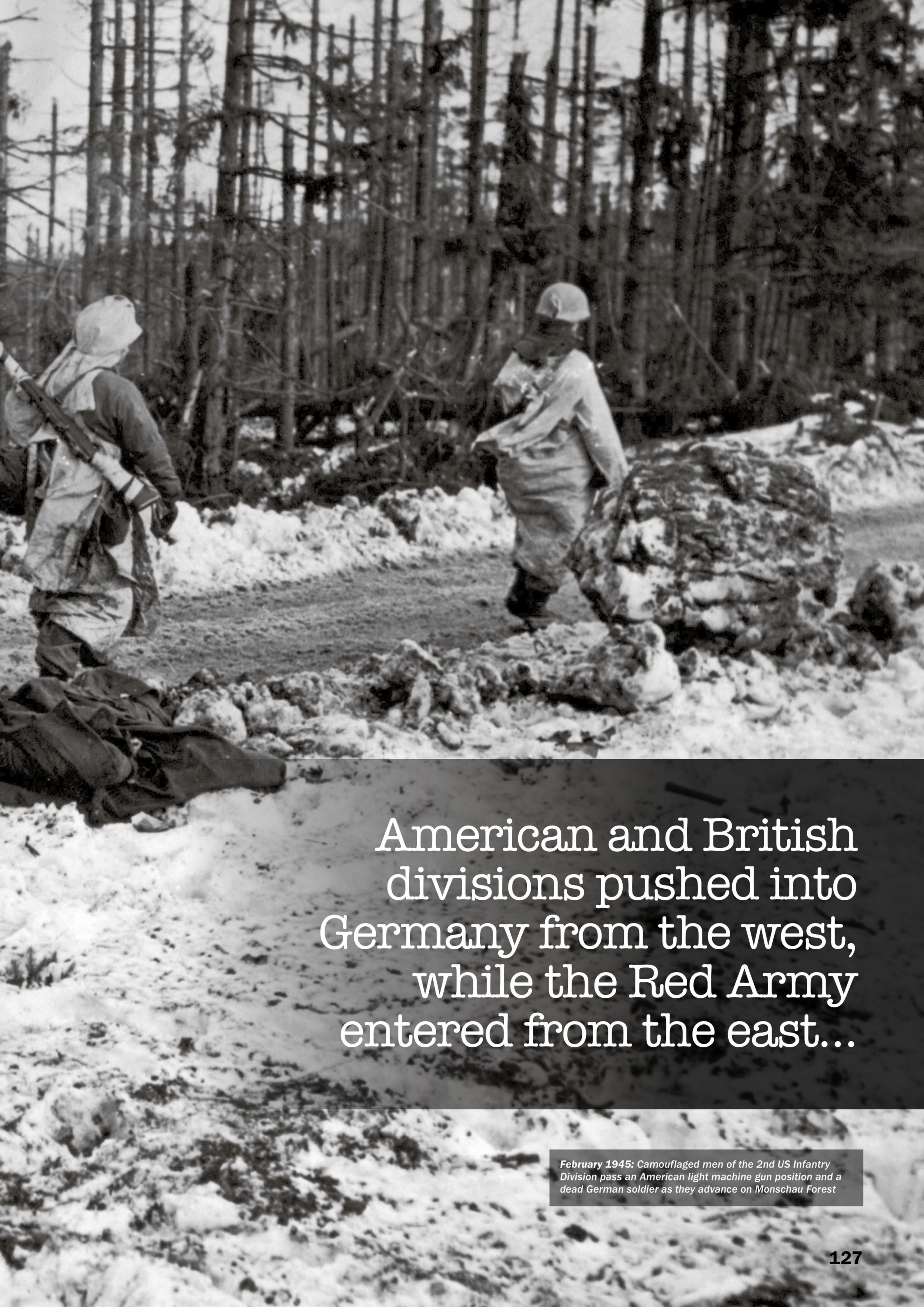
The aftermath

The appalling conditions and tenacity of the Allied forces had a devastating impact on the German forces...

Getty Images

6 February 1945: *Engineers of the 82nd Airborne Division sweep a road for mines in Belgium*

UIG via Getty Images



American and British divisions pushed into Germany from the west, while the Red Army entered from the east...

February 1945: *Camouflaged men of the 2nd US Infantry Division pass an American light machine gun position and a dead German soldier as they advance on Monschau Forest*

UIG via Getty Images

It would only be a matter of weeks before Allied troops were crossing the Rhine.

26 March 1945: *Troops of the 7th US Army clamber up the east bank of the Rhine after crossing the river in assault boats*

Author: Dennis Jarvis, Halifax, Canada

The Mardasson Memorial honours the memory of the 76,890 American soldiers who were wounded or killed during the Battle of the Bulge.

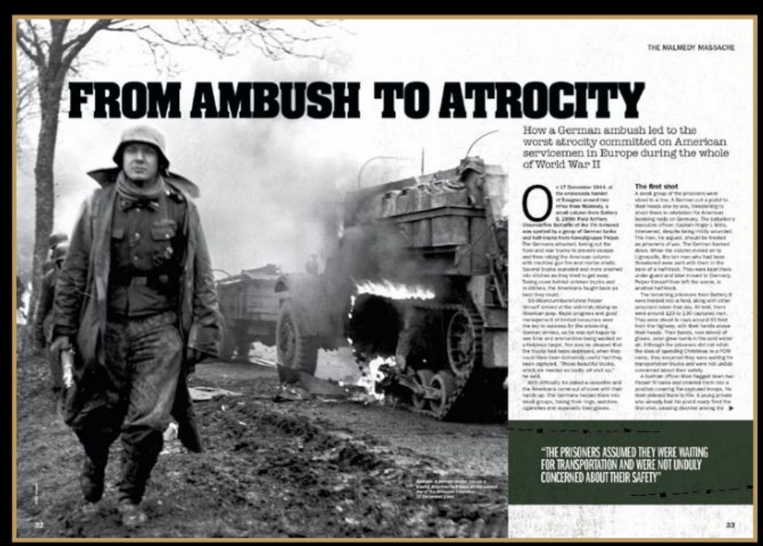
The complex is a pentagram with a height of 12 metres and a side length of 31 metres centred by a circular atrium with a diameter of 20 metres. While the inner walls are covered with ten paintings from the battle, the outer crown is engraved with the names of the contemporary 48 US States, and the insignia of most of the participating battalions are shown on the walls.

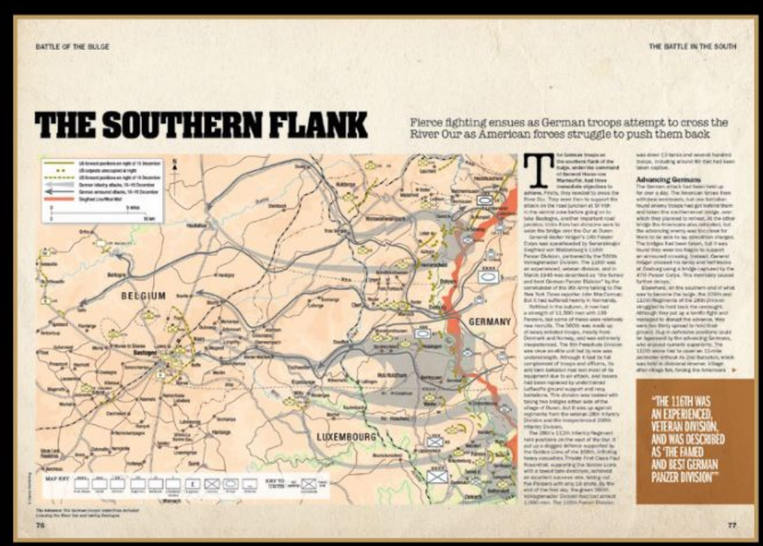
COLORADO
CONNECTICUT
DELAWARE
FLORIDA
WEST
ANA
SSACHUSE
ARMY UNITS
12th ARMY GROUP
FIRST ARMY
THIRD ARMY
FIRST AIRBORNE ARMY
III CORPS
V CORPS
VII CORPS

From the makers of
HISTORY of WAR

BATTLE of the BULGE

THE STRUGGLE THAT CRUSHED GERMANY IN THE WEST





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