

# NIERSTEIN AND OPPENHEIM 1945

Patton Bounces the Rhine



**RUSS RODGERS**

**ILLUSTRATED BY DARREN TAN**

CAMPAIGN 350

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*Series editor Marcus Cowper*

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# ORIGINS OF THE CAMPAIGN

The Allied campaign across France, while moving faster than originally planned once their forces had broken out of the invasion lodgment in Normandy, caused a logistical nightmare that served to retard further advances into Germany. Even as the Allies strove to strengthen their logistical situation by rebuilding the French railroads and at last opening the Belgian port of Antwerp, the Germans threw a monkey wrench into Allied plans with their December offensive in the Ardennes, followed by their January 1945 offensive in Alsace. Yet, even though German efforts temporarily stymied the Allied drive through the Westwall, commonly referred to as the Siegfried Line, these offensive operations cost the Wehrmacht dearly in both men and materiel.

The production of tanks for the Germans bear this out. Despite the Allied bombing campaign, Reich Minister of Armaments and War Production Albert Speer was able to bring tank production to its maximum level by late 1944. However, the failed offensives in the West squandered much of this production, as the Wehrmacht was unable to recover most of its battle-damaged equipment when it fell back to its start points. Thus, the increased production at best only partly replaced what was lost. Moreover, a misguided German effort to thwart Allied air supremacy in the West, known as Operation *Bodenplatte* (*Baseplate*), resulted in not only the loss of over 300 German aircraft but also many irreplaceable pilots.

Making these problems worse were the ongoing Soviet offensives in the East. In December, Soviet forces pressed into Hungary, threatening Budapest and one of the last remaining oil reserves available to Germany near Nagykanisza, southwest of Lake Balaton. German counterattacks to stop these advances met both fierce Soviet resistance and horrendous weather that turned roads and fields into morasses, and despite these efforts Budapest was surrounded on December 24. With the assault in the Ardennes still ongoing, the Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (OKW—High Command of the Armed Forces) had to strip other fronts in the East to find a reserve to attempt to relieve the city and secure the oil fields. Operation *Konrad* was developed to relieve the city, and more ambitious operations were planned for the near future. *Konrad* was launched from the northwest of the city from January 1 to 8, 1945, and managed to advance two-thirds of the 45km to the edge of the German lines before stalling. *Konrad II* and *III*, were launched more from the south later in January, and again closed in on the city, only to grind to a halt through a combination of weather difficulties and growing Soviet resistance. To make matters worse, the Soviets launched their own offensive





Field Marshal Montgomery (right, foreground) discusses operational execution with Brigadier-General William H. Simpson (left) on March 25, 1945, after the initiation of Operation *Plunder*. Lieutenant-General Bradley, 12th US Army Group commander (center, rear) looks on, along with Major-General John Anderson of the US XVI Corps (left, rear) and British Field Marshal Alanbrooke (right, rear). Montgomery demanded up to 12 additional American divisions for his operations, but relented when Eisenhower insisted that Bradley command the American forces side by side with Montgomery. (NARA)

into Poland on January 12, and the front collapsed, as Generaloberst Heinz Guderian had predicted, like a house of cards.

Hitler's stance up to this time was that the Eastern Front was going to have to fend for itself. But this series of disasters convinced him that the Ardennes Offensive needed to be abandoned and significant forces shifted to the East. Watching the crisis build, on January 16 the OKW sent orders to Generalfeldmarschall Gerd von Rundstedt to pull most of 6.Panzer-Armee from the line and have them refitted for future action. By the end of the month, these forces were rail loaded and on the move to Hungary, and thus Rundstedt lost a significant body of combat troops for his exhausted front. With the loss of 6.Panzer-Armee, 5.Panzer-Armee shifted northward, along with its armor and mechanized troops. The suspension of Operation *Nordwind*, an assault along the Franco-German border between Sarreguemines and Wissembourg, completed the depletion of armor in the West. All told, five SS-Panzer divisions, with two elite brigades (1., 2., 9., 10., and 12.Panzer divisions, and Führer-Begleit-Brigade and Grenadier-Brigade), along with 21.Panzer-Division and the newly reformed 25.Panzer Grenadier-Division were sent east, constituting over 50 percent of the mechanized strength to Rundstedt's command. Besides the Panzer units, he also lost infantry divisions, all told losing 16 divisions and their equivalents, with many being the best equipped on hand. This constituted an almost one-third reduction of the entire force in the West. And with the need to protect the Ruhr industrial district, what was left of Rundstedt's armor was mostly concentrated to the north of Koblenz. Only 2.Panzer-Division, still licking its wounds after its mauling in the Ardennes by its opposite number in the US Army, and 17.SS-Panzer Grenadier-Division "Götz von Berlichingen"

A sign of the coming end was the increasing prevalence of white flags and sheets flown in German towns, such as here in Polch, as civilians attempted to avoid having what little was left being destroyed in combat. In some instances, German civilians aided both German and Allied troops in identifying and removing explosives and roadblocks so as to keep the war as far away as possible. Nevertheless, some diehard German commanders strove to suppress such displays of collaboration, and pressed civilians into building fortifications or service in the Volksturm. (NARA)



remained south of Koblenz—two weary mechanized divisions to act as a fire brigade for two-thirds of the Western Front.

In February 1945, the entire Western Front seemed to explode. Coordinated advances by the Allied armies along the whole front hammered their way through the crumbling edifice of what was left of Heeresgruppe West. Operation *Grenade* saw Montgomery's 21st Army Group, supported by the Ninth US Army, cut its way to the Rhine River by March 11. Patton's Third US Army pushed across the Schnee Eifel and the western Palatinate to reach the Moselle River by early March. But the thrust that gained the headlines was that of Hodges' First US Army with Operation *Lumberjack*, whose 9th Armored Division captured the Ludendorff Bridge at Remagen, on March 7. Along with the French Second Army and Patch's Seventh US Army, who were positioned along the upper Rhine River, these advances left a large German salient protruding from along the Moselle River to Trier, and then along the Franco-German border.

In the East, German offensives in Hungary had marginal gains but were stopped by appalling weather and stiffening Soviet resistance. Moreover, Soviet forces pushed through Poland, cut off East Prussia from the rest of the Reich, and threw bridgeheads across the Oder River. They were now close to 80km from Berlin. In addition, the fall of much of the Saar region and Silesia had dealt a crippling blow to the German industrial effort, and any hope of producing sufficient materiel to continue prosecuting the war had been dashed.

The various German offensives cost the Wehrmacht heavily in men and materiel. The last truly potent reserve had been expended in Hungary and the Western Front had been denuded of any mechanized reserve whatsoever. For Germany and the Wehrmacht, the final catastrophe was about to begin.

# CHRONOLOGY

## 1944

- November 3 Third US Army develops offensive plans to cross the Rhine River between Oppenheim and Mannheim.
- November 28 The Scheldt Estuary is at last cleared by British forces, and the first ships arrive at the port of Antwerp. Allied logistics are now assured for a drive into Germany.
- December 16 The Germans launch their last major offensive, codenamed *Wacht am Rhein* (*Watch on the Rhine*), in the West through the Ardennes Forest.
- December 26 Elements of Patton's Third US Army break the siege of Bastogne.
- December 31 German forces launch Operation *Nordwind*, an offensive to clear US forces from portions of northern Alsace.

## 1945

- January 1 The German Luftwaffe attempts a massive ground attack strike against Allied airfields with Operation *Bodenplatte*. Despite marginal success, the cost in aircraft and pilots is crippling for the Luftwaffe.
- January 7 Hitler calls off the Ardennes Offensive. The lion's share of German armor reserves are sent to the Eastern Front.
- January 12 On the Eastern Front, the Soviets begin their Vistula–Oder Offensive. German forces are swept from Poland.
- January 25 The *Nordwind* offensive is at last fully contained. German forces are on the defensive.
- February 13 On the Eastern Front, German and Hungarian resistance in Budapest ends with the last breakout attempt crushed. The siege of Budapest had prompted a number of major German offensives to secure its relief.
- February 22 Operation *Grenade* begins, with the British 21st Army Group, supported by the Ninth US Army, driving for the Rhine River.
- March 1 Operation *Lumberjack* begins, as the First US Army begins its drive to the Rhine.
- March 2 Elements of the US XX Corps capture Trier.
- March 6 On the Eastern Front, the Germans launch the Lake Balaton Offensive, called *Frühlingserwachen* (*Spring Awakening*). The last operational reserves of the Wehrmacht are expended.

<b>March 7</b>	Elements of the 9th Armored Division under the First US Army capture the Ludendorff Bridge on the Rhine at Remagen. The bridgehead is slowly expanded and the area begins to draw in virtually every German reserve unit on the Western Front.
<b>March 13–14</b>	Patton's XII Corps begins its offensive across the Moselle River, the northern offensive to trap German forces in the Saar-Palatinate Triangle.
<b>March 15</b>	The Seventh US Army begins Operation <i>Undertone</i> , comprising a drive to the north and east to trap German forces in the Saar-Palatinate Triangle.
<b>March 22–23</b>	Elements of the US 5th Infantry Division begin a surprise crossing of the Rhine at Nierstein–Oppenheim. German resistance steadily crumbles.
<b>March 24</b>	Montgomery's 21st Army Group, with Operation <i>Plunder</i> , crosses the Rhine near Wesel.
<b>April 1</b>	Elements of the Ninth and First US armies seal off the Ruhr Pocket (also called the Rose Pocket, named for the commander of the 3rd Armored Division recently killed in action).
<b>April 16</b>	On the Eastern Front, Soviet forces launch their final major offensive to cross the Oder River and capture Berlin.
<b>April 18</b>	The Ruhr Pocket surrenders.
<b>April 19</b>	Elements of Patton's Third US Army reach the border of Czechoslovakia.
<b>April 30</b>	Hitler commits suicide in the bunker of the Reich Chancellery.
<b>May 8</b>	Victory in Europe Day; German forces surrender, though sporadic fighting in isolated areas will continue for almost a month.



# OPPOSING COMMANDERS

## GERMAN

**SS-Oberst-Gruppenführer Paul Hausser** (1880–1972) took command of Heeresgruppe G, which covered the southern half of the Western Front, in January 1945. Hausser began his military career with the German Army in World War I, and was part of the interwar Reichswehr until his retirement in 1932 as a Generalleutnant (a two-star equivalent in the US Army). He came out of retirement to help create the Waffen-SS, and led the SS-Verfügungs-Division during the invasion of France in 1940. Later reflagged as 2.SS-Panzer-Division “Das Reich,” Hausser led this division into the Soviet Union until he was severely wounded in October 1941, losing his right eye. After recovery, he led the newly created SS-Panzer-Korps during the Third Battle of Kharkov and the Battle of Kursk in 1943. Reflagged as II.SS-Panzer-Korps, Hausser and his command were sent to the West immediately after the Normandy invasion. He was tapped to be the new commander of 7.Armee on June 29, 1944. Again severely wounded in August, he did not return to field command until January 1945, first leading Oberkommando Oberrhein and then Heeresgruppe G. It appears that he fell out of favor with Kesselring and was relieved of command on April 4, spending the remainder of the war as part of Kesselring’s Heeresgruppe West staff. Known as “Papa” Hausser to his men, he was arguably the most competent senior leader of the Waffen-SS, and was the holder of the Knights Cross with Oak Leaves and Swords.

**General Hans Felber** (1889–1962) led 7.Armee from February 22, 1945, having previously exercised a rear-area command along the upper Rhine River. Felber served in World War I as a junior officer, and postwar was involved in the Freikorps movement before serving in the Reichswehr. By 1934, he had been promoted to Oberst, and briefly was the commandant of the Kriegsakademie (War Academy). In 1937, he was a Generalmajor (a brigadier-general by American standards), and served as the chief of staff of various commands before receiving command of XIII.Armee-Korps on October 25, 1940. In doing this, he bypassed

SS-Oberst-Gruppenführer Paul Hausser, commander of Heeresgruppe G, was responsible for almost two-thirds of the Western Front, and yet had the bare minimum of tanks and assault guns. He and his army commanders told Kesselring, who was the Oberbefehlshaber West, that an American attack in the Saar-Palatinate would jeopardize both 7.Armee and 1.Armee, as well as the defense of the Rhine. (Bundesarchiv, Bild 101III-Hoffmann-013-17)



General Hans Felber (left) commanded 7.Armee during Patton's drive to the Rhine. Kesselring was greatly disturbed by what he considered to be Felber's lack of energy in properly defending the river, and had him sacked on March 25. After the war, Felber was put on trial for war crimes related to his involvement in the deportation of the Jews in Lodz, but the trial was discontinued and he was released. (Bundesarchiv, Bild 101I-027-1476-38A)



Patton, here as a four-star general at the end of the war, commanded the Third US Army from the time of its activation in Normandy until the war's end. There is a considerable divergence between the real Patton and the caricature created after the war in popular media. He has been cited by German generals as the one Allied commander they truly feared because of his drive and unpredictability. (US Army Signal Corps/The General George Patton Museum)

command at both regimental and divisional levels. He led the XIII. and later LXXXIII.Armee-Korps in Russia until assigned to command a detachment to fight partisans in Serbia. In 1945, Felber held command of 7.Armee until relieved on March 25. As a prisoner of war, Felber was tried for war crimes, but the charges were dropped and he lived out his last years near Frankfurt/Main. Felber does not stand out as an above-average military leader, and it is interesting that he somehow managed to avoid several layers of command responsibility. Kesselring was not impressed with him, later expressing astonishment that he appeared to be quite torpid in his preparations to oppose Patton's crossing of the Rhine. Nevertheless, it should be noted that it was Kesselring who disregarded Felber's express contention that holding exposed positions in the Saar-Palatinate Triangle would result in the virtual destruction of his 7.Armee prior to Patton's Rhine crossing. He was a holder of the Knights Cross.



## US

**Lieutenant-General George S. Patton, Jr.** (1885–1945) needs little introduction to most students of military history. Yet, he is also the subject of numerous myths and legends that have made the popular view of his life a caricature. Patton graduated from the US Military Academy at West Point in 1909. He served as General John Pershing's aide during the American Expeditionary incursion into Mexico in 1916, and later led the first American tank force in France during World War I, being seriously wounded and receiving the Distinguished Service Cross. Though an ardent lover of horse cavalry, Patton transferred to the new Armor Force. As war clouds grew in Europe, most other officers in Patton's class were retired by Chief of Staff of the Army General George C. Marshall, but Marshall saw in Patton an exception, being both vigorous and driven despite his older age. Patton commanded the Western Task Force during the Allied invasion of Western North Africa