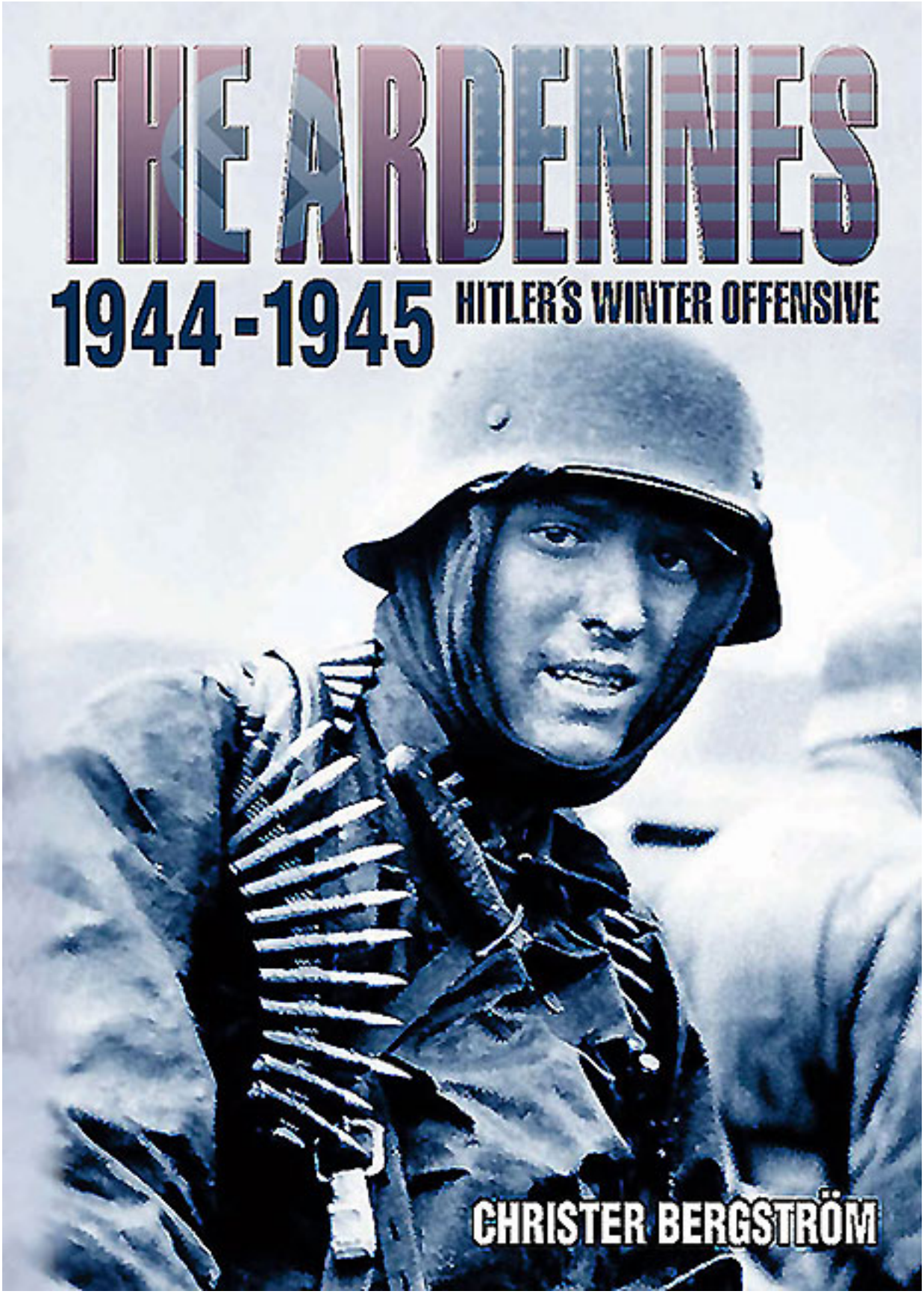
THE ARDENNES

1944-1945 HITLER'S WINTER OFFENSIVE



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The Ardennes 1944-1945
Hitler's Winter Offensive

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This book is dedicated to the Allied soldiers who liberated Belgium and Luxembourg a second time in the winter of 1944/1945, and all victims of the Ardennes Battle.

(NARA, US Signal Corps)

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GLOSSARY AND GUIDE TO ABBREVIATIONS

Ia, German operations officer.
Ic, German intelligence officer.
2nd Tactical Air Force, British tactical air corps, comprised of around 1,500 aircraft.
2nd TAF, abbreviation of 2nd Tactical Air Force.
3ème Régiments de Chasseurs Parachutistes, French 3rd Paratroop Regiment.
4e Bataillon d'Infanterie de l'Air de l'Armée de l'Air, French 4th Airborne Battalion.
9th Air Force, U.S. tactical air corps comprised of around 2,000 aircraft.
IX Troop Carrier Command, U.S. airborne troop transport command on the Western Front.
A 4 (Aggregat 4), German ballistic flying bomb, also called V 2.
A-20 Havoc, U.S. twin-engine Douglas attack bomber.
A-26 Invader, U.S. twin-engine Douglas attack bomber.
Abteilung, battalion in German cavalry, armored troops, antitank troops, artillery and signal units.
Adlerhorst, (Eagle's Nest), Hitler's headquarters on the Western Front, in Schloss Ziegenberg near Bad Nauheim.
Air Chief Marshal, military rank in the Royal Air Force, the equivalence of the German Generaloberst.
Air Division, unit in the US Air Force, comprised of several Groups.
Air Vice Marshal, military rank in the Royal Air Force, the equivalence of the German Generalleutnant.
APCBC (Armour Piercing, Capped, Ballistic Capped), British armor-piercing shell.
APDS (Armour-piercing discarding sabot), British armor-piercing shell.
Ar 234, German twin-engine jet-propelled Arado bomber and reconnaissance aircraft.
Armé, military unit comprised of two or more corps.
Armee, army (German).
Armeegruppe, army group (German).
Armeekorps, army corps (German).
Armeeoberkommando, the headquarters of a German numbered army.
Armored Cavalry Squadron, the reconnaissance battalion of a U.S. armored division.
Armoured Brigade (British), usually comprised of three British Tank Regiments with an assigned strength of 49 tanks apiece.
Armoured Division, (British), in December 1944 with an assigned strength of 343 tanks.
Army group, military formation, comprised of two or more armies.
Artillerie, artillery (German).
Assault gun, armored tracked combat vehicle, tasked to support the infantry with a cannon firing explosive shells. The German StuG III was a combined assault gun and tank destroyer.
Aufklärungs-Abteilung, German reconnaissance battalion.
Ausf. (Ausführung), model (German).
B-17 Flying Fortress (Bomber-17), U.S. Boeing four-engine heavy bomber.
B-24 Liberator (Bomber-24), U.S. Consolidated four-engine heavy bomber.
B-26 Marauder (Bomber-26), U.S., Martin twin-engine medium bomber.
BArch, Bundesarchiv.
Bataillon, battalion (German).
Battalion, military unit, sub-unit to a brigade or a regiment, with an assigned strength of 860 men in both the German and the U.S. armed forces.
Bazooka, American anti-tank weapon.
Bf (Bayerische Flugzeugwerke), alternative designation of certain German Messerschmitt aircraft.
Bf 109, German Messerschmitt single-engine fighter.
Bletchley Park, the place outside of London where the British decrypted German Enigma coded messages,
Bomber Command, the strategic bomber force of the Royal Air Force.
Bomb Group, also Bombardment Group, U.S. air unit with an assigned strength of (regarding Heavy Bomb Group) 72 bombers, or) regarding Medium Bomb Groups or Light Bomb Groups) 96 bombers.
Bomb Squadron, U.S. aviation unit; three Bomb Squadrons formed a Bomb Group.
Brigade, (brigade) German military unit of varied size, between a company's size and that of a half division.
C-47 (Carrier-47), U.S. Douglas twin-engine transport plane.
Cavalry Group, American mechanized and armored regiment.
Cavalry (Reconnaissance) Squadron, U.S. equivalence of an armored reconnaissance battalion.
CCA (Combat Command A), see Combat Command.
CCB (Combat Command B), see Combat Command.
CCR (Combat Command Reserve), see Combat Command.
CCS (Combined Chiefs of Staff) Allied top military command.
Chaffee M24, U.S. light tank.
Combat Command, a sub-unit of an American armored division, comprised of one tank battalion, an armored infantry battalion, an artillery battalion, and a platoon of antitank guns or tank destroyers.
Combat Command Reserve, see Combat Command.
Company, military unit, sub-unit to a battalion, with an assigned strength of around 200 men in both the German and the American armies.
Consumption unit (Verbrauchseinheit), German military term for in principle full fuel tank for all vehicles in a military unit.
Corps, military unit, comprised of two or more divisions.
Division, military unit, usually comprised of three regiments and support units with a total of between 10,000 and 20,000 men.
Fallschirmjäger, paratroopers (German).
FBB (Führer Begleit Brigade), (Leader-Escort-Brigade) German armored brigade.
Feldjägerkommando, (Field hunter command) German field gendarmes.
FGB (Führer Grenadier Brigade), (Leader-Grenadier

Brigade) German armored brigade.
Field gun, field artillery piece able to fire at an angle of less than 45°.
Field howitzer, an artillery piece able to fire at an angle both larger and smaller than 45°.
Fieseler, German aircraft and rocket designer.
Fighter-bomber, fighter plane attacking target son the ground with automatic weapons, bombs or rocket-projectiles.
Fighter Group, U.S. aviation unit comprised of three Fighter Squadrons with a total of 111-126 fighters/fighter-bombers.
Fighter Squadron, see Fighter Group.
FK, (Feldkanone), field gun (German).
Flak (Fliegerabwehrkanone), antiaircraft gun (German).
Flak-Regiment 155 (W) (Flak-Regiment 155 Werfer), German regiment in charge of the launching of V 1 flying bombs.
Flieger-Division, (aviation division), German aviation unit comprised of several Geschwader.
Flight Lieutenant, military rank in the Royal Air Force, the equivalence of the German Hauptmann (captain).
Focke Wulf 190, German Focke-Wulf single-engine fighter.
Führer Begleit Brigade, see FBB.
Führer Grenadier Brigade, see FGB.
Fw, abbreviation of Focke Wulf.
General der Artillerie, German general in the artillery.
General der Infanterie, German general in the infantry.
General der Jagdflieger, a German position (not a military rank) as top responsible for the German fighter aviation.
General der Kampfflieger, a German position (not a military rank) as top responsible for the German bomber aviation.
General der Panzertruppen, German general in the armored forces.
Gepanzerte, armored (German).
G.I. Joe, slang for the 'ordinary' U.S. soldier.
Greif, (griffon) the codename of the German operation with German soldiers in U.S. uniforms behind Allied lines.
Grenadier-Regiment, see Volksgrenadier-Regiment.
Gruppe, (group) German aviation unit comprised of (in December 1944) four Staffel of each 16 aircraft plus a staff Schwarm of 4 aircraft in the fighter aviation and three Staffel of each 12 aircraft plus a staff Kette of 3 aircraft in the bomber aviation.
Halifax, British Handley-Page four-engine heavy bomber.
Half-track, vehicle that combines wheels and tracks.
Hanomag, German half-track Sonderkraftfahrzeug 251 armored troop carrier.
Heeres-Flak-Abteilung, army-antiaircraft battalion (German).
Heeresgruppe, army group (German).
Hellcat M18, American 76mm Gun Motor Carriage M18 tracked tank destroyer.
Herbstnebel, (autumn fog) the code name of the German Ardennes Offensive.
Hetzer, German Panzerjäger 38(t) tracked tank destroyer.
Intelligence officer, an officer in a military headquarters, responsible for intelligence information concerning the enemy.
Jabo (Jagdbomber), fighter-bomber (German).
Jackson M36, American 90mm Gun Motor Carriage M36 tracked tank destroyer.
Jagd-Division, (fighter division) German aviation unit comprised of a number of Geschwader, however smaller in size than a Luftflotte.
Jagdfliegerführer Mittelrhein, (fighter leader Mittelrhein) German commander of the fighter aviation in the Mittelrhein area.
Jagdgeschwader, (fighter wing) German fighter unit comprised of (in December 1944) four Gruppe of each 66 fighters and a staff Staffel of 16 fighters.
Jagdkorps, (fighter corps) German fighter aviation unit comprised of a number of Geschwader, however smaller in size than a Luftflotte.
Jagdpanther, German tracked tank destroyer.
Jagdpanzer, tracked tank destroyer (German).
Jagdpanzer IV, German tracked tank destroyer.
Jagdpanzer 38(t) Hetzer, German tracked tank destroyer.
JG (Jagdgeschwader), see Jagdgeschwader.
Ju, abbreviation of Junkers.
Junkers Ju 88, German Junkers twin-engine bomber or night-fighter.
Junkers Ju 188, German Junkers twin-engine bomber.
Kampfgeschwader, (fighting wing) German bomber unit comprised of in general three Gruppe of each 40 bombers plus a staff Staffel of 12 bombers.
Kampfgruppe, (fighting group) in the German ground forces an ad-hoc unit of a size between that of a regiment and that of a battalion; in the German bomber aviation, an aviation unit comprised of three Staffel of each 12 bombers plus a staff Kette of three bombers.
KG (Kampfgeschwader), see Kampfgeschwader.
Knights Cross, see Ritterkreuz.
Kompanie, company (German).
Korps, corps (German).
Kübelwagen, Volkswagen car, the German equivalence of the jeep.
KwK (Kampfwagen-Kanone), tank cannon (German).
Königstiger (Tiger II), German Panzerkampfwagen VI Tiger Ausf. B heavy tank.
Lancaster, British Avro four-engine heavy bomber.
Lehrgeschwader, (training wing) in practice (December 1944) a German bomber wing, synonymous with a Kampfgeschwader.
LFH 18/40 (leichte Feldhaubitze 18/40), German light field howitzer.
L-4 Grasshopper, American Piper single-engine artillery observation aircraft.
Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler, (Life Guard Adolf Hitler) the name of the 1. SS-Panzer-Division.
Lightning, American Lockheed P-38 twin-engine fighter/fighter bomber.
Long Tom, U.S. 155mm field gun M1.
Luftflotte, (air fleet) the largest German aviation grouping, comprised of two or more Korps or Division.
Luftflotte Reich, (Reich Air Fleet), the German Air Force's command organization for the air defense of the homeland.
Luftwaffe, (air arms) the German Air Force.
Luftwaffen-Feld-Division, (aviation-field division) ground

unit formed from personnel of the German Air Fore.
Luftwaffenkommando West, the German Air Force's command organization in the West.
M4 Sherman, U.S. medium tank.
M5 Stuart, U.S. light tank.
M8, U.S. armored car.
M10, U.S. 3-inch Gun Motor Carriage M10 tracked tank destroyer.
M18 Hellcat, U.S. 76mm Gun Motor Carriage (GMC) M18 tracked tank destroyer.
M20, U.S. armored car.
M24 Chaffee, U.S. light tank.
M36 Jackson, U.S. 90mm Gun Motor Carriage M36 tracked tank destroyer.
Marauder, U.S. Martin B-26 twin-engine medium bomber.
Marschbataillon, (march battalion) German replacement battalion.
Me 262, see Messerschmitt 262.
Mechanized, mechanized infantry is infantry equipped with armored fighting vehicles.
Messerschmitt Me 262, German Messerschmitt twin-engine jet-propelled fighter and fighter-bomber.
MG 42 (Maschinengewehr 42), German machine gun.
Mortar, simple infantry support weapon able to fire grenades at an angle of above 45°.
Mosquito, British de Havilland twin-engine bomber, reconnaissance aircraft and night fighter.
Mustang, U.S. North American P-51 single-engine fighter.
Nachtjagdgeschwader, (night fighter wing) German night fighter unit comprised of two to four Gruppe with 40 night fighters apiece.
Nachtrichten-, German signals (-unit).
Nebelwerfer, (fog launcher) German rocket artillery.
Night Fighter Squadron, U.S. night fighter aviation unit comprised of 18 night fighters.
NJG, (Nachtjagdgeschwader), see Nachtjagdgeschwader.
Null-Tag, (Zero-Day), German code for the attack day in the Ardennes Offensive.
Oberbefehlshaber West, (supreme commander west) German supreme commander on the Western Front.
Oberleutnant zur See, military rank in the German Navy, the equivalence of the Army's Oberleutnant.
OB West, abbreviation of Oberbefehlshaber West.
OKW (Oberkommando der Wehrmacht), (Armed Forces High Command) the German Armed Forces High Command.
Operations officer, a staff officer responsible for the planning of a certain unit's military operations and trainings, as well as the development of tactics.
P (Pursuit), U.S. designation for fighter aircraft.
P-38 Lightning, U.S. Lockheed twin-engine fighter/fighter-bomber.
P-47 Thunderbolt, U.S. Republic single-engine fighter/fighter-bomber.
P-51 Mustang, U.S. North American engine fighter.
P-61 Black Widow, U.S. Northrop twin-engine night fighter.
PaK (Panzerabwehr-Kanone), antitank gun (German).
Panther, German Panzerkampwagen V medium tank.
Panzer IV, German Panzerkampwagen IV medium tank.
Panzer IV/70, the development of the German tracked tank destroyer Jagdpanzer IV.
Panzerarmee, tank army (German).
Panzer-Artillerie-Regiment, (armored artillery regiment) the artillery regiment of a German armored division.
Panzer-Aufklärungs-Abteilung, armored reconnaissance battalion (German).
Panzer Brigade, armored brigade (German).
Panzer-Division, armored division (German).
Panzerfaust, (armored fist) German hand-held antitank weapon.
Panzer-Füsilier, (armor-rifle) German armored reconnaissance troop.
Panzer Grenadier, German mechanized infantry.
Panzer-Grenadier-Division, German division comprised of mechanized infantry and often also tanks.
Panzerjäger-Abteilung, antitank battalion (German).
Panzerkorps, armored corps (German).
Panzer Lehr, (armor-training) the designation if the German armored division 130. Panzer-Lehr-Division.
Panzer-Pionier-Bataillon, the engineer battalion of the German armored units.
Panzer-Regiment, armored regiment (German).
Panzerschreck, (armor horror) German Raketenpanzerbüchse 54 antitank weapon.
Pionier-Bataillon, German engineer battalion.
PIR, abbreviation of Parachute Infantry Regiment.
Platoon, military unit, sub-unit to a company. A German infantry company comprised of three platoons, the American infantry company of four platoons. The assigned strength of a platoon was 48-50 men in the German infantry and 41 men in the American infantry.
POZIT (abbreviation of Proximity Fuse), a fuse that detonates an explosive device automatically when the distance to the target becomes smaller than a predetermined value, used for air burst shells in the U.S. artillery.
Quad Fifty, U.S. weapon, four parallel mounted 12.7mm M51 .50-Cal. anti-aircraft machine guns.
RAF (Royal Air Force), see Royal Air Force.
RCT (Regimental Combat Team), se Regimental Combat Team.
Regiment, military unit, sub-unit to a division, with an assigned strength of around 3,000 men in both the German and the U.S. armies in December 1944.
Regimental Combat Team, an American infantry regiment reinforces with, e.g., a tank battalion.
Ritterkreuz, (Knight's Cross) the German highest award for valor in combat during World War II. The Knight's Cross had three additions: with oak leaves (Ritterkreuz mit Eichenlaub), with oak leaves and swords (Ritterkreuz mit Eichenlaub und Schwertern), and with oak leaves, swords and diamonds (Ritterkreuz mit Eichenlaub, Schwertern und Brillanten).
Royal Air Force, British Air Force.
Red Army, (krasnaya armiya) the Soviet Army in WW II.
SAS (Special Air Service), British special forces during WW II.
Schlachtgeschwader, (strike wing) German ground-attack aviation wing.

Schwere Panzer-Abteilung, heavy tank battalion (German).
Schwere Panzerjäger-Abteilung, heavy tank destroyer battalion (German).
Sd.Kfz. (Sonderkraftfahrzeug), se Sonderkraftfahrzeug.
sFH 18, (schwere Feldhaubitze 18) German heavy field howitzer.
SHAEF (Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force) see Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force.
Sherman, U.S. M4 medium tank.
Silver Star, the third highest U.S. award for valor in combat.
Spitfire, British Vickers Supermarine single-engine fighter.
Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force, the headquarters for the supreme commander of the Allied forces in Western Europe, General Eisenhower.
Sonderkraftfahrzeug, (special vehicle) designation of German armored vehicles.
SS (Schutzstaffel), (defense group) the German Nazi Party's paramilitary and also purely military force.
SS-Reichsführer, (SS Reich leader) the title of the leader of the SS, Heinrich Himmler.
Staffel, (squadron) the German aviation's squadron, with a strength of 12-16 aircraft.
Stalag (Stammlager), German POW camp.
StG 44 (Sturmgewehr 44), see Sturmgewehr 44.
Stuart, U.S. M5 light tank.
StuG III (Sturmgeschütz III), see Sturmgeschütz III.
StuK, (Sturmkanone), see Sturmkanone.
Sturmgeschütz III, German tracked assault gun.
Sturmgeschütz-Brigade, assault gun brigade (German).
Sturmgewehr 44, (assault rifle 44) German automatic carbine.
Sturmkanone, the gun of a German assault gun.
Sturm-Zug, the advance platoon of a German infantry or paratroop battalion.
TAC (Tactical Air Command), see Tactical Air Command.
Tactical Air Command, the command of the tactical air support of a certain U.S. numbered army. Each Tactical Air Command of the U.S. 9th Air Force in December 1944 was comprised of four to six Fighter Groups and a Squadron each of reconnaissance aircraft (24 aircraft) and night fighters (18 aircraft).
Tank destroyer, most commonly the designation of a tracked armored vehicle with the purpose of destroying the enemy's tanks with an anti-tank gun. However, in the U.S. Army, a tank destroyer battalion was comprised of either 36 towed antitank guns or 36 tracked (self-propelled) tank destroyers.
Thunderbolt, U.S. Republic P-47 single-engine fighter/ fighter-bomber.
Tiger I, German Panzerkampfwagen VI heavy tank.
Tiger II, German Panzerkampfwagen VI Ausf. B Königstiger heavy tank.
Time on Target, an American artillery firing method where the firing was calculated so that all fired shells hit the target at the same time.
TOT (Time on Target), see Time on Target.
Troop, the approximate equivalence of a company in the U.S. (mechanized) Cavalry.
Troop Carrier Group, U.S. troop transport aviation unit, comprised of 80-110 troop transport aircraft.
Troop Carrier squadron, U.S. troop transport aviation unit; each Troop Carrier Group comprised of Troop Carrier Squadrons.
Troop Carrier Wing, U.S. troop transport aviation unit, comprised of two to five Troop Carrier Groups.
TUSA Third U.S. Army.
Typhoon, British Hawker single-engine fighter-bomber.
Ultra, code of the British decrypting of the German Enigma-coded messages.
USAAF, United States Army Air Force.
V 1 (Vergeltungswaffe 1), (Vengeance Weapon 1) German Fieseler 103 rocket-propelled flying bomb.
V 2 (Vergeltungswaffe 2), (Vengeance Weapon 2) German ballistic bomb, also designed as A 4.
V 3 (Vergeltungswaffe 3), (Vengeance Weapon 3) German (extremely) long-range artillery piece.
Volksartilleriekorps, (People's Artillery Corps) German artillery corps.
Volksgrenadier-Division, (People's Grenadier Division) designation from the fall of 1944 of German infantry divisions.
Volksgrenadier-Regiment, (People's Grenadier Regiment) designation from the fall of 1944 of German infantry regiments.
Volkswerfer Brigade, (People's Launcher Brigade) designation from the fall of 1944 of German rocket-artillery brigade
Wacht am Rhein, (Rhine guard) the code-name of the German plan for the Ardennes Offensive, later changed into 'Herbstnebel.'
Waffen-SS, (Arms-SS) the purely military forces of the German SS.
Wehrmacht, (Defense Force) the German Armed Forces.
Wehrmachtbefehlshaber Niederlande, (Armed Forces Commander Netherlands) the supreme commander of the German armed forces in the occupied Netherlands.
Wehrmachtsbericht, (Defense forces report) the German Armed Forces' daily news broadcast.
West Wall, line of fortifications along Germany's western border.
Wing, American Wing: a U.S. aviation unit comprised of two or more Groups; two wings usually formed a U.S. Air Force Division. British Wing: the equivalence of the U.S. Air Force's Group. Here also used as a designation of a Luftwaffe Geschwader.
z.b.V. (zur besonderen Verwendung), for special purpose (German).
Zug, German platoon.

MILITARY RANKS DURING WORLD WAR II—AN APPROXIMATE COMPARISON

Wehrmacht	**Waffen-SS**	**U.S. Army**
Reichsmarschall*	(no equivalence)	(no equivalence)
Generalfeldmarschall	Reichsführer SS	General of the Army
Generaloberst	SS-Oberst-Gruppenführer	General
General	SS-Obergruppenführer	Lieutenant General
Generalleutnant	SS-Gruppenführer	Major General
Generalmajor	SS-Brigadeführer	Brigadier General
(no equivalence)	SS-Oberführer	(no equivalence)
Oberst	SS-Standartenführer	Colonel
Oberstleutnant	SS-Obersturmbannführer	Lieutenant Colonel
Major	SS-Sturmbannführer	Major
Hauptmann	SS-Hauptsturmführer	Captain
Oberleutnant	SS-Obersturmführer	First Lieutenant (1/Lt)
Leutnant	SS-Untersturmführer	Second Lieutenant (2/Lt)
Stabsfeldwebel	SS-Sturmscharführer	Sergeant Major
Oberfeldwebel	SS-Hauptscharführer	Master Sergeant
Feldwebel	SS-Oberscharführer	Sergeant First Class
Unterfeldwebel	SS-Scharführer	Staff Sergeant
Unteroffizier	SS-Unterscharführer	Sergeant
Stabsgefreiter	(no equivalence)	(no equivalence)
Obergefreiter	SS-Rottenführer	Corporal
Gefreiter	SS-Sturmmann	(no equivalence)
Oberschütze	SS-Oberschütze	Private First Class (PFC)
Soldat/Schütze/Grenadier	SS-Schütze	Private

* Only one man held this the highest rank, the Luftwaffe commander Hermann Göring.

In addition, the U.S. Army had so-called technical specialist ranks, with the following equivalences:
First Sergeant – Master Sergeant
Technical Sergeant – (no equivalence)
Technician Third Grade (T/3) - Staff Sergeant
Technician Fourth Grade (T/4) – Sergeant
Technician Fifth Grade (T/5) - Corporal

HEADING FOR THE MEUSE

On the evening of 22 December 1944, the advance force of German 2. Panzer-Division paused in the small Belgian village of Hargimont. The palace yard of the partly dilapidated medieval castle Château de Jemeppe, just at the end of the hurst leading down to Hargimont from the east, was filled with German combat vehicles. Similarly, in the narrow village streets, in the fields and in groves around the village—everywhere German combat vehicles of all kinds were parked, nearly one thousand in total. It was like an exhibition of the German Army's vehicle park at the end of World War II: Half-track Hanomag armored personnel carriers, eight-wheel Puma armored cars, big 11- and 18-ton Sonderkraftfahrzeug 7 and 9 towing vehicles, four-wheel-driven 4.5 ton MAN 4500 trucks, slightly smaller Opel Blitz trucks, Maultier half-track trucks, small Volkswagen Schwimmwagen amphibious cars, various anti-aircraft vehicles, several motorcycle types, captured U.S. vehicles of all kinds, and an abundance of civilian vehicles. On the hills that surrounded the village, Panther and Panzer IV tanks and Sturmgeschütz III assault guns were strategically placed. Inside the dark village, German sentinels, shivering in the freezing December night, sauntered about between parked vehicles. Others manned positions just outside the village, and some of the least fortunate were out on patrol missions in the surroundings. Several others lay asleep in the forcibly requisitioned houses, where many were so exhausted that they did not even wake up to the bangs from the German artillery that sporadically shelled the town of Marche, a couple of miles to the northeast.

Major Ernst von Cochenhausen, the commander of the German advance force, waited for the sunrise when he would resume the advance in what was expected to be the final leg to—and across—River Meuse. Forty-four-year-old von Cochenhausen was a veteran who had participated in the German seizure of the Czech Sudeten area in 1938. He had been wounded already on the fourth day of the war against Poland in 1939, but returned to first-line service and commanded a motorcycle battalion on the Eastern Front. After completion of the regimental commander training, he was in December 1944 transferred to the 2. Panzer-Division, where he became deputy commander of Panzergrenadier-Regiment 304. In this position he led the combat group that was named after himself, Kampfgruppe Cochenhausen. Along with the armored reconnaissance battalion, this constituted the 2. Panzer-Division's advance force.

On the crest of the hill above Château de Jemeppe, American military vehicles that had been knocked out by German fire a couple of hours ago, were still smouldering. These belonged to a combined task force from two American divisions—the 84th Infantry and 3rd Armored—that was routed on the evening of 22 December, after which the Germans could take Hargimont. This was but the latest of a series of successful engagements between the 2. Panzer-Division and various American forces since the Ardennes Offensive had begun one week earlier.

From their perspective, the men of the 2. Panzer-Division had all the reason to feel proud of the division's accomplishments in the war. The division had been founded already in 1935, when Hitler reintroduced military conscription and began the reconstruction of the German Armed Forces. The first commander of the division was no one less than Heinz Guderian, the father and founder of the new German Armored Force. The 2. Panzer-Division participated in the march into Austria *(Anschluss)* in March 1938, and the occupation of the Czech Sudeten area following the Munich agreement in September that same year. In World War II, the 2. Panzer-Division fought with great success on almost all theaters of war—Poland in 1939, the West in 1940, the Balkans in 1941, the Eastern Front 1941 to 1944, and finally the Western Front, including Normandy, in 1944.

The 2. Panzer-Division reached the zenith of its career on 20 May 1940, during the Blitzkrieg in the West, when it became the first German unit to reach the English Channel. Thus, a whole Allied army group was caught in a huge 'sack' in the north. This settled the fate of France. One month later, France, Germany's old arch enemy, had to surrender under humiliating circumstances. However, the question the men of the 2. Panzer-Division could ask themselves there in that little Belgian village called Hargimont on the cold night of 22 December 1944, was whether they were not actually on the verge of superceding even the accomplishments of 1940.

During the week that had passed since the opening of the German Ardennes Offensive on 16 December 1944, the 2. Panzer-Division had advanced about sixty miles on miserable country lanes and muddy fields, subduing any resistance which the mighty U.S. Army had confronted them with. 'Enemy morale seems strongly shaken,' the divisional commander, Oberst Meinrad von Lauchert, wrote in a report which he compiled on the evening of 22 December 1944. Von Lauchert continued:

'Since our fight at Noville we have encountered only weak resistance that was easily overcome—except south of Marche today.'

This was the result of a whole series of utterly devastating defeats dealt by the 2. Panzer-Division to its American opponent.

It all started in the wee hours of the night of 15-16 December 1944, as specially selected assault troops from the division silently paddled across the German border river Our, and under the cover of darkness and fog crept past the American positions in the mountains on the other side. Meanwhile, tens of thousands of other German troops from fifteen other divisions advanced in the same silent

way to assume attack positions along the Ardennes Front. The attack caught the unprepared Americans completely by surprise. Soon the panzer division's armor was able to cross a hastily completed bridge, and at the small village of Marnach, three miles into Luxembourg, the 2. Panzer-Division smashed the first armored force that the Americans put up against them.

The 2. Panzer-Division's next task was to secure the crossing of River Clerve at Clervaux, seven miles from the point of departure. This was achieved on the second day of the offensive, in a tank battle in which the Americans lost sixty and the 2. Panzer-Division not more than four tanks. The regiment from the U.S. 28th Infantry Division that tried to stop the Germans here, was completely annihilated, and the regimental commander, Colonel Hurley Fuller, was among the large number of Americans who were taken as prisoners.

In the space of forty-eight hours, the victorious and confident American Army on the Western Front had been thrown completely out of the way, and its demoralized soldiers fled headlong to the west, pursued by German armored columns that seemed to be absolutely invincible. Among the most advanced German troops was Meinrad von Lauchert's panzer division.

On the third day of the offensive, U.S. 9th Armored Division brought forward its reserve force in an attempt to halt the 2. Panzer-Division. The ensuing combat ended with the American force being almost completely obliterated. Leaving the hulks of forty-five burning Sherman tanks behind, what remained of the American armored unit withdrew. Among those that were killed, was the commander of U.S. 2nd Tank Battalion. That evening, the 2. Panzer-Division stood four miles to the west of its point of departure, and so far it had suffered no more than marginal losses of its own.

The Americans now brought a third division—the 10th Armored from Patton's Third Army—against the 2. Panzer-Division's southern flank. But during two days of violent tank battles, even this American division had to see its tanks getting knocked out in the dozens. The final, decisive battle took place at Noville, a small community northeast of Bastogne. When the 2. Panzer-Division stood victorious in Noville, having mowed down another task force of U.S. 10th Armored Division, it might well have been able to capture the strategic town of Bastogne through an attack from the north. But the German commanders had other plans for von Lauchert's division: It was to form the spearhead of the lightning offensive that sought to establish a bridgehead across River Meuse, forty miles further to the west. The German report of 20 December 1944 stated, 'The enemy is fleeing towards the west.'

What seemed to be a final American attempt to stem the German advance was made at Hargimont in the afternoon on 22 December. It ended with American 3rd Armored Division and 84th Infantry Division having to retreat.

By now German 2. Panzer-Division not only appeared to be completely invincible; on its left flank stood German Panzer Division Lehr, led by the renowned Generalleutnant Fritz Bayerlein. To the right stood German 116. Panzer-Division, the famous 'Windhund' Division, which just like the 2. Panzer-Division had surged forward like a steamroller, crushing any American resistance in its way. This armored division also had advanced sixty miles in less than a week. A bit further to the east, two more panzer divisions had marched up—the 2. SS-Panzer-Division 'Das Reich,' and the 9. SS-Panzer-Division 'Hohenstaufen'—along with an infantry division. When the offensive was initiated, these German forces had a combined strength of over four hundred operational tanks, of which nearly two-thirds were of the model Panzerkampfwagen V Panther—far superior to anything the Western Allies could muster in the shape of tanks.

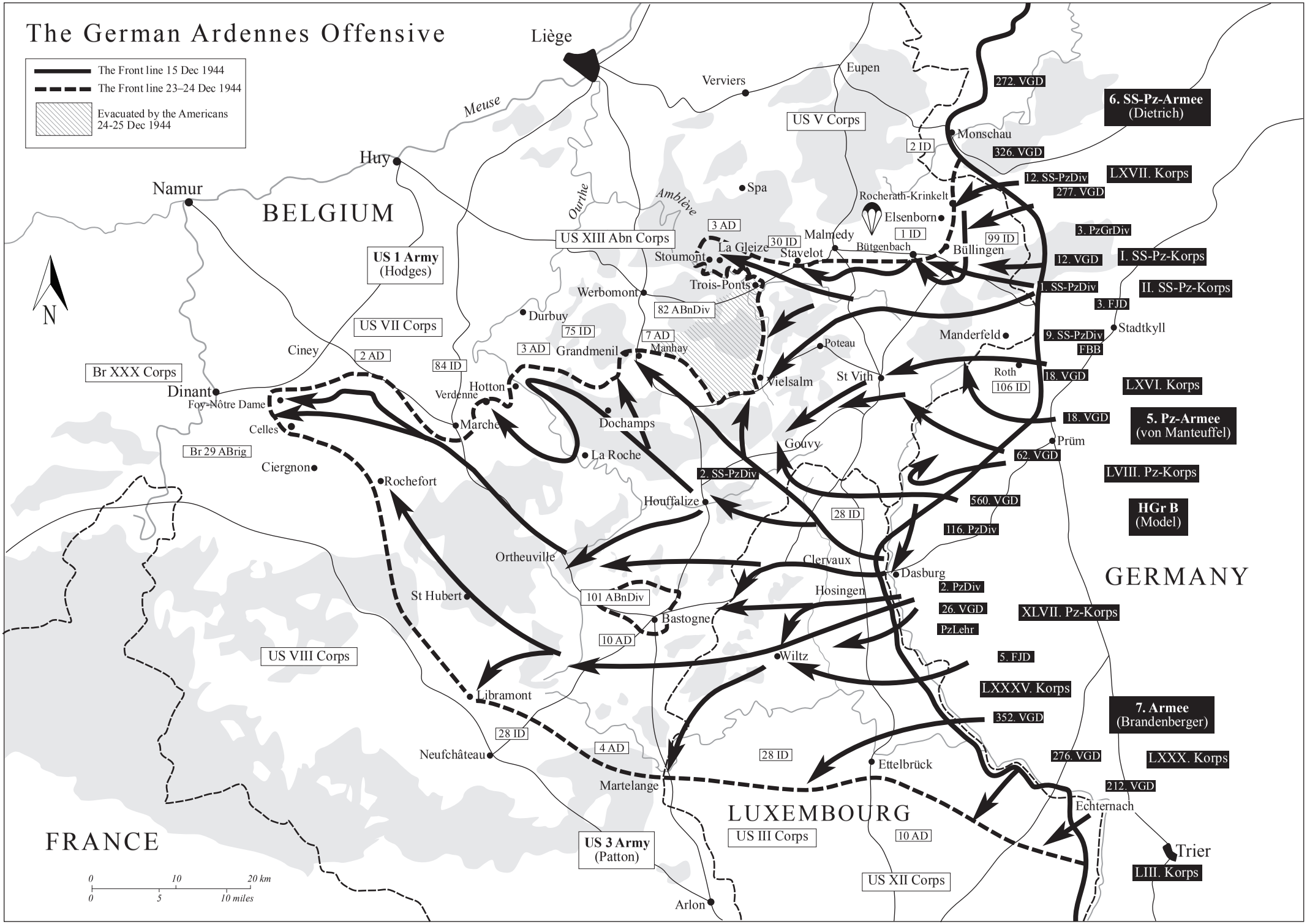
At the sunrise which von Cochenhausen waited for in Hargimont, the 2. Panzer-Division would take the shortest route across the fields on the frozen plateau towards the bridge over the Meuse at Dinant. Indeed, the distance that had to be covered to reach this place was twenty-five miles, but there was nothing but quite weak Allied forces between Hargimont and Dinant, so the Germans could expect to reach their goal during the next day, 23 December. Quite confident, the divisional commander von Lauchert reported to the Corps headquarters on the evening of 22 December 1944:

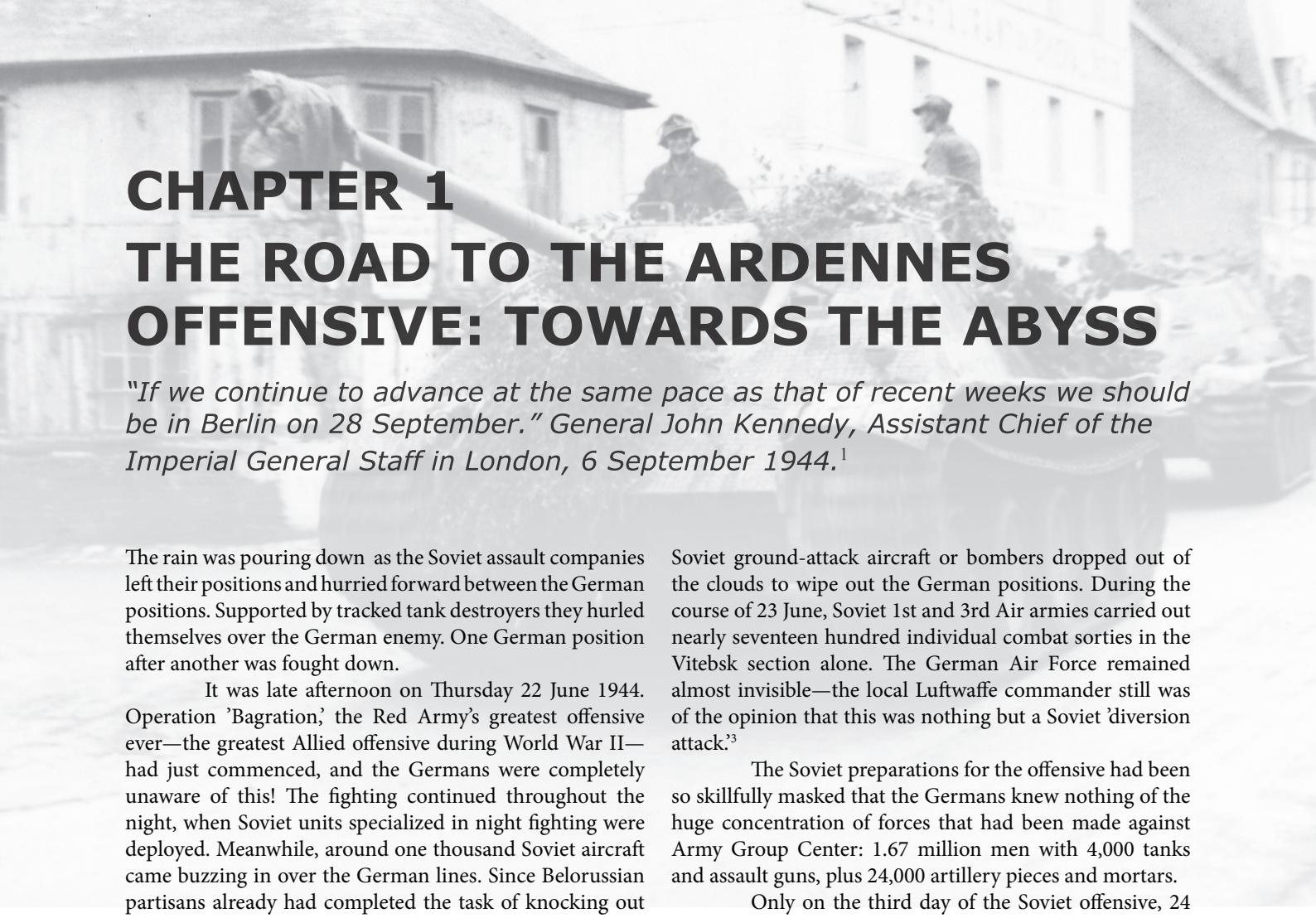
'We will continue our advance with our main force. [. . .] We will occupy the zone Celles, Conjoux and prepare to cross the Meuse at Anseremme [just south of Dinant].'

Through its rapid crossing of River Meuse at the French city of Sedan in May 1940, the 2. Panzer-Division had played a crucial role in the blighting of the Allied defensive strategy in the West in 1940. This opened the way for the rapid advance to the English Channel, where the British Expeditionary Force was driven out to sea at Dunkirk. Now, four and a half years later, it looked as though the division was about to repeat a similar feat. If only this armored division crossed the Meuse, it would probably force the Allies to a general retreat behind the river; otherwise its units would run the risk of getting cut off. This in turn could lead to a situation where the two German armored armies in the Ardennes Offensive—the 5. Panzerarmee and the 6. SS-Panzerarmee—would succeed in their aim to reach the port of Antwerp. Thus, the whole British-Canadian 21 Army Group, including U.S. First and Ninth armies, would be cut off in the north. In view of the prevailing circumstances, such a German victory would eclipse even the great victory in the West in May and June 1940.

At Dinant on the evening of 22 December 1944, British 3rd Royal Tank Regiment was instructed to prepare a withdrawal to Saint-Gérard, three miles west of the Meuse. The road really seemed to lay open to the German panzers. How was it possible that such a situation could happen at all—in the sixth year of the war, half a year after the successful Allied landing in Normandy, and the following liberation of France? That was a question asked by a whole world.

German Panther tanks pass through a small village during the offensive in the winter of 1944/1945. The German attack in the Ardennes came totally unexpected to the Allies. (BArch, Bild 183-1985-0104-500/Dr Paul Wolff)


The German Ardennes Offensive
The Front line 15 Dec 1944
The Front line 23–24 Dec 1944
Evacuated by the Americans 24-25 Dec 1944
N
Liège
Verviers
Eupen
Meuse
Huy
Namur
BELGIUM
Ourthe
Amblève
Spa
US V Corps
272. VGD
6. SS-Pz-Armee (Dietrich)
Monschau
2 ID
326. VGD
12. SS-PzDiv
277. VGD
LXVII. Korps
Rocherath-Krinkelt
Elsenborn
3. PzGrDiv
3 AD
US XIII Abn Corps
30 ID
La Gleize
Malmedy
1 ID
99 ID
Büllingen
Bütgenbach
Stavelot
Stoumont
12. VGD
I. SS-Pz-Korps
US 1 Army (Hodges)
Trois-Ponts
1. SS-PzDiv
II. SS-Pz-Korps
Werbomont
82 ABnDiv
3. FJD
Durbuy
US VII Corps
75 ID
7 AD
Manhay
Manderfeld
9. SS-PzDiv
Stadtkyll
Ciney
3 AD
Grandmenil
Poteau
FBB
2 AD
84 ID
Br XXX Corps
Vielsalm
St Vith
Roth
106 ID
18. VGD
LXVI. Korps
Dinant
Hotton
Verdenne
Foy-Nôtre Dame
Marche
Dochamps
18. VGD
5. Pz-Armee (von Manteuffel)
Celles
Prüm
Br 29 ABrig
La Roche
Gouvy
62. VGD
Ciergnon
Rochefort
2. SS-PzDiv
LVIII. Pz-Korps
Houffalize
560. VGD
28 ID
HGr B (Model)
116. PzDiv
Ortheuville
Clervaux
Dasburg
GERMANY
St Hubert
Hosingen
2. PzDiv
101 ABnDiv
26. VGD
XLVII. Pz-Korps
Bastogne
PzLehr
10 AD
US VIII Corps
Wiltz
5. FJD
LXXXV. Korps
Libramont
352. VGD
7. Armee (Brandenberger)
28 ID
4 AD
Neufchâteau
28 ID
Ettelbrück
276. VGD
LXXX. Korps
Martelange
212. VGD
Echternach
LUXEMBOURG
FRANCE
US III Corps
10 AD
US 3 Army (Patton)
Trier
LIII. Korps
US XII Corps
Arlon
0 10 20 km
0 5 10 miles



CHAPTER 1
THE ROAD TO THE ARDENNES OFFENSIVE: TOWARDS THE ABYSS

"If we continue to advance at the same pace as that of recent weeks we should be in Berlin on 28 September." General John Kennedy, Assistant Chief of the Imperial General Staff in London, 6 September 1944.[1]

The rain was pouring down as the Soviet assault companies left their positions and hurried forward between the German positions. Supported by tracked tank destroyers they hurled themselves over the German enemy. One German position after another was fought down.

It was late afternoon on Thursday 22 June 1944. Operation 'Bagration,' the Red Army's greatest offensive ever—the greatest Allied offensive during World War II—had just commenced, and the Germans were completely unaware of this! The fighting continued throughout the night, when Soviet units specialized in night fighting were deployed. Meanwhile, around one thousand Soviet aircraft came buzzing in over the German lines. Since Belorussian partisans already had completed the task of knocking out much of the German rail lines, the aircrews could focus on German artillery positions and strongpoints in the defense.[2] However, to the headquarters of German Army Group Center, Heeresgruppe Mitte—one of the most powerful army groups of the entire German Army, the one which had withstood attacks of the Red Army longer than any other force—it appeared to be nothing but an expansion of the deep armed reconnaissance thrusts that had been carried out by the Red Army during the recent months. According to the textbook, a major attack was initiated by artillery and large tank concentrations, but here was only a rather limited artillery fire, mainly infantry with self-propelled guns, and only quite few medium tanks.

At five in the morning on 23 June, General Ivan Bagramyan, the commander of Soviet 1st Baltic Front, ordered his artillery to open fire. But what followed was not a general, massive fire all along the line, but rather a shelling of selected points where infantry thrusts had been halted in front of German points of resistance. Not even when the Soviets despatched more powerful armored units—including two regiments equipped with the new heavy Josef Stalin 2 tanks—into the gaps that the infantry had opened in the German lines, did the German High Command fully understand what was actually developing.

North and south of the Belorussian city of Vitebsk, less than one hundred miles southeast of the Latvian border, German 3. Panzerarmee was locked into a desperate battle. Wherever the Germans managed to halt their opponent, Soviet ground-attack aircraft or bombers dropped out of the clouds to wipe out the German positions. During the course of 23 June, Soviet 1st and 3rd Air armies carried out nearly seventeen hundred individual combat sorties in the Vitebsk section alone. The German Air Force remained almost invisible—the local Luftwaffe commander still was of the opinion that this was nothing but a Soviet 'diversion attack.'[3]

The Soviet preparations for the offensive had been so skillfully masked that the Germans knew nothing of the huge concentration of forces that had been made against Army Group Center: 1.67 million men with 4,000 tanks and assault guns, plus 24,000 artillery pieces and mortars.

Only on the third day of the Soviet offensive, 24 June, did it dawn on the German High Command that the Red Army in fact had launched a major attack aiming at nothing less than the destruction of Heeresgruppe Mitte.[4] But by then it was too late. The armored forces of the 1st Baltic and 3rd Belorussian fronts already had achieved deep incursions. At Vitebsk, 38,000 men from German 3. Panzerarmee were surrounded. Farther to the south, at Bobruysk, a major part of German 9. Armee was enveloped.

From the initial hour, the Soviet Air Force controlled the skies, and air attacks played a crucial role to the rapid collapse of Heeresgruppe Mitte. On 2 July, the Red Army's pincers closed around 105,000 troops of German 4. Armee at the Belorussian capital Minsk. A couple of days later, the 4. Armee's last resistance had been completely broken. Sixty thousand men marched into Soviet captivity. At this stage, Heeresgruppe Mitte had lost 350,000 of the 490,000 soldiers which had stood at its disposal only a fortnight earlier. During the following weeks, another 100,000 men would be added to the German army group's loss list.

Following the Battle of Kursk in the summer of 1943, the Germans had been pushed back bit by bit by the Red Army, but with the exception of the breakdown on the Crimean Peninsula in the spring of 1944, this had taken place with mainly coherent German front lines. Until Operation 'Bagration,' the hope had remained that somewhere it would be possible to 'lock' the Red Army along powerful defensive lines on the Eastern front. The

collapse of Heeresgruppe Mitte during the first days of July 1944 gave the German High Command the painful realization that the war against the Soviet Union inevitably was lost.

On 13 July, the Soviet offensive expanded as Marshal Ivan Konyev's 1st Ukrainian Front attacked German Heeresgruppe Nordukraine in northwestern Ukraine. Here too, the Soviet air supremacy played a decisive role to the outcome of the ground battle. Due to the air support, Konyev's troops succeeded in surrounding and annihilating a large German force at Brody. By 29 June, the 1st Ukrainian Front had inflicted 198,000 casualties on Heeresgruppe Nordukraine, against its own losses of 37,400 men. While Konyev's forces pushed the Germans out of the Ukraine and severed the connection between Heeresgruppe Nordukraine and Heeresgruppe Mitte, the battered remnants of the latter German army group fled more or less in panic towards the west. By the end of July, the Red Army had reached the Gulf of Riga, thus cutting off yet another German army group—Heeresgruppe Nord—in Estonia and northern Latvia, while Soviet 1st Ukrainian Front was closing in on Warsaw.

Only a rapid deployment of strong German reinforcements—including some that had been brought from Normandy, where the Germans and the Western Allies were locked into positional warfare following the landings on 6 June—could halt the Red Army, just to the east of Warsaw. The connection with Heeresgruppe Nord barely could be reestablished.

These Soviet breakthroughs were the climax of the serious crisis which the Germans had been hurled into after the first days after the Allied invasion of Normandy in northwestern France as it stood clear that the British-American bridgehead could not be eliminated. The heavy artillery of the Allied warships which controlled the area around the landing beaches, the massive Allied air superiority—against around 10,000 Allied fighters and bombers stood an average of slightly more than one thousand German aircraft on the Western Front—as well as the increasing numerical superiority of the Allied ground forces, made it clear beyond doubt that it merely was a question of time before the Germans would have lost their control over France. Throughout July 1944, the German commanders expected a major Allied breakthrough any day.[5] By the third week of July, the relation of forces at Normandy was about the same as at Operation 'Bagration'—around 1.5 million Allied troops faced 380,000 men on the German side.[6]

On 20 July 1944, a group of conspirators struck against Hitler in a final desperate attempt to save a hopeless situation. The result is well-known—the plot failed, and the powerful grip which the Nazi dictator already held on the German Armed Forces was even further strengthened.

On 24 July, the Americans despatched 350 heavy bombers against the German positions at the southwestern corner of the Allied bridgehead in Normandy, where the cornerstone of the German defense consisted of the armored division Panzer Lehr under Generalleutnant Fritz Bayerlein. This bombing cost Panzer Lehr a loss of 350 men and ten armored vehicles, but this was not more than the Germans could take. Bayerlein, who assumed that this was the prelude to yet another American attempt to break through, despatched his reserves. These had barely occupied their forward positions when the Americans on the following day unleashed a new massive aerial assault. This began at 0938 hrs, when fighter-bombers from eight fighter groups from U.S. 9th Air Force struck the German positions along a four-mile wide front. This continued for nineteen minutes, and then no less than fifteen hundred heavy bombers of U.S. 8th Air Force lumbered in and dropped three thousand tons of bombs over the same area. These aircraft had barely disappeared before another seven fighter groups of the 9th Air Force appeared and started to bomb and machine gun the totally devastated German positions. This was in turn followed by a fifty-minute bombardment by five hundred and eighty medium bombers.

These three hours of air attacks had, in the words of Bayerlein, a totally 'exterminating morale effect on the troops,' who in several cases 'surrendered, deserted to the enemy or escaped to the rear, as far as they survived the bombing.'[7] Others 'got crazy or paralyzed and were unable to carry out anything.'[8] After the end of the war Bayerlein admitted that 'for me, who during this war was in every theater committed at the points of the main efforts, this was

German paratroopers in Normandy in the summer of 1944. At this time, Germany was under heavy pressure on all fronts and it was rather obvious that the war was lost, which also was reflected in the morale of the troops on both the Eastern and the Western fronts. However, this insight on the German side would not last throughout the year. (BArch, Bild 101I-586-2225-11A/Slickers)

U.S. soldiers, supported by M10 tank destroyers, advance in the vicinity of Avranches in France in August 1944. (The Paul Warp Collection)

the worst I ever saw.'[9]

With Panzer Lehr 'totally exterminated' and other German units—like the 116. Panzer-Division—prevented by Allied fighter-bombers from intervening in the battle, the American ground forces finally managed to achieve the operational breakthrough which they had sought for two months. On 30-31 July, the German positions at Avranches crumbled.

Next day, the American units in Normandy were lifted out of the Allied 21 Army Group, which under command of the British General Bernard Montgomery until then had had the unified command of all Allied ground forces in Normandy. Certainly, General Montgomery continued to hold the position as supreme commander of the Allied ground forces in France for another couple of weeks, but now the 12th Army Group was formed under the command of the previous C.O. of U.S. First Army, Lieutenant General Omar Bradley, with the task of directing the operations of the two American armies: First Army, which now was placed under command of Lieutenant General Courtney Hodges, and the new Third Army, which was formed from units brought from First Army. Lieutenant General George S. Patton was appointed to command the Third Army.

The Allied main force—812,000 American soldiers with 2,450 tanks and tank destroyers—was positioned on the western flank.[10] The Germans, who had concentrated 645 of their slightly more than 800 tanks at Normandy against British 2nd Army and Canadian 1st Army on the eastern flank, had no chance against Patton's armored forces once these had started their advance towards the south.[11] Displaying a brilliant organizational ability, Patton managed to bring seven U.S. division across a single bridge at Avranches in only 72 hours.[12]

According to plans, a new tactical air command was formed within the U.S. 9th Air Force, XIX Tactical Air Command under Major General Otto P. Weyland, assigned with the task of providing the Third Army with close air support.[13] XIX Tactical Air Command would develop a new American close air support tactic—the Armored Column Cover method, according to which an air controller with direct radio communication with airborne aircraft was assigned to the leading column of the advancing armored units, while fighter-bombers simultaneously were in the air above, ready to strike down on anything the forward air controller would direct them onto.

Patton's Third Army spread out fan-shaped towards the west, the south, and the southeast from the gap at Avranches, and carried out a lightning offensive while Weyland's airmen covered its flanks. In reality, Major General Middleton's VIII Corps of the Third Army hardly encountered any resistance. The 'sweep' through Britanny in the West was made in an area mainly evacuated by the Germans, where villages and towns had been taken over by the French resistance.[14] The remnants of the four German divisions in this area hastily withdrew in order to establish strong defenses of the Atlantic ports of Brest, Lorient, and Saint-Nazaire.

Neither were the Germans able to offer any effective resistance against Patton's advance towards the southeast, and on 8 August, Le Mans, ninety miles south of the German positions at Caen on the eastern flank at Normandy, was liberated. Thus, Heeresgruppe B, the German army group

A formation of American Douglas A-20 attack bombers from the 9th Air Force heading for France to support the battle at Normandy. Allied aircraft played a decisive role on the Western Front in 1944. (US Army)

in Normandy, was threatened to become cut off west of River Seine. Generalfeldmarschall Günther von Kluge, who on 2 July had succeeded Generalfeldmarschall Gerd von Rundstedt as this army group's commander, suggested a retreat from Normandy to a new defensive line from the Seine's mouth into the English Channel and further southeast to the Franco-Swiss border.

But Hitler instead ordered a counter-attack against Avranches with the aim of cutting off Patton's army in the south. Such a counter-attack might have had a chance to succeed, had it not been for the Allied air supremacy. To von Kluge and his generals, it was absolutely clear that the whole operation was doomed beforehand, but in the climate of fear which dominated in the wave of terror that had followed on the failed 20 July Plot, hardly anyone dared to oppose.

Most German commanders agree that what halted the German counter-attack was the Allied aviation. 'They came in hundreds, firing their rockets at the concentrated tanks and vehicles. We could do nothing against them and we could make no further progress,' wrote the commander of the 2. Panzer-Division, Generalleutnant Heinrich von Lüttwitz.[15] Next, the Allies attacked from both the north and the south in order to capture the entire Heeresgruppe B in a 'sack' at Falaise south of Caen. In the middle of this dramatic battle—on 17 August—Hitler fired von Kluge and brought in Generalfeldmarschall Walter Model as his succeessor.*

When Model arrived in France, 100,000 German troops were trapped in the so-called 'Falaise pocket.' Their only very narrow line of escape to the east was subject to relentless air attacks; one of the Allied pilots reported the

* Two days later, von Kluge committed suicide.

German Jagdpanther tank destroyers from schwere Panzer Jäger-Abteilung 654 pass through a French village during the fighting on the Western Front in the summer of 1944. With its 88mm PaK 43/3 L/71 anti-tank gun, the Jagdpanther was a feared weapon that could knock out Allied tanks at a distance of up to two miles. Although the German panzer force was significantly superior to their opponents' tanks, the battle was decided to the latter's advantage through the Anglo-American air superiority. (BArch, Bild 101I-301-1951-06/Kurth)

whole area to be burning.[16] However, as one among only a few senior German commanders by this time, Model enjoyed the Führer's unreserved confidence. He had just arrived from the Eastern Front, where he had contributed to the halting of the great Soviet offensive. Hence, he could allow himself to order his troops to evacuate the Falaise pocket.

Even though German tanks were able to prevent the Allied ground forces from closing the 'sack,' the evacuation was made extremely difficult due to the massive Allied air attacks. Around 50,000 men managed to escape to the east, but the bulk of their heavy equipment was abandoned in the Falaise area—chiefly as a result of the assault from the air.* The entire German strategy in France—which until this stage had consisted of the ambition to drive the Allies back into the sea—now fell apart completely. On 15 August, an Allied force under Lieutenant General Alexander Patch landed in southern France, where it was able to establish a bridgehead without encountering any serious difficulties. Hitler was left with no choice. On 16 August he ordered Armeegruppe G, which until then had held positions in southwestern France, to perform a rapid withdrawal towards the northeast.[17] This coincided with Model's evacuation of the Falaise pocket, which descended into a precipitous retreat from France when Patton's Third Army on 20 August crossed the Seine south of Paris.

On the same day, 20 August, the Red Army opened its next great offensive on the Eastern Front—this time against Rumania, Hitler's faithful ally for four years. In spite of fairly equal relations of strength—1.3 million Soviet troops were launched against 900,000 men on the Axis side—the German-Rumanian defenses rapidly disintegrated. Here too, this was to a great extent the result of the Soviet onslaught from the air.[18] The new German 6. Armee—which had been assigned with the same number as the army that had been annihilated at Stalingrad in January 1943—was, just as its predecessor, surrounded by Soviet forces; the only major difference was that in this latter case, destruction came quicker. By early September 1944, even this second 6. Armee had ceased to exist. The losses amounted to 200,000 German troops, among whom 115,000 ended up in Soviet captivity. Thus Germany had lost a disastrous 1.27 million soldiers—900,000 of them on the Eastern Front—in just three months.[19]

The news of the loss of the Rumanian oil fields—which had been responsible for the bulk of Germany's supply of crude oil—barely had reached Hitler, when two of Germany's former allies abandoned the Nazi dictator. From Rumania, the Red Army continued into Bulgaria, which on 8 September declared war on Germany. Only four days

*Allied airmen made huge overclaims during their operations over the Falaise pocket. An examination undertaken a while after the area had been seized by the Allied showed that among 101 examined German tanks and assault guns in the Falaise area, only six had been destroyed as a direct result of air attacks, 44 through ground fire, and twelve through other or unknown causes. Another 22 were found to have been abandoned by their own crews. This has led to the misinterpretation that the Allied aviation after all was not that effective at Falaise, but this is a conclusion which must be refuted. The number of tanks which were made to halt through air activity, which enabled anti-tank gunners to hit them, has never been established. But above all, the efficiency of the Allied aviation at e.g. Falaise constituted mainly not in its ability to directly destroy heavily armored vehicles, but in its capacity to knock out transport vehicles going to and from the front area. The same Allied examination as above also showed that almost half of the other German vehicles ('soft-skinned vehicles') destroyed in the Falaise pocket were knocked out through air attacks, and the majority of the remainder were abandoned by their own crews—in the latter case to a large extent as the result of air attacks. It might be safe to assume that the greater part of the 40,000 German troops who were captured in the Falaise pocket, can be attributed to the direct or indirect effect of Allied air attacks against their retreat routes.

earlier, Finland—subject to a heavy pressure through the Soviet offensive that had begun in June 1944—had signed an armistice with the Soviet Union. This was a serious blow to the German strategy on the Eastern Front, which had rested on the Finnish ability to tie down considerable Soviet forces. These now could be shifted to the front against Germany itself.

In fact, there was only one war theatre—the Italian front—where the German lines did not completely collapse during the summer of 1944. Here, in spite of a marked numerical superiority, the Allies failed to achieve anything but relatively limited territorial gains through the major offensive that was launched on 25 August. Hence, the Germans could bring forces from the Italian Front to more endangered combat zones. Military historian John Ellis is pitiless in his judgement of the Allied military command in Italy:

'Almost all the Allied generals made a poor showing, displaying a conspicuous lack of either tactical or strategic flair. Often enough they could not even agree between themselves as to what should be done. The whole Italian campaign was badly vitiated from the start by profound American and British disagreements.'[20] The Germans of course did not fail to observe these circumstances, and based on this, they drew several vital conclusions. As a matter of fact, the situation in this regard was not much better on the Western Front, where the Allies failed to fully exploit the profitable situation immediately after the German evacuation across the Seine. Generalfeldmarschall Model, serving both as the commander of Heeresgruppe B at Normandy, and as the supreme commander on the Western Front (OB West), summarized Heeresgruppe B's situation on 29 August: The army group's eleven infantry division could muster a combined force of not more than the equivalence of the assigned strength of four divisions, disregarding the fact that they had lost almost all their heavy equipment. The eleven panzer and panzer grenadier divisions mustered on average between five and ten tanks apiece.[21] Considering these circumstances, Model told Hitler that there was no other option but to retreat back to Germany as fast as possible.

British military historian Basil H. Liddell Hart concludes that the war fairly easily could have been ended in September 1944.[22] With nearly three thousand tanks, a million and a half troops, and fourteen thousand aircraft at their disposal, the Allies theoretically had the possibility to annihilate the last remnants of the German Armed Forces in the West in the fall of 1944—but in this, they failed utterly.

The fact that the German Armed Forces in the West not only survived, but also were able to stabilize the Western Front during the first half of September 1944, was—not without reason—described by the German propaganda as a 'miracle.' By mid-September 1944, the Allied armies had chiefly become locked into positional warfare along a line that extended across the Netherlands from the sea and to the east, along the (present) German borders with Belgium and Luxembourg, and finally running almost straight to the south along River Moselle.*

The explanation for this abrupt reversal may in no small part be sought in the German High Command. Of course, Hitler was far from the 'Greatest Military Commander of all Time,' which one of his henchmen once had called him—for instance, the German disaster at Falaise was caused by Hitler's misguided attack order—but among his generals were to be found some of the most skillful military commanders of World War II. One of them was Generalfeldmarschall Walter Model, who previously had saved many a desperate situation on the Eastern Front. In January 1942, when the Red Army came close to routing German 9. Armee west of Moscow, Model's personal interference turned the whole situation. German military historian Paul Carell (Paul Karl Schmidt) wrote:

'Model appeared everywhere. [. . .] He suddenly bolted out of a staff Kübelwagen in front of a battalion command post, he came galloping on a horse through the deep snow in the first line, incited the troops, gave words of praise or criticism, and even, waving his pistol, he led a battalion in a counter-attack against the enemy's breakthrough-force. This highly energetic general was everywhere. And where he was not present for the moment, everyone felt his spirit.'[23]

With the bulk of their vehicles abandoned on the western side of River Seine, pursued by masses of Allied tanks, and subject to incessant attacks from the air, the German withdrawal on the Western Front in late August 1944 rapidly degenerated into chaos and panic. In this pandemonium, the fighting spirits collapsed. A few lines jotted down by a German soldier during these days are indicative of the prevailing mood, 'I won't stay with them very long. I really don't know what we are still fighting for. Very soon I shall run over to the Tommies if I am not killed before I get there.'[24]

In the German retreat columns, gallows humor spread the slogan *heim ins Reich*—back to the Reich, i.e. back to Germany.* The Allied Combined Chiefs of Staff Joint Intelligence Committee in Washington concluded that the German armies would collapse one by one, and that it was 'improbable that any organized resistance under the German High Command could continue beyond 1 December 1944 … it might even end earlier.'[25]

Without any doubt, when this assessment was made, it rested on solid grounds—however, two factors had not been taken into due consideration: the errors made by the Allied Supreme Command, and the German High Command's ability to turn a difficult situation. Model carefully selected trusted staff officers and despatched them to the front. In cooperation with military police and field gendarms—the special army force whose main task was to maintain military order by e.g. tracking down deserters—these fought panic among the troops, rounded up dispersed units, and tucked individuals or groups of fleeing soldiers into newly formed front units.

In the meantime, a virtually completely new line

* By this time, since May 1940, the Belgian Eupen-Malmedy area was annexed by Germany, whereby Germany's border with Belgium ran about six miles further to the west than today.

* *Heim ins Reich was really the Nazi slogan that meant that all Germans living outside of Germany were to be included in Hitler's

of defense was built along the German western border, stretching from the Swiss border in the south to Roermond near the Dutch city of Maastricht in the north. Although the construction of this so-called West Wall—known to the Allies as the 'Siegfried Line'—had begun already in 1936, it still had not been complete when the German armies launched their Blitzkrieg in the West in May 1940. Because of the rapid German victory over France, this defense line fell into decay during the following years, and when the West Wall now again, in late summer of 1944, was needed, it was anything but sufficient. The anti-tank obstacles—the so-called 'dragon's teeth'—were too small to be able to stop the tanks of 1944, the pillboxes were too thin to withstand the modern air bombs and too small to harbour the larger anti-tank guns which were in use in 1944.[26] However, on 20 August 1944 Hitler ordered a strengthening of the West Wall through a 'people's posse,' and before long 211,000 workers had been mobilized for this purpose.[27]

At the same time, about a hundred garrisons and fortress battalions in the rear area, as well as training regiments and officer cadet schools, were converted into first-line units. The badly mauled Luftwaffe, and the Navy—whose large surface ships mainly lay inactive in port—were instructed to despatch all 'dispensable men.' These were grouped into new kinds of infantry divisions—'people's grenadier divisions.'* The designation *Volksgrenadier-Division* was connected with the German-nationalist/Nazi concept *völkisch*, which in essence meant a kind of mythologizing of the German people. The inspirer of this was SS Leader Heinrich Himmler, who had been appointed to command the so-called Replacement Army after its former commander, General Friedrich Fromm, had been arrested for having been acquainted with the 20 July plot against Hitler without interfering against it.*

The idea was that these 'people's grenadier divisions' would become a new kind of units, even more loyal to the Führer and with no ties to what was perceived as old and conservative values within the German Army. The Volksgrenadier divisions nevertheless were subordinated to the regular German Armed Forces, Wehrmacht, and were formed around a nucleous of experienced veterans from a division which previously had been practically obliterated. Quite often a volksgrenadier division was numbered according to the old infantry division out of which remnants it was formed. For instance, the 26. Volksgrenadier-Division was formed around a nucleous of surviving veterans from the 26. Infanterie-Division, which had been largely annihilated on the Eastern Front. What was new with these volksgrenadier divisions mainly was that they had been reduced to six battalions apiece instead of nine, which previously had been the standard in German infantry division—giving them an assigned strength of around 10,000 troops instead of 17,000.

Apart from these units, the Luftwaffe had six new paratroop regiments with a total of twenty thousand men at its disposal. To these were added ten thousand men from various air units, and these were despatched to the front as the First Paratroop Army—1. Fallschirmarmee—under General Kurt Student.

On the same day as the 1. Fallschirmarmee was formed, 4 September 1944, sixty-eight-year-old veteran Generalfeldmarschall Gerd von Rundstedt returned to the Western Front to reassume the position of Oberbefehlshaber West (OB West). Two months earlier, Hitler had discharged him from this post, but when the Nazi leader now realized his mistake, von Rundstedt willingly heeded to the call. Thus, Model was able to concentrate fully on the command of the army group Heeresgruppe B.

Overall, however, the German defense in the West in September 1944 was quite fragile. On 10 September, von Rundstedt reported that it would take another five to six weeks of intensive work before the West Wall would be able to withstand a serious attack by a modern military force.[28] The fact that the 1. Fallschirmarmee was named an army, although it mustered no more than 30,000 men—the equivalence of a normal army corps—illustrates the situation quite well. In mid-September, Heeresgruppe B was composed of no more than twelve divisions with altogether only eighty-four operational tanks and tank destroyers to defend of a 250-mile-wide front sector—against which Montgomery and his American support units employed over a million troops and 1,700 tanks.[29] Most of the German units left much to be desired. Thus, for instance, due to the general lack of available reserve forces, the still incomplete West Wall was manned by second-class soldiers, men who under normal circumstances were given an exemption warrant. These were divided into so-called *Magen-Bataillon* (Stomach Batallions) and *Ohren Bataillon* (Ear Batallions); the former were constituted of men with chronic stomache diseases and who received special rations, while the latter were constituted of men with severe hearing defects, given tasks adopted to their handicaps. Thereby, another 70 to 80,000 men could be mobilized for the defense of Germany's western borders.[30] That such a weak force was able to halt the Allied offensive is highly remarkable.

The single most important reason why the British and Americans failed to fully exploit their numerical superiority on the Western Front in the fall of 1944, was supply difficulties. Until September 1944, the forces landed in Normandy only had a single shipping port at their disposal, Cherbourg. Furthermore, there was a severe shortage of transport means on land, this due to several factors, of which the most important was that the rail networks in northern France still lay in shambles after the Allied bombings in the past spring and summer. But on top of that, the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) under General Dwight D. Eisenhower had failed to bring ashore more than one hundred and sixty truck companies, even though the U.S. Transportation Corps had advised that at least fifty percent more would be needed.[31] Moreover, fourteen hundred British three-ton trucks broke down in France as a result of faulty pistons.[32]

In this situation, the supplies to the front ought to have been concentrated on fuel. This would have enabled

* Volksgrenadier-Division should not be confused with the Nazi Home Guard Forces, Volkssturm.

** The German Ersatzheer organized troop training and replaced losses in the regular first-line units.

the motorized units to pursue, envelop and annihilate the withdrawing German armies. But nothing of the kind happened. Instead, the Allies wasted much of their relatively limited transport capacity to replenish their stocks of ammunition, which was fairly superfluous since their enemy by this time—late August and early September 1944—was in a state of disintegration.*

In addition, just like in Italy, the Allied warfare on the Western Front was impaired by rivalry and jealousy between British and the American commanders. While Eisenhower was the Supreme Commander, the Englishman Montgomery—the victor at el-Alamein—commanded the ground forces in Normandy. However, as we have previously seen, in connection with the breakthrough at Avranches, the U.S. forces were removed from Montgomery's 21 Army group to form the all-American 12th Army Group under Lieutenant General Bradley. Montgomery would remain in command of all Allied ground forces in northern France for another while, but through the creation of the 12th Army Group, the chain of command became vague.

In Montgomery's opinion, the difficult supply situation made it impossible to carry out a powerful offensive all along the front line. On 17 August 1944, he introduced Bradley to what he called his 'reversed Schlieffen Plan.' According to this, the two Allied army groups would be held together in a 'solid mass' of forty divisions which would advance towards the northeast, from the Paris area and across River Seine. The main thrust would be made by 21 Army Group against Pas de Calais and western Flanders in order to secure the port of Antwerp and southern Netherlands. The American 12th Army Group was to form the eastern flank and advance towards the Ardennes and the German cities of Aachen and Cologne. Lieutenant General Patch's U.S. Seventh Army, which had landed in southern France during Operation 'Dragoon,' was supposed to advance in a northerly direction towards Nancy in eastern France and the German Saar area, but Montgomery's and Bradley's army groups were not supposed to stretch out to the right to reach connection with Patch's forces, since this would cause 'an imbalance in the strategy.' Montgomery's plan was mainly aimed at establishing 'a powerful air force in Belgium, to secure bridgeheads over the Rhine before the winter began, and to seize the Ruhr quickly.'[33]

Although Bradley initially seemed to agree with Montgomery, the tensions between Americans and Britons soon grew stronger. 'From that time onwards,' Montgomery wrote after the war, 'there were always "feelings" between the British and American forces till the war ended. Patton's remarks from time to time did not help. When stopped by Bradley at Argentan he said: "Let me go on to Falaise and we'll drive the British back into the sea for another Dunkirk".'[34] Bradley, on the other hand, wrote in his memoirs about what he called the 'skirmishing' which 'continued through several major showdowns and did not end until the spring of 1945 when Eisenhower finally turned me loose at Remagen for encirclement of the Ruhr.'[35] This conflict continued, and to some extent continues even today in the two countries' respective historiography.

On 20 August, Eisenhower convened a staff meeting in Normandy where it was decided that the command system would be changed on 1 September, so that Eisenhower also would assume command of the ground forces. This would reduce Montgomery's command to only the British-Canadian 21 Army Group. Furthermore, it was decided that the American 12th Army Group, quite contrary to what Montgomery had suggested, was to advance towards Metz in eastern France, and the German Saar area, in order to link up with the 'Dragoon' forces. Montgomery protested vehemently when these decisions were presented to him at his advanced command post that same evening.

On 23 August, Montgomery flew to Bradley's command post to discuss the matters, and found that his American colleague had changed opinion regarding the plan which had been decided upon at Eisenhower's staff meeting three days previously. Montgomery then went immediately to Eisenhower's command post, and told the supreme commander that 'if he adopted a broad front strategy, with the whole line advancing and everyone fighting all the time, the advance would inevitably peter out, the Germans would be given time to recover, and the war would go on all through the winter and well into 1945.'[36]

* Both soldiers at the front and military commanders took out their frustration over this situation on the supply organization, known as the Communications Zone (ComZ). Its commander, Lieutenant General John C. H. Lee—who also was Eisenhower's deputy in the SHAEF and thus the second highest Allied military commander in Europe—was subject to particularly virulent attacks. His initials were scornfully read as 'Jesus Christ Himself,' alluding to the sumptuous life which he was supposed to have led on the front soldiers' expense. A U.S. general wrote, concerning what was apprehended as Eisenhower's 'indulgence' of Lee that 'Alexander the Great loved flatterers.' (Hastings, *Armageddon*, p. 25.) This bitterness—which has continued to be echoed in more recent narratives, where anecdotes and sharp statements made by military commanders have come to play an important role in the description of ComZ—nevertheless disregards from the fact that under Lee's command, 37 million tons of military supplies were shipped from the USA and Canada prior to the invasion, and after the invasion, 41 million tons were transported to the Continent. In his extensive review of the U.S. maintenance organization in Europe during World War II, U.S. military historian Roland G. Ruppenthal points out that 'lack of confidence in the Communications Zone was hardly a new phenomenon. Suspicions engendered by the differences over organization and planning in the U.K. period had never subsided, and relations between the Communications Zone and the field commands were never completely cordial. Part of the mistrust undoubtedly stemmed from the traditional and probably unpreventable feeling that rear area troops were better supplied than those at the front, particularly in such items as clothing and food.' (Ruppenthal, *United States Army in World War II European Theater of Operations: Logistical Support of the Armies. Volume II: September 1944-May 1945*, p. 349.) Indeed, Lee was a highly controversial character, but in no small part was this due to the fact that he was the first senior commander in the by this time segregated U.S. Armed Forces to challenge the Army's racial prejudices. Up until this time, the doors to first-line service had been practically shut to African Americans, and no single military commander played a greater role than Lee in tearing down these racist barriers. For instance, he he issued a spectacular memorandum that demanded that 'commanders of all grades will receive voluntary applications [from African Americans] for transfer to the Infantry.' (Memo from John C. H. Lee, December 26, 1944. Security Classified Records, Record Group 220: Records of the President's Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services. Harry S. Truman Library and Museum. http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/desegregation/large/documents/index.php?documentdate=1944-12-26&documentid=12-12&studycollectionid=&pagenumber=1&sortorder=. 1 November 2012.) This was not looked upon with favour by many of Lee's colleagues, but as a result of Lee's intervention, African-American military units were deployed in the Ardennes Battle, with quite good results—as we shall see later.

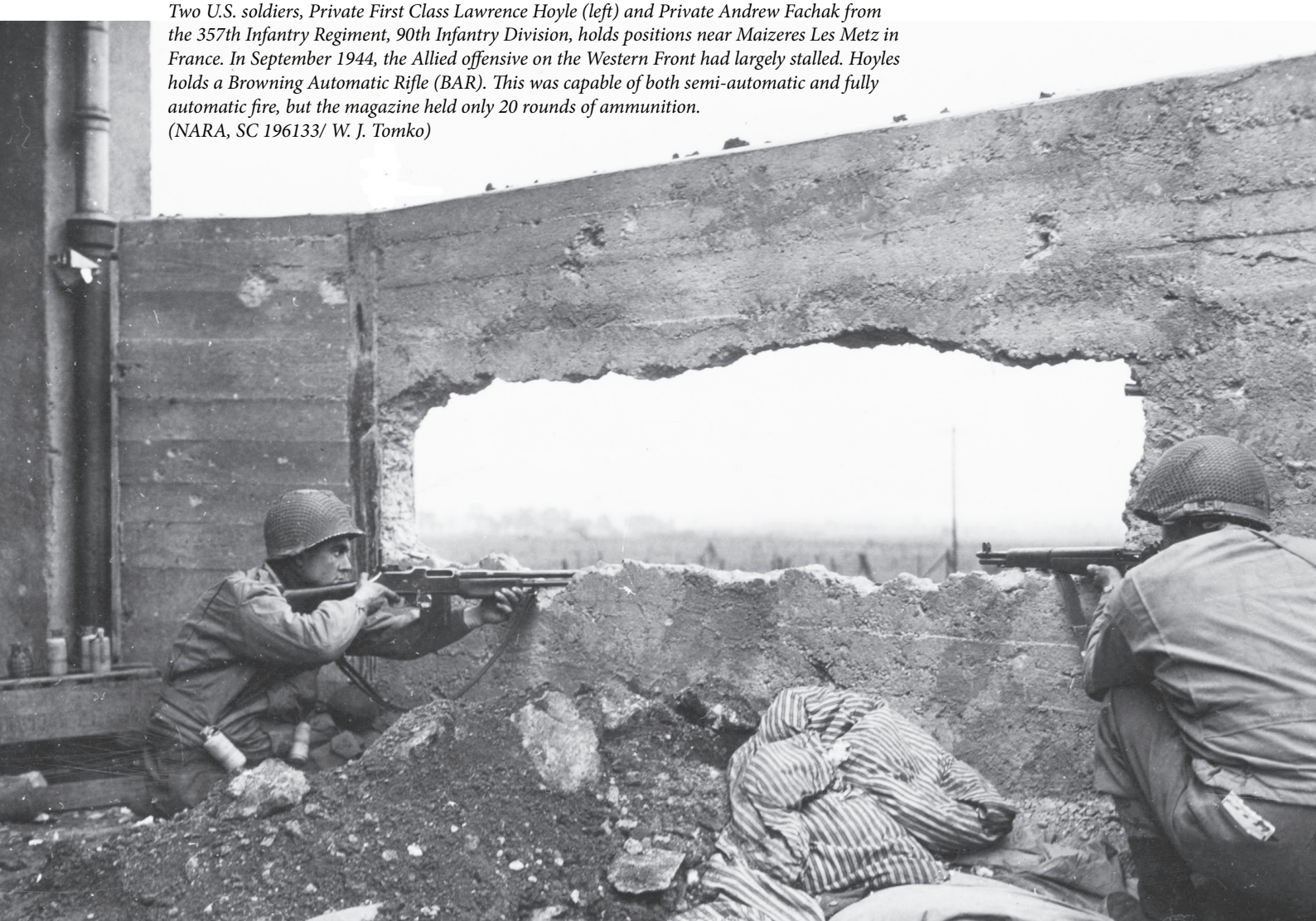
Montgomery also opposed the idea that the supreme commander would 'descend' to the battlefield to assume command of the ground troops. 'The supreme commander,' Montgomery said, 'must sit on a very lofty perch in order to be able to take a detached view of the whole intricate problem—which involves land, sea, air, civil control, political problems, etc. Someone must run the land battle for him.'[37] This has sometimes been interpreted as a personal power greed on behalf of Montgomery, but he in fact declared that he most willingly would serve under Bradley if it was decided to make him the commander of ground operations. The meeting on 23 August resulted in what could best be described as a compromise. Eisenhower agreed to make Hodges' U.S. First Army available to Montgomery's planned concentrated attack towards the northeast, but refused to accept the proposal to halt Patton, whose Third Army was advancing on the Allied southern (right) flank, thus stretching the supply lines both to the south and the east. 'The American public opinion would never stand for it; and public opinions win wars,' said Eisenhower—to which Montgomery replied, 'Victories win wars. Give people victory and they won't care who won it.'[38]

Nevertheless, during a couple of days, the flow of supplies to Patton's army was reduced to two thousand tons per day, while U.S. First Army, which constituted the southern flank of Montgomery's advance, received five thousand tons a day.[39] As a result, fuel shortage halted Patton's armor at the French city of Verdun on 31 August—following a lightning advance of 140 miles in just ten days, from River Seine south of Paris, without encountering any noteworthy resistance. Since Patch's Seventh Army still remained far down in southern France, this enabled the bulk of German Armeegruppe G to slip through from southwestern France, in order to establish defensive positions in Lorraine in northeastern France just in time to counter Patton's resumed offensive.

In the meantime, the British-Canadian army group and U.S. First Army surged forward in the north, also without encountering much resistance. On 3 September, the news was cabled out that the Belgian capital Brussels had been liberated. But while this took place, German 15. Armee, which Montgomery's 21 Army Group simply had bypassed in the Calais area in the west, escaped fairly mildly. There hardly is any justification for the British neglect on 4 September, when Antwerp was seized, to block the evacuation routes farther to the west. Instead, these remained open for the Germans, who thus not only were able to evacuate 82,000 troops and 580 artillery pieces of their 15. Armee, but also had the opportunity to establish powerful garrisons on both sides of the Scheldt Estuary, and in several French Channel ports—which served to prolong the Allied supply problems.[40]

During these weeks in September 1944, which could have decided the outcome of the war, the Allies were left with only three ports for all supplies arriving from the British Isles—Cherbourg, Dieppe and Ostende. Cherbourg, far distant in western France, had been taken already before the breakthrough at Avranches. Dieppe was occupied by 1st Canadian Army on 1 September, but the road from that place and to the front lines was between 250 and 300 miles.

Two U.S. soldiers, Private First Class Lawrence Hoyle (left) and Private Andrew Fachak from the 357th Infantry Regiment, 90th Infantry Division, holds positions near Maizeres Les Metz in France. In September 1944, the Allied offensive on the Western Front had largely stalled. Hoyles holds a Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR). This was capable of both semi-automatic and fully automatic fire, but the magazine held only 20 rounds of ammunition.
(NARA, SC 196133/ W. J. Tomko)



The small Belgian fishing community of Ostende, which was captured by the Canadians on 8 September, indeed was located closer to the front, but its port had a very limited capacity. Access to the great international port of Antwerp was, as we have seen, blocked by the German troops who held the Scheldt Estuary. The French Channel ports of Boulogne, Calais, and Dunkirk in the Pas de Calais area were firmly held by German garrisons who had managed to fortify themselves while Montgomery's forces had just passed by. It would cost the British and Canadians bitter fighting before Boulogne (on 22 September) and Calais (on 30 September) could be captured. In the meantime, the Germans were able to destroy the port installations and block the harbor entrances with sunken ships. Not until the middle of October could the port of Boulogne be taken into use, and the port of Calais was opened to traffic only in November 1944. Neither could the port of Antwerp be taken into service until the Germans, following heavy fighting, had been forced to abandon their positions at the Scheldt Estuary after the first week of November. In Dunkirk, a German force of 10,000 men held out until the end of the war.

The errors committed by the Allied supreme command, as well as the faulties displayed by its troops, was carefully noted by the Germans. These were also quite aware of the growing tension between British and Americans, not least through media in the UK and the USA. To his dismay, Eisenhower found that the modified chain of command, in which he himself succeeded Montgomery as the commander of the Allied ground operations, was received with 'great resentment' in the British press, which asserted that Montygomery had been pushed aside because of his successes. At the same time, the American press exulted over the fact that the U.S. forces, as they saw it, had gained 'a truly independent basis.'[41] (To compensate Montgomery, he was promoted to field marshal on 1 September, the same day as Eisenhower assumed command of ground operations.)

On 2 September, when the British troops reached the Franco-Belgian border southeast of Lille, Bradley and Patton met Eisenhower in an attempt to make him change the priorities at the front. 'My men can eat their belts, but my tanks gotta have gas,' Patton lamented. Eisenhower agreed to detail one of the army corps of Hodges' First Army, V Corps, to Patton's attack towards the east. Two days later, Eisenhower swung completely in favor of Bradley: He now granted Patton's eastbound advance towards the Saar area a share of the supply that was equal to that of Hodges' First Army. With the supply lines of both Allied army groups already overstretched, this new decision resulted in Montgomery's forces being unable to advance for three whole days—which in turn gave Model time to organize his Heeresgruppe B against Montgomery's 21 Army Group.

Meanwhile, Patton's Third Army banged its head against the German fortifications around the French city of Metz. Here, at the old Franco-German border (between 1871 and 1919) along River Moselle (Mosel), the so-called 'Mosel Line,' over forty miles wide, had been constructed by the Germans before World War One. When Patton now resumed his offensive, German Armeegruppe G—which on 11 September was re-organized into Heeresgruppe G—had had time to evacuate 130,000 troops from southwestern France, and these now confronted Patton's forces in the fortifications of the 'Mosel Line.' Moreover, two fullstrength German divisions, the 3. and 15. Panzergrenadier divisions, had been released from the Italian Front, and these played a crucial role in the checking of Patton's attack at Metz.

The Germans were completely astonished at the American approach on the battlefield. Generaloberst Johannes Blaskowitz, C.O. of Armeegruppe G, is not gentle in his review of Patton's decision to launch a headlong attack straight into the fortifications at Metz: 'A direct attack on Metz was unnecessary … In contrast, a swerve northward in the direction of Luxembourg and Bitburg would have met with greater success and would have caused our 1st Army's right flank to collapse, followed by the breakdown of our 7th Army.'[42] The famous military strategist Liddell Hart remarked laconically, 'Patton's Third Army began to cross the Moselle as early as 5 September, yet was little farther forward two weeks later—or, indeed two months later.'[43]

Hodges' U.S. First Army was no more successful as it in the meantime crossed the German western border further to the north. Its V Corps penetrated into Germany on 12 September and crossed the Our River just north of Luxembourg's northern border. This sector was defended by German I. SS-Panzerkorps, which on 7 September reported a field strength of not more than 800 troops and one (1) single tank along a frontline of over forty miles.[44] Its troops did not even suffice to occupy all the pillboxes of the West Wall in this sector, and in each manned pillbox there were just two or three soldiers, armed with rifles, occasionally a single machine gun or a Panzerfaust.

Although the Americans captured the first line of fortifications in this part of the West Wall, the Germans —to their own astonishment—soon managed to halt the offensive. On one occasion, barely eighty German soldiers, supported by two armored personnel carriers equipped with flame throwers, made a counter-attack which caused panic among the American ranks. The intrercepted radio call from the affected American unit—part of U.S. 28th Infantry Division—revealed quite a lot about the state of the American troops to the Germans: 'King Sugar to anybody! King Sugar to anybody! Help! We are having a counterattack—tanks, infantry, flame throwers!'[45]

Military historian Peter Elstob wrote, 'After two days of fighting the tired 28th Division's soldiers had only succeeded in forcing two small breaches through the West Wall. When the Germans counter-attacked, the exhaustion of the long pursuit took its toll and the men who had formerly fought bravely and well fell back in panic before fairly light attacks.'[46] While Brigadier General Norman D. Cota, the American divisional commander, had the commander of the 109th Infantry Regiment dismissed for the shortcomings, the Germans carefully analyzed the American setback—and thereby paid attention not least to the fact that this had occurred at a time when rain and a low cloud ceiling had prevented the Allied aviation from

providing the ground troops with direct close support. That the attackers had lacked tank support, while the difficult supply situation forced them to reduce the artillery support to twenty-five fired shells per day and gun, reinforced the impression that the U.S. infantry was totally dependent on a powerful fire support in order to act effectively.

'This setback,' Elstob wrote, 'marked the beginning of the steep rise in "combat fatigue" which later, as the proportion of non-combat casualties rose to twenty-five percent, caused considerable alarm to commanders.'[47]

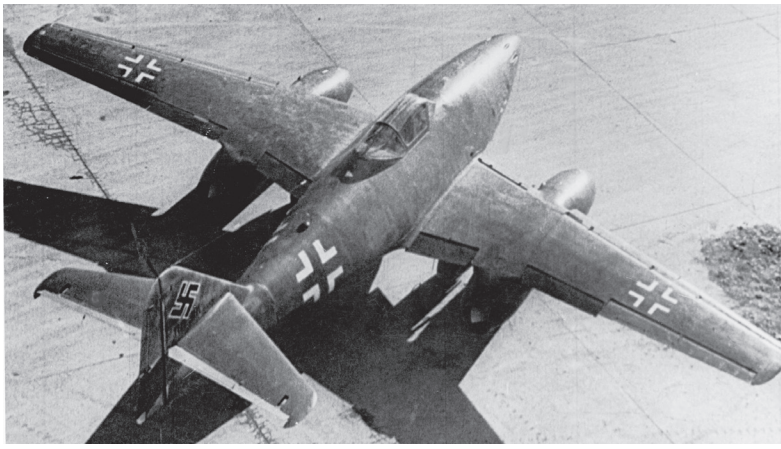
Meanwhile, the Allied supply situation deteriorated by the day. The fuel supply occasionally dwindled to just two days of consumption. The shortage in ammunition became even worse. During the first week of October, only one ammunition ship could be reloaded in France, while another thirty-five waited offshore for docking space.[48] On 2 October, ammunition rationing was instituted. At the beginning of the second week of October it was obvious that even in spite of this rationing, the ammunition stocks in France would be exhausted within a month.[49]

In the German camp, combat spirits were boosted through a combination of Goebbel's propaganda and hopes tied to the new 'wonder weapons'—top modern weapons which outclassed anything the Allies had at their disposal. By this time, the first among these—the jet propelled combat aircraft Messerschmitt 262 and Arado 234 and the rocket propelled fighter plane Messerschmitt 163—had begun to take part in the fighting, albeit in small numbers.* On 8 September the next 'wonder weapon' was taken into use—the ballistic missile bomb A 4 (Aggregat 4). This was launched into the stratosphere and thereafter plunged at a speed of one mile per second (3,600 m.p.h.) towards its target. The 27,600lb heavy missile, carrying a warhead containing 2,200 lbs of explosives, hit the ground with a terrible impact. A scientific study made in the year 2010 showed that an A 4 created a sixty foot wide and twenty-four feet deep crater, hurling 3,000 tons of debris into the air.[50]

Shortly before noon on 8 September 1944, the first A 4 came down in southeastern Paris. Seven hours later, London was hit by two other A4s. This caused consternation in the Allied headquarters, where this type of weapon was already well known—the parts of a test-launched A 4 which had exploded over Bäckebo in Sweden two months earlier, had been handed over to the British by the Swedish government. By this time, the British were just coming to grips with the unmanned rocket propelled robot bombs of the model Fieseler 103—better known as V 1 (*Vergeltungswaffe 1*, 'Vengeance Weapon 1')—which the Germans had been launching mainly against London since June 1944. Because the V 1s approached at altitudes of around 2,000 to 3,000 feet and at a speed of 400 m.p.h., they could be fought with fighter planes and antiaircraft guns, and by the end of August, 70 percent of all incoming V 1s were shot down over southern England.

But against the A 4 there were no countermeasures. When it was discovered that the A 4s were launched from the German-occupied Netherlands, Eisenhower promptly decided to approve Montgomery's proposal to air-land the joint Allied airborne army at the Dutch river crossings at Eindhoven, Nijmegen, and Arnhem. The purpose of this operation, codenamed 'Market,' was to establish a corridor along which British XXX Corps would advance in order to break up the German defenses—Operation 'Garden.' The attack had the dual objective of capturing the A 4 launching sites and to gain new momentum in the Allied offensive to seize the Ruhr area.

But the difficulties that already hampered the Allied offensive had not changed, to the detriment of the combined operation 'Market Garden.' Montgomery informed Eisenhower that if nothing was done about the 21 Army Group's strained supply situation, it would take nearly two weeks before he would be able to attack. Eisenhower immediately switched back the supply priority to the British-Canadian army group, and then Montgomery set the attack date to 17 September. The British field marshal believed that Patton's resource-consuming attacks at Metz would be cancelled so that most of the American army group's supplies could be diverted to Hodges' First Army, which according to the plan would act in support of 'Market Garden.' But he had underestimated the creativity of the American generals.



The German jet plane Messerschmitt Me 262 undoubtedly was the best fighter plane of World War II. (Creek)

When Bradley on 12 September informed Patton of Eisenhower's decision, Patton suggested that he would make his Third Army so strongly committed on the other side of River Moselle that it would be impossible to halt it. Bradley gave Patton two days to execute this plan, and in a new twist, Eisenhower declared that the Allied northern flank could not be given top priority until Patton's army had been thoroughly established on the eastern side of River Moselle. This was in effect a charte blanche for Patton. Australian war correspondent and historian Chester Wilmot wrote:

'By his advance from the Marne to the Meuse and then from the Meuse to the Moselle, Patton had distorted

* By this time, no more than one regular bomber group actually was operating with Me 262 bombers, I. Gruppe/ Kampf-geschwader (Jagd) 51. Since early August 1944, a couple of Ar 234s had conducted reconnaissance flights on the Western Front and over the British Isles, and a few dozen Me 163s took part in the air defense of Germany.

the Allied Front and dragged it too far to the south. Third Army had become a magnet drawing forces and supplies away from what Eisenhower had declared should be the main drive.'[51]

Hitler's decision on 8 September to despatch one of his new so-called armored brigades in an attack against U.S. Third Army further bolstered Patton's position in the rivalry over Allied supplies. With the emphasis on armor and less on support troops in the shape of panzer grenadiers and artillery, Hitler believed that these armored brigades would be more agile than 'traditional' panzer divisions. But this structure, contradictory to the basic idea of panzer units, only left the tanks of these armored brigades on their own on the battlefield, without the necessary support. The first attack by one of these armored brigades on 8 September ended with the annihilation of the German unit. Up to 18 September another three armored brigades were hurled into counter-attacks against U.S. Third Army: they were all largely wiped out.*

This not only led the Germans to reconsider the idea of armored brigades; no further supplies were diverted from Patton's Third Army to Hodges' First Army —with the result that the latter was unable to support Operation 'Market Garden' in the Netherlands.

To the British-American airborne army, the situation became quite the opposite to that of the German armor brigades farther south. In the absence of the required armored support— owing to inadequate supplies, only three out of nine British divisions could be deployed during first days of the operation—'Market Garden' ended in a disaster for the Allied Airborne Army. While eighty percent of British 1st Airborne Division was annihilated, U.S. 101st Airborne Division lost 2,100 troops; in U.S. 82nd Airborne Division, 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment alone sustained 796 casualties, and 'C' Company, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment was dealt 50 percent losses.

The A 4 bombardment continued unabated. During the last days of September 1944, up to fourteen missiles were launched each day. From 7 October, Antwerp was added to the targets list for these rockets, which soon were dubbed V 2 by German propaganda. When the 1,000th V 2 was launched on 26 November, 556 had been sent against Antwerp, and 254 against London.

Even though the material crisis was far from overcome for the German Western Front—by the end of September 1944, Heeresgruppe B mustered no more than 239 tanks or tank destroyers and 821 artillery pieces—the acute military crisis had at least temporarily been overcome. On 27 September, Generalfeldmarschall Model reported: 'Combat spirits improving by the day.' After the war, the operations officer of Heeresgruppe B, Oberstleutnant Günther Reichhelm, recalled that 'the possibilities of capitulation were discussed in the most intimate circles of Army group staff, but had to be dropped because of the existing, excellent morale of both troops and civilians.'[52]

However, on the Eastern Front, things looked different. With their supply lines strung out, the power of the great Soviet summer offensive in Belorussia and the Ukraine also withered down, and by August 1944 the Red Army had been checked along River Vistula in Poland and at East Prussia's border with Lithuania. But this could be achieved only when the Germans had brought in very strong reinforcements. At Warsaw alone, they despatched five hundred tanks and tank destroyers at the end of July and early August.[53] In early September 1944, the Germans could muster two million men on the Eastern Front, against the Red Army's 6.5 million troops (three times more than the total strength of the Allied forces on the Western Front). Of Germany's ten so-called heavy armored battalions (schwere Panzer-Abteilung)—equipped with heavy Tiger tanks——seven were deployed on the Eastern Front, only one on the Western Front, and two in Italy. Moreover, the German Air Force was incomparably better on the Eastern Front than in the West or in Italy.

When the Red Army attacked Heeresgruppe North in the Baltic States on 14 September, 1.5 million Soviet troops with 4,400 tanks were pitted against 700,000 men and 1,000 tanks on the German side. [54] The Soviets completely smashed the German positions. When they took Tallinn and Pärnu on 22 September, almost all of Estonia had been captured by the Red Army. The Germans launched four hundred tanks in a counter-attack in Latvia, but the ensuing five-day tank battle cost them a loss of nearly 150 tanks and tank destroyers. [55] In early October, the Soviet forces reached Lithuania's Baltic Sea coast, thus isolating Heeresgruppe Nord in the so-called 'Courland Pocket' in the north.

The 'Courland Pocket' nevertheless also tied down sizable Soviet forces, which also the fighting in Hungaria and Yugoslavia did—in September and October 1944 the Red Army was working its way through these two countries—why the Soviets for the moment were unable to bring forward sufficient forces to launch an offensive in Poland and against Germany at the Vistula Front. Hitler realized that the only way to avert the looming disaster, was to act during the respite of a few months that he would be granted before the Red Army had managed to gather strength for a new major offensive at River Vistula, and it was quite clear to him how and where he would act. All lessons from the battlefield during the previous three months seemed to be clearly pointing in one direction.

* The commander of Heeresgruppe G, Generaloberst Johannes Blaskowitz, made the scapegoat for these failures, was replaced on 21 September by General Hermann Balck. When Balck nevertheless later on failed to hold back the Americans from the German border, even he was dismissed, and on 24 December 1944, Blaskowitz was reinstituted as the C.O. of Heeresgruppe G.

CHAPTER 2

THE PLAN TO ATTACK: 'A MOMENTOUS DECISION!'

"Split the British and American armies at their seam, then a new Dunkirk!" Adolf Hitler in the "Wolf's Lair" on 16 September 1944.

After the daily military situation conference in the 'Wolf's Lair'—Hitler's secretly located Headquarters in a forest outside of Rastenburg in East Prussia—on Saturday 16 September 1944, the Führer asked a small group of men to stay a little while for a 'second conference.'
Generaloberst Alfred Jodl, chief of operations in the staff of the German Armed Forces (OKW), opened this by reviewing the relation of forces on the Western Front, but he was silenced by Hitler who cried, 'Stop!'[1]

A moment of uneasy silence followed. The men in the room looked at each other. Some, among them General Werner Kreipe, chief of staff of the Luftwaffe that Hitler in recent times had lamented so much over, felt a strong discomfort. Finally Hitler spoke again.

'I have come to a momentous decision. I shall go over to the counterattack!'[2]

Hitler rose from his chair and walked over to the large wall map, took the ruler from Jodl and banged the edge of the ruler against the Ardennes on the map, as he clarified, 'That is to say here, out of the Ardennes, with the objective Antwerp!'[3]

The Ardennes—the hilly and forested area in eastern Belgium and northern Luxembourg, the place where German troops had launched their great offensives in the West at every previous occasion: This had been done by the Prussian Army in 1870, by the Kaiser's Forces in 1914, and by Hitler's armored spearheads on 10 May 1940. Each time their opponents had allowed themselves to be caught off guard because the Germans had chosen this area with its rough terrain.

Would the enemy fall for the same trick a fourth time? The assembled generals looked at each other. But Hitler was certain that it would work. The attack, he explained, was to be led by von Rundstedt and would be launched around 1 November. Recent events on the Western Front, he said, had shown that the the German defense positions were strong enough to withstand the numerically superior Allied armies until the attack was launched. He continued:

'The present front can easily be held! Our own attacking force will consist of thirty new Volksgrenadier divisions and new panzer divisions, plus panzer divisions from the Eastern Front.'[4]

According to German intelligence reports, U.S. First Army, grouped in the Ardennes sector, consisted of eight infantry and three armored divisions, but the bulk of these were concentrated to the Aachen area. A sixty-mile-wide sector between Monschau (at the present German-Belgian border) and Echternach (on the border between Germany and Luxembourg further to the south) was held by only four American divisions, and this was where the Germans were going to strike. Moreover, the wooded Eifel area offered good opportunities to to conceal the German assault force. Once a breakthrough had been achieved, the troops would strike towards the northwest, through the Ardennes, to cross River Meuse between Liège and Namur, with Antwerp as the objective.[5] If this was accomplished, Hitler expected that between twenty and thirty Allied divisions would be cut off and annihilated to the east of Antwerp. 'Split the British and American armies at their seam, then a new Dunkirk!' he enthusiastically exclaimed.[6]

Those present were just as astonished at Hitler's suddenly regained energy at the bold plan. Generaloberst Heinz Guderian, acting chief of staff for the German Army Staff (OKH), objected by asking whether the difficult situation on the Eastern Front really admitted such a concentrated effort on the Western Front.[7] Hitler replied that the Russians would have to pause for several months before they were able to resume their great offensive—an assessment which proved to be correct—and that the Germans had to act within that period.

Jodl referred to the great air superiority of the Western Allies—would that not render such a venture impossible? Hitler countered by requesting that the Luftwaffe concentrate 1,500 aircraft to the Western Front on 1 November. Furthermore, he explained, the attack would be launched in a period of bad weather, and added acidly—clearly addressing Kreipe:

'In bad weather the enemy's air force does *not either* fly!'

While the generals' objections were restricted to a strictly military viewpoint, Hitler proceeded from a broader perspective. Chester Wilmot interprets and summarizes the Nazi dictator's reasoning:

> [Hitler] realized that he had neither the forces to inflict a serious defeat on the Red Army, nor the petrol to maintain an advance deep enough to deprive Stalin of any essential resources. His best opportunity of regaining the initiative lay, he decided, in the West. Here with smaller forces and less petrol he might capture an objective of critical significance. In addition, it appeared to him that the Western Allies were more vulnerable and less tenacious than the Russians. He believed that the British were nearly exhausted and that the Americans had no real interest in the war against Germany. Lacking the toughness and the incentive of the Russians, American troops would quickly lose heart in adversity. Their victories had been won, so he thought, only by air-power, but, once winter deprived them of their customary air support, the Americans would collapse under the impact of a powerful assault.[8]

Hitler felt quite assured that if the Western Allies were dealt such a devastating defeat—whereby half their military force in the West would be obliterated in a single strike – public opinion in the USA would enforce a separate peace with Germany. And even if this result was not achieved, such a victory would afford Hitler with what he needed most of all, time. It would grant him time to, covered by the bad winter weather, rebuild his destroyed factories, so that his new, superior 'wonder weapons' could be produced in large numbers. With great quantities of jet planes, V 2s, and the new 'electric submarines' he assumed that he would be able to drive the British-American armies off the Continent. Then he hoped he would be able to concentrate almost the entire German Armed Forces to the Eastern Front in order to attain at least a stalemate against the Soviets. It was, he admitted, a clutch at straws—but from his perspective it was the only possible way out.

Hitler also had thought about how the attack would be militarily feasible. Hence, he for instance ordered the armored units I. SS-Panzerkorps and II. SS-Panzerkorps, with the 1., 2., 9., and 12. SS Panzer divisions, and the Panzer Lehr Division, to be immediately withdrawn from the front line and to regroup to the rear area east of the Rhine river. There, under the supervision of Generalfeldmarschall Model, they would be replenished for the upcoming offensive.[9] The Nazi dictator had a special confidence in the Waffen SS—the armed wing of the Nazi SS. Although Waffen-SS was operationally subordinated to the Wehrmacht, the recruitment of its personnel was handled by SS-Reichsführer Himmler's SS, which also took care of the training. Another speciality of the Waffen-SS was its very own military ranks.

A prerequisite for the success of the operation, Hitler declared, was that the enemy would be taken by surprise. Therefore, preparations were to be surrounded by a particularly strict secrecy. Percy E. Schramm, responsible for the war diary of the German Armed Forces High Command (OKW), referenced Hitler's continued briefing, 'If these measures succeeded, the leadership and the troops were to be guided by the single principle of both thrusting deeply into the enemy zone of operations and refusing to be diverted from their original objective by counter-attacks against their flanks. Only then could the offensive be completely successful. Any tendency of turning against the flank of the enemy forces, such as those around Aachen, had to be strictly opposed from the onset, because the German forces thereby would only run into the enemy's strongest forces, and would never again be able to obtain a complete success.'[10]

Under oath not to divulge a word to anyone, the men left the conference room. Jodl's task was to prepare a first draft of an operations plan according to Hitler's guidelines.

Without doubt, Hitler had drawn many vital conclusions from the past three months of warfare. The assessment that the Red Army was too powerful to allow any similar offensive on the Eastern Front was correct. From a military strategic point of view, it was entirely proper to strike against the weakest enemy, the Western Allies, and this at the spot where they were weakest. Some particular observations that had been made during the operations on the Western Front between June and September 1944 seemed to justify a certain optimism regarding the planned attack.

The first of these was the Allied dependence on the ports on the English Channel for the supply of their armies. Therefore it was only logical that the attack was aimed at reaching Antwerp, whereby large Allied forces would be encircled, while at the same time the other Allied forces in the area would be deprived of their main supply port.

Concerning the battlefield, the most important realization was that the attack under no circumstances should be launched in a situation where the Allied aviation could operate freely. Already on the third day after the Allied landing in Normandy in June 1944, the diary of the High Command of the German Armed Forces noted that the fighting was 'dominated by the enemy aviation, which covered the battle area and a large portion of the rear area and thus could stifle [German] armored attacks already at the onset, strike [German] headquarters and sever lines of communication to the front,' all of which had an 'absolutely crucial impact on the combat.'[11] On 22 July 1944, the supreme commander on the Western Front, von Kluge, reported, ' In face of the enemy's complete command of the air, there is no possibility of finding a strategy which will counter-balance its truly annihilating effect.'[12]

An American report established that 'a fighter-bomber attack concentrated on close-in enemy positions was worth more than any artillery preparation, if the air attack was followed immediately by a determined infantry attack.'[13] According to a compilation of Allied battlefield analyses made by military historian Ian Gooderson, the effect of fighter-bombers on German combat spirits quite often was higher than what could be achieved by artillery shelling.[14]

While the Luftwaffe on the Eastern Front even by this time could be regarded as an élite force, with a cadre undoubtedly belonging to the most experienced combat fliers of the entire war, the German aviation in the West was almost completely broken, and by all means in no shape to challenge the Allies for aerial superiority. Incredibly costly air combats against large formations of American heavy bombers with a steadily growing number of escort fighters had bled the German Air Force in the West white—to a point where it, by late summer 1944, ceased to be an opponent which the Allies could expect to meet regularly. Following the devastating aerial battles over Normandy between June

At an air base in Belgium in the fall of 1944, Lockheed P-38 Lightning fighter-bombers from U.S. 9th Air Force's 370th Fighter Group are parked in front of the wrecks of German aircraft previously destroyed during Allied air raids when the airfield was in German hands. The Allied air superiority was one of the main reasons for concern on the German side when the Ardennes Offensive was planned. (NARA, 3A-5150)

and August 1944, the Luftwaffe almost completely vanished from the skies in the West.

Almost without exception, each aerial encounter resulted in terrible German losses while the Allies sustained no more than marginal losses. These losses forced the Germans to radically shorten their pilot training, which increased the already quite wide gap regarding quality between their aviation in the West and the Western Allied aviation. By this time, German fighter pilots arrived at first-line units after just 110-125 flight hours at the flight training schools. The Americans, who had far greater opportunities to replace their own losses, still were able to provide their fighter pilots with 340 to 400 flight hours of training.[15]

In the fall of 1944, the German Air Force took to the air in the West more or less only when the Allies directed large-scale air attacks against the Achilles heel of the German war economy, the hydrogenation plants where synthetic fuel was produced. On 11 September, 305 German fighter planes went into battle in order to defend one of these plants. One hundred and ten of these were shot down. Of 1,131 U.S. heavy bombers and 440 escort fighters that had taken off from England, forty bombers and seventeen fighters were lost. The attacked ground targets were severely damaged. This in turn contributed to a further reduction of German pilot training; whereas the Luftwaffe's chief of staff Kreipe reckoned that flight schools would need between 60,000 and 80,000 tons of aviation fuel per month to be able to replace the losses, only 6,300 tons could be allocated in September 1944.[16] Nevertheless, by intensifying the efforts to repair the bomb damage on the hydrogenation plants as quickly as possible, the Germans were able to increase the production of aviation fuel from 6 percent of the original capacity in September 1944 to 29 percent in November. Production of aviation fuel rose from 10,000 tons in September to 49,000 tons in November.[17] Meanwhile the aviation in the West was spared from combat missions inasmuch as possible. This created the conditions for the large-scale operation by the Luftwaffe during the Ardennes Offensive as prescribed by the attack plane.

Hitler however had completely lost confidence in the Luftwaffe on the Western Front, and for that reason he decided to wait to launch the offensive until weather reconnaissance could foresee a long period of bad weather that would keep the Allied aircraft grounded.* This perhaps was the most important lesson from the fighting on the Western Front after the Allied landings in Normandy.

Another observation made by the Germans, one which also had to do with the aviation, was that the efficiency of the Allied ground troops appeared to be dependent on the scale of air support that they received. 'The morale of the enemy infantry is not very high,' a report by the 10. SS-Panzer-Division stated. ' It depends largely on artillery and air support. In case of a well-placed concentration of fire from our own artillery the infantry will often leave its position and retreat hastily. Wherever the enemy is engaged with force, he usually retreats or surrenders.'[18] Generalmajor Friedrich Wilhelm von Mellenthin, chief of staff in Heeresgruppe G, described the behavior of U.S. ground troops in combat as 'cautious and hesistant.'[19]

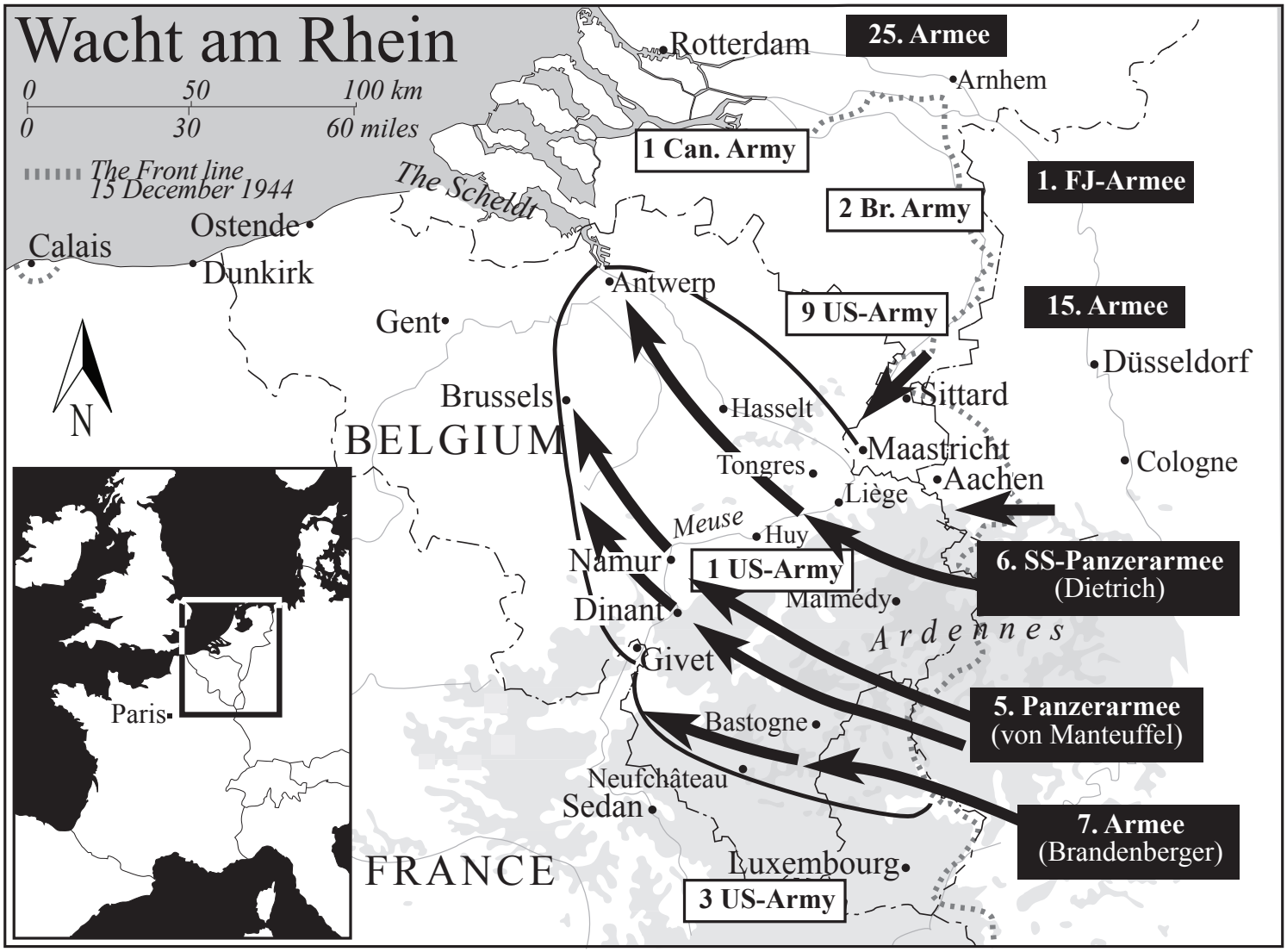
The numerous errors made by the Allied military command, as depicted in the previous chapter, of course also contributed to Hitler's feeling that there might be some justification to expect success for a concentrated attack in the Ardennes. The conflict between the Americans and the British also was no secret to the Germans. Moreover, an observed general slowness in the response of Allied ground forces to rapid changes in the situation on the battlefield gave the Germans further reason to expect their attack to be at least initially quite successful. A German military report found that 'in contrast to the Eastern theater of operations, in the West it was possible to still straighten out seemingly impossible situations because the opposing armies there [. . .] despite their enormous material superiority, were limited by slow and methodical modes of combat.'[20]

On 11 October, Generaloberst Jodl presented Hitler a first draft of the attack plan. According to this, the main thrust would be undertaken by the newly formed 6. Panzerarmee —with a spearhed consisting of four SS panzer divisions - on the right flank, while the 5. Panzerarmee would attack further to the south—with a spearhed consisting of four panzer divisions—and the southern flank covered by the 7. Armee with six infantry divisions. The two panzer armies would also be assigned five and three infantry divisions respectively.[21] The 6. Panzerarmee would be tasked to cross River Meuse at Liège, and, with its northern flank covered by the Albert Canal, to continue towards Antwerp. The 5. Panzerarmee was supposed to advance along a twenty-mile wide front mainly through northern Luxembourg, seize the important road junction Bastogne in southwestern Belgium (slightly to the west of the frontier with Luxembourg), cross the Meuse at Dinant and Namur, bypass Brussels from the south, and link up with the 6. Panzerarmee at Antwerp.

The 6. Panzerarmee was a most special creation. This army—or rather, its headquarters, Armeeoberkommando 6. Panzerarmee—was formed on 14 September 1944 to assume command of the two SS panzer corps that were pulled behind the Rhine in order to replenish their strength. It was placed under the command of a rough SS general who, owing to political reasons, was among Hitler's favourites, SS-Oberst-Gruppenführer Josef 'Sepp' Dietrich. Since this army was led by an SS general and consisted of a nucleous of SS panzer divisions, Sepp Dietrich sought and received Hitler's permission to design it as the 6. SS-Panzerarmee.[22] Formally, however, it remained registered as a Wehrmacht army up until April 1945, when it was officially designed an SS Panzer Army.[23] In different sources it is interchangeably referred to as the 6. Panzerarmee or the 6. SS-Panzerarmee. Because it essentially acted with the character of an SS Army, the designation 6. SS-Panzerarmee will be used here.

Jodl's draft also involved the southernmost army corps of the 15. Armee (grouped immediately to the north of the sector where the 6. SS-Panzerarmee would launch

* On 23 August, Hitler dismissed the commander of German Luftflotte 3 on the Western Front, Generalfeldmarschall Hugo Sperrle. In early September 1944 Hitler was even prepared to dismantle the Luftwaffe on the Western Front altogether, and on 19 September he fired Kreipe, whom he characterized as as both 'a defeatist and unreliable.'



its attack); this corps would attack in order to cover the northern flank of the breakthrough.

Just as the Red Army had done during the opening phase of Operation 'Bagration,' the attack would not be initiated according to the classic approach with massive waves of tanks, but instead the first attack wave was to be comprised of infantry groups supported by assault guns and artillery. It was only when these had accomplished gaps in the American defense lines that tanks would be deployed massively—just as the Soviets had done in 'Bagration.' Another important part of the plan was that the attack would not be launched until the weather prospect forecasted a period of ten to fourteen days of such bad weather that the Allied aviation could not be deployed.

On the whole, Hitler agreed with Jodl's draft. However, he was of the opinion that the proposed attack front—from Monschau to the confluence of the rivers Our and Sauer at the German border with Luxembourg forty miles further to south—was too narrow. Therefore, he ordered the attack to be extended southwards, so that the U.S. troops in the 'wedge' between Echternach and Wasserbillig also could be encircled and destroyed. This was intended to reduce the American opportunity to strike against the 7. Armee's southern flank.[24]

Moreover, Hitler emphasized how important it was that all artillery and rocket artillery units were to be organized with scrutiny, so that the artillery fire could be opened exactly at same time, in order to achieve a maximum effect. He also said that both panzer armies had to be supplied with 'experienced senior artillery commanders, who were to coordinate all the artillery forces, flak units, and rocket launchers for the purpose of a sudden concentration.'[25] Hitler also requested that the troops tasked to carry out the initial attack would be selected with particular care, and he stressed the importance of the assault troops being properly equipped with engineer equipment, particularly for mine clearing. He also felt that the greatest menace to the offensive would come from the enemy units concentrated in the Aachen area, only a dozen miles north-northwest of Monschau. Therefore, he ordered that 'only the best German divisions were to be committed in this area.' He specified this to the 3. and 5. paratroop divisions and the 12. Volksgrenadier-Division, which had distinguished themselves quite well during the Battle of Aachen. Furthermore the 6. SS-Panzerarmee received priority in the allocation of the new tank destroyers.[26]

Once again the Führer repeated that the 6. SS-Panzerarmee's armor on no conditions should allow itself to be 'be diverted by or involved in fighting on their right flank.'[27] Finally he gave the plan a code name, 'Wacht am Rhein.' This was taken from a popular patriotic song on how the Germans stood on guard against the enemy (implicitly

the traditional enemy France) at the Rhine, but the name ('on guard at the Rhine') also implied that it was a defensive plan, which was part of the cover.

Both Jodl and Hitler felt that the attack could be launched no sooner than 25 November. They also agreed on the strictest secrecy surrounding the plan, whereby not even Model or von Rundstedt would be privy to it for some time; they would be told that the build-up of forces only aimed at the creation of a powerful defensive reserve.

In the following days Jodl drafted a plan for the groupment of the assault forces in anticipation of the attack date: They were to be deployed in such locations that they would give the impression of a defensive reserve, ready to be brought into action in the event of an enemy breakthrough. No earlier than two days ahead of the attack should any of these units be transferred to the front. This called for a march to the first line proceeding quickly and smoothly, and without being noticed by the Allied air reconnaissance. In response to this, exact march routes for each unit were determined, and along these, facilities necessary for the marching units were placed. This plan was completed and approved by Hitler on 21 October.

Meanwhile a number of special operations were added to the attack, which gradually developed into one of the most carefully prepared military operations of the entire war. On the afternoon of 22 October 1944, a 6'3" tall, strongly built man strode into Hitler's 'Wolf's Lair.' A fencing scar ran the length of the blond giant's left cheek down to his chin. It was SS-Obersturmbannführer (lieutenant colonel) Otto Skorzeny, a man that Hitler held in the greatest regard.

Born in Vienna in 1908, Skorzeny had joined the Austrian Nazi Party at the age of twenty-two. After *Anschluss*, the absorption of Austria into the Third Reich in 1938, Skorzeny became an officer candidate in the SS-Leibstandarte, Hitler's personal bodyguard. There he soon displayed his talent for 'special operations.' When Hitler invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, Skorzeny was appointed to lead an SS force tasked to seize the Soviet Secret Police's headquarters Lubyanka in Moscow. Nevertheless, the German attempt to capture the Soviet capital failed utterly, and shortly afterward Skorzeny was wounded by shrapnel.

During his hospital stay in Vienna he read all he could lay his hands on about secret military operations, and he bombarded the SS High Command with ideas on commando operations. Skorzeny's superiors in the SS were most attentive to his proposals, not least because the Army's commando force, the so-called Brandenburgers, by that time superceded the SS by a wide margin regarding such ventures. In 1943 Skorzeny was appointed to command the new SS commando force, SS-Sonderverband z.b.V. Friedenthal. The Zenith of his career was reached in September 1943, when he led the airborne operation to rescue the toppled Italian dictator Mussolini.

Hitler did not hesitate to initiate the loyal Skorzeny into the plan for 'Wacht am Rhein.' This he did by assigning Skorzeny the task of forming a special force composed of English-speaking commando troops who, dressed in American uniforms and supplied with captured American equipment, would infiltrate the enemy lines to capture vital bridges across the Meuse, spread confusion in the Allied camp, and undertake reconnaissance.*

This was supposed to be just one among several special operations in support of Operation 'Wacht am Rhein.' Alongside with Skorzeny's infiltrators, a paratroop unit would be airdropped behind the Allied lines on the night before the attack. The objective of this operation was to take and hold the strategically important crossroads Baraque Michel, seven miles to the west of Monschau on the northern flank of the German attack. The aim was to prevent the Americans from regrouping forces from Aachen against the northern wing of the 6. SS-Panzerarmee.

Several other special operations were undertaken in order to reinforce or support Operation 'Wacht am Rhein.' What has been overlooked in many depictions of the Battle is the contribution given by German submarines. Operating far out in the Atlantic, some of these wired regular weather reconnaissance reports to the German High Command. Due to these weather reports, the German Weather Service managed to spot an extensive low pressure area that would cover the entire region during the first days of the offensive, thus creating the indispensable prerequisite for success. Other submarines entered the English Channel, where their sinking of Allied troop transport ships considerably reduced the flow of reinforcements to the Ardennes Front once the German offensive had been launched—more on this later. In additon to this, the brand new electric two-man midget submarine XXVII B Seehund would enter combat against Allied shipping on the way to Antwerp, this also in support of the Ardennes Offensive.[28]

Antwerp and the Allied headquarters in Liège would be subject to a massive air offensive by flying bombs—V 1s and V 2s. Against the City of Luxembourg—where e.g. the headquarters of Bradley's 12th Army Group was located—another of Hitler's latest 'wonder weapons,' the 'super gun' V 3 (*Vergeltungswaffe 3*) would be employed. With its 160 ft long barrel—along which multiple propellant charges were fired as the shell passed in order to provide an increased muzzle velocity—it had a greater range of fire than any other artillery piece, over 100 miles. When the first V 3 shells began hitting Luxembourg during the Ardennes Offensive, it evoked a panic which was added to the general

* Before Skorzeny had the opportunity to execute this mission, he undertook another operation with at least as far-reaching consequences . Over the course of the summer of 1944 the German Eastern Front collapsed, and in this context Hitler lost his old 'brothers in arms' Rumania, Bulgaria, and Finland. Hungary seemed to be next in line. When Hitler learned that this country's leader, Admiral Miklós Horthy, was holding secret negotiations with the Soviet Union, he summoned Skorzeny and asked him to 'do something about it.' Skorzeny went into action, as quickly as mercilessly. In the afternoon of 15 October 1944, Admiral Horthy had barely spoke on the radio, announcingHungary's withdrawal from the war, when Skorzeny and his commandos assaulted the Presidential Palace and took the admiral as their prisoner. The plan was to force Horthy to accept that a Hungarian puppet government take over to continue the war on the German side. The admiral probably would have rejected this, had it not been for Skorzeny's very special trump card: Just a few hours earlier, Skorzeny had tricked the Hungarian leader's son into a trap, beat him unconscious and abducted him—wrapped in a Persian rug , like in a classic Agent movie. Fearing for his son's life, Admiral Horthy signed the paper that guaranteed Hungary's continued participation in the war on Germany's side.

uneasiness caused by the German attack.

Many more of Hitler's so-called 'wonder weapons' would see their baptism of fire or be employed in large scale for the first time during the Ardennes Offensive. The Luftwaffe's only jet bomber wing—Kampfgeschwader 51, equipped with Messerschmitt 262s which easily could outrun any Allied fighter plane—was prepared to support 'Wacht am Rhein.' The Arado 234 would also see its operational debut as the world's first regular jet bomber in support of the Ardennes Offensive.

Moreover, the Wehrmacht's new Volksgrenadier divisions in 'Wacht am Rhein' were to be equipped with the revolutionary new assault rifle Sturmgewehr 44 as their standard hand gun. According to issued directives, two-thirds of the companies in these divisions were to be fully equipped with StG 44s. Furthermore, numerous soldiers in the panzer divisions were equipped with this firearm —hence, on 1 December 1944, the 1. SS-Panzer-Division mustered 418 of these automatic guns.

The Sturmgewehr 44 is considered to be the first modern assault rifle, and would have a wide-ranging effect on post-war arms designs. With a rate of fire of 550-600 r.p.m., an effective range of 1,800 feet (900 feet at automatic fire) and a 30-round box magazine which could be easily and quickly detached, this 7.92mm assault gun was totally superior to the hand guns of all other armies at that time. The U.S. Army's semi-automatic M1 Garand rifle with its eight-round bloc clip could not be fired at a rate higher than about 30 rounds per minute.

Two special devices that made the StG 44 even more revolutionizing was the so-called *Krummlauf* and *Zielgerät 1229*. The former ('curved barrel') was a bent barrel attachment which, along with a periscope sighting device allowed shooting around corners. *Zielgerät 1229* was an active infrared device for night fighting. However, it is uncertain whether *Zielgerät 1229* actually was produced in time to be brought into action during the Ardennes Offensive, although this was the intention.

Infrared night fighting devices—totally revolutionizing by that time—also were developed for German tanks. One of these, *Fahrgerät FG 1250*, could be mounted on Panther tanks. This could be supplemented with a larger infrared 'searchlight' with a 600mm diameter which was attached to an accompanying half-track vehicle. This system was called 'Uhu' (eagle-owl). However, although the Americans believed so, no infrared night fighting dervices were used by German tanks in the Ardennes.*

The German industry that the Western Allies leaders at the same time were discussing the dismantling of after the war, meanwhile managed to maintain an astonishing high level of arms production, in spite of intense Allied bombings. This can be explained by several factors. The dominant reason was that the industry steadily was increasing the war production at the expense of production of civilian goods, which further aggravated an already serious shortage of ordinary consumer goods in German civil society. In addition to this, not least due to Armaments Minister Albert Speer, an extensive rationalization and streamlining of the military production was effectuated—including an increase of the working week from 48 to 60 hours. Furthermore, a relocation of the production from large plants, vulnerable to aerial bombing, to a multitude of smaller, well-masked locations was carried out at a rapid pace. 'It was an absolute miracle,' recalled the Inspector of the German fighter aviation, Generalleutnant Adolf Galland. 'Having been concentrated to twenty-seven large facilities, the German aircraft production was relocated to more than seven hundred smaller plants—in unused tunnels and mine shafts, deep in dense forests, in valleys and small villages. The most astonishing of it all is that under these circumstances production volumes even could be increased.'[29] In 1944 German military production reached its highest level during the entire war, nearly three times as high as in early 1942.[30] Through 1944, the ammunition industry produced 108 million cartridges and grenades, as compared to 93 million in 1943.[31]

The accumulative effect of an increased bomber offensive and the loss of vital areas where raw material was produced led to a certain decrease during the third and fourth quarters of 1944, but ahead of the Ardennes Offensive, between September and November 1944, Speer used the reserve stocks to maintain the high level of production.

In September 1944, a total of 4,103 combat aircraft were manufactured, the highest monthly figure throughout the war (about twice the average monthly figure for 1943), and during the following three months another more than 10,000 German combat aircraft left the production lines.[32] Output of the tanks Panther, Panzer IV, and Tiger nevertheless dropped from the all-time high figure of 2,438 during the period June-August 1944 to 1,764 between September and November.[33] This chiefly was due to Allied bombing raids that destroyed 48 percent of the factory space at the Henschel Works where the Tiger was manufactured. The average monthly production of Tiger tanks dropped from 622 during the first six months of 1944 to just 380 in the period July-December.[34] However, the effect of this could to some extent be balanced by an increased production of tracked tank destroyers (Panzerjäger). These were manufactured at plants in Czechoslovakia, which due to the large distance from Allied air bases were damaged by bombing only to a limited extent. During the last three months of 1944, more German tracked tank destroyers were produced than during all of 1943. Thus, a large part of the shortage of tanks in the units earmarked for the Ardennes Offensive could be covered by tank destroyers.

In the long term, however, German industry was in a steep decline. A large number of strategic raw material, such as oil, rubber, manganese, tungsten, chromium, nickel, copper, and zinc, became increasingly difficult to obtain. Steel production fell from 9.2 million tons in the first quarter of 1944 to 3.9 million tons during the last quarter.[35] To a decline in the quality of the produced military materiel which was the result of strategic metals being replaced with substitutes of lesser quality, was added the effects of deliberate sabotage by foreign slave workers; the latter

** The rumour that the 116. Panzer-Division received such equipment probably derives from the fact that this panzer division received a number of Panther tanks from Panzer-Regiment 24, which was due to receive night fighting devices.*

THE MORGENTHAU PLAN

Combat morale among the German soldiers on the Western Front was restored in September 1944, not least through Generalfeldmarschall Model's harsh methods to halt the disorderly retreat. This made it possible to halt the Allied advance, which in turn further reinforced the German morale. In addition, the expectations elicited on the first so-called 'wonder weapons'—jet planes and V weapons—contributed to give the battered front soldiers hope.

Involuntarily, and through an incomparable tactlessness, the Allies themselves helped to strengthen the German will to resist against the Western Allies. At the Western Allied war conference in Quebec on 14-16 September 1944, U.S. President Roosevelt and Treasury of the Secretary Henry Morgenthau persuaded British Prime Minister Winston Churchill to sign a memorandum on the fate of Germany after the war which in essence was based on a plan created by Morgenthau.[1] According to this memorandum, the Allies would de-industrialize Germany after the war and convert it into 'a country primarily agricultural and pastoral in its character.'[2]

Morgenthau himself had previously studied the fairly detailed information that at this time was available on the Nazi Holocaust of the Jews, and had reacted strongly on this. Meanwhile Roosevelt expressed a desire to somehow neutralize Germany for a long time to come. Professor of Sociology and History at the University of Virginia, Jeffrey K. Olick, who has studied the background of the Morgenthau Plan, concludes that these were the grounds upon which Morgenthau appointed the committee to start drafting the plan.[3]

Along with Secretary of State Cordell Hull, Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson and Roosevelt's close associate, Harry Hopkins, Morgenthau was included in the U.S. government committee that was appointed to coordinate the various U.S. government agencies' proposals in relation to Germany after the war. When Stimson on 23 August 1944 was introduced to Morgenthau's plan, he protested vigorously. He argued that such a plan could have worked in 1860, when Germany had only 40 million inhabitants, but that now, in the 1940s, it would mean 'the removal of a large number of people from Germany.'[4] But Roosevelt went into polemics against Stimson, and two days later he told him in a letter that he considered it to be of the utmost importance that every individual in Germany is made to understand that Germany this time is a defeated nation. It was not his intention that the Germans would starve, but he said that 'if they need food . . . they can be fed three times a day with soup from Army soup kitchens,' so that 'they will remember that experience the rest of their lives.'[5]

In addition to the de-industrialization of Germany, the plan was that Germany would lose the Saar region, the areas between rivers Rhine and Moselle, southern Silesia, and East Prussia. Furthermore, the Rhineland, Westphalia, the North Sea coast and the Kiel Canal area would form an international zone, and with Austria separated again, what remained of Germany would be divided into two smaller states.

It did not take many days before the plan was leaked to the media. On 23 September 1944, it was published in great detail in the *Wall Street Journal*, which ran the front-page headline 'Department of the Treasury plans Division of Germany, Dismantling of Heavy Industry.'

The Germany Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels could not have received a better gift. Three days after publication in the *Wall Street Journal*, the front-page headline of the Nazi party newspaper *Völkischer Beobachter* read, 'Roosevelt and Churchill made Judaism's murder plan their own.' The German propaganda claimed that the purpose of the Morgenthau Plan was to 'surrender 30 million Germans to starvation.' Goebbels linked the Morgenthau Plan with a book published in 1941, *Germany must Perish*, by the American businessman Theodore N. Kaufman, who argued that 'sterilization of the German people cannot but be considered a great health measure promoted by humanity to immunize itself forever against the virus of Germanism.' [6] In a radio speech on 4 October 1944, Goebbels set the tone by stating that 'hatred and vengeance of character the Old Testament characterizes this plan, created by the American Jew Morgenthau. The industrialized Germany will be literally turned into a gigantic potato field.'

The fact that Roosevelt, following the revelations in the press, on 27 September publicly distanced himself from the plan, did not help. During the remainder of the fall of 1944—during the preparations for the Ardennes Offensive—what the Nazis called the 'Jewish murder plan' became a constantly recurring theme in the German propaganda against the Western Allies. For instance, in the journal *Das Reich* on 21 October 1944, Goebbels wrote, 'It does not matter if the Bolsheviks destroy the Reich in their own way, or if the Anglo-Saxons do it their way. They both agree on the goal: to annihilate thirty to forty million Germans.'

It was with this in mind that the German soldiers at dawn on 16 December1944 pounced on the American positions to launch the Ardennes Offensive. A few days earlier, the American intelligence agent William Donovan sent President Roosevelt a memorandum from Bern apropos the Morgenthau Plan. There he quoted the Swiss *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*:

'The conviction that Germany had nothing to expect from defeat but oppression and exploitation still prevails, and that accounts for the fact that the Germans continue to fight. It is not a question of a regime, but of the homeland itself, and to save that, every German is bound to obey the call, whether he be Nazi or member of the opposition.'[7]

1 *Suggested Post-Surrender Program for Germany av Henry Morgenthau jr.* docs.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/psf/box31/a297a01.html. 16 April 2014.
2 Olick, *In the House of the Hangman: The Agonies of German Defeat, 1943-1949*, p. 84.
3 Ibid., p. 77.
4 Ibid., p. 79.
5 Blum, *Roosevelt in Morgenthau*, p. 575-577; op. cit. in Olick, p. 78.
6 *Germany must Perish* by Theodore N. Kaufman. en.wikisource.org/wiki/Germany_Must_Perish. 16 April 2014.
7 *Memorandum for the President av William Donovan, 11 December 1944.* docs.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/psf/box32/a298m03.html. 16 April 2014.

came to play an increasingly important role in German industry when a growing share of the German working class was mobilized for military service. The deepened crisis in civilian production also had the effect that the military fatigues had to be made of artificial fibre, which did not give the same protection against cold as ordinary wool or cotton, a fact that would have severe repercussions for the German soldiers during the Ardennes Battle. The declining food production—further aggravated in the fall of 1944 through the loss of previously occupied farmlands outside of Germany, along with an intensified Allied air offensive against German communication routes—also had a long-term effect on the physical condition of the German soldiers.

Jodl estimated that 17,000 cubic meters of fuel and 50 train loads of ammunition would be required for Operation 'Wacht am Rhein.' These amounts could be obtained by using up supply stocks to compensate for what German industry was not able to produce, and the quantities needed were estimated to be ready well before the attack.[36] This would rather, in view of the damages wrought upon the German railway net by Allied bombings, depend on whether it would be possible to bring forward these quantities to the front area.

In the fall of 1944, most major cities in western and central Germany lay in ruins after extensive Allied bombing. (US Army)

On Tuesday, 28 October 1944, Generalmajor Siegfried Westphal, chief of staff at von Rundstedt's Oberbefehlshaber West Headquarters, and Generalleutnant Hans Krebs, chief of staff in Model's Heeresgruppe B, were summoned to Hitler's headquarters where they were duly informed of the attack plan. Hitler opened by telling them that 'Germany could not remain on the defensive, or else her collapse would be inevitable.'[37] The aim, he explained, was 'the destruction of the bulk of the Allied Western armies' and to render a new Allied landing in France impossible.[38] Having gone through the main outlines of the plan for the offensive and the units which were supposed to be assigned to Heeresgruppe B, Hitler proceeded to describe the support the ground troops were to receive. The two generals were informed that the Luftwaffe would support the offensive with 'incessant waves of 4,000 of the newest type fighter planes,' where 'each plane will fly two sorties daily to gain aerial superiority over the battlefield and the rear operational area.'[39] Furthermore, V weapons would be launched 'in larger numbers than in the past, against Antwerp and Liège.'[40]

Concerning ammunition, he promised two consumption units in the first line from the first day of the attack, and the troops would then be provided with another three consumption units during the course of the offensive. Regarding fuel he guaranteed three consumption units in the first line on the day the attack opened, followed by a continuous supply. Additionally, 17,000 cubic meters of fuel from the OKW reserves had been stockpiled at the Rhine. A pipeline would even be constructed across the river.[41]

Percy E. Schramm, secretary at the High Command of the German Armed Forces (OKW), noted that these two experienced generals both were in favour of the offensive plan; the only objection they voiced was that the proposed attack date, 25 November, seemed to be a bit too early to allow all the necessary preparations to be made.[42] The operations officer in Heeresgruppe B, Oberstleutnant Reichhelm, also reacted with enthusiasm when he was informed of the plan.[43] Reichhelm nevertheless admits that Generalfeldmarschall Model's first comment was more restrained. 'To me,' he said, 'the entire thing seems to stand on damned wooden feet.'[44]

Two days later, Jodl sent field marshals von Rundstedt and Model written information on the plan. This was supplemented with the additional information that Heeresgruppe H also would participate.*This would take place either in the form of an attack by the 15. Armee from the Sittard area (northwest of Aachen), and directed southwards, in conjunction with the 6. SS-Panzerarmee's push towards the west, to envelop the Allied troops in the so-called 'Maas Wedge' at Maastricht and Aachen right in the seam between Heeresgruppe B and Heeresgruppe H. Or it could be launched from Venlo, twenty miles farther to the north, directed towards the west or the southwest. According to the plan, the progress of the offensive would decide which of these two alternatives would be chosen.[45] Nevertheless, Heeresgruppe H would not go into action until the 6. SS-Panzerarmee had achieved an operational breakthrough.

Von Rundstedt and Model immediatley called for a conference to discuss the proposed plan at the headquarters of Heeresgruppe B east of Krefeld.** At this meeting, which took place on 2 November, the forty-seven-year old commander of the 5. Panzerarmee, General der Panzertruppen Hasso von Manteuffel, would become something of the main character. Since Model's army group would carry out the main onslaught, von Rundstedt declined to utter any opinion on the matter until he had heard what Model had to say, and Model in turn decided to wait until the highly experienced von Manteuffel had spoken.

* On 27 October an order was issued to form Heeresgruppe H under Generaloberst Student in order to organize the northern wing of the Western Front—the so-called Wehrmachts-Befehlshaber Niederlande (later 25. Armee), 1. Fallschirmarmee, and 15. Armee.

** Invited to this conference were, apart from the two chiefs of staff Westphal and Krebs, the commanders of the three armies in Heeresgruppe B as well as General Gustav-Adolf von Zangen and Generaloberst Kurt Student, the commanders of the two armies in Heeresgruppe H, 15. Armee and 1. Fallschirmarmee, that were supposed to take part in the pincer attack from the north.

Following a short introduction by von Rundstedt, Krebs gave the assembled men more details on the plan. Among other things, he informed them that the attack was to be launched sometime between 1030 and 1100 hrs, following a two-hour artillery preparation by all armies of Heeresgruppe B. This artillery preparation would, in combination with air attacks, be launched exactly simultaneously all along the front line.[46] When Krebs had finished talking, von Manstein took the floor. 'Only on the condition that the following "promises" are met,' he said, 'will I be able to reach and cross the Meuse,' and then he listed what he considered to be the basic conditions:

First of all, a local air supremacy over the front area as well as the supply bases and the supply routes must be ensured as soon as the bad weather period in which the offensive shall be launched has ended. Furthermore, the assault units must have full strength, be rested and be in place in their points of departure in due time before the attack. In addition to this, the mobility of the motorized units, of the reconnaissance units of all divisions, of the artillery, the anti-aircraft and the bridge construction units had to be 'decisively' improved. Moreover, the aim of having the needed quantities of ammunition, communication equipment, fuel, oil, spare parts, etc at the direct disposal of the first-line units no later than on the attack day, must be fully reached.[47] Should not all these conditions be met, von Manteuffel maintained, the assault units would be able to reach 'no further than the Meuse, and establish bridgeheads there.'[48]

The commander of 6. SS-Panzerarmee, the main assault force, SS-Oberst-Gruppenführer Sepp Dietrich, remained silent.[49] Model, who had been listening with the greatest attention, asked for a follow-up meeting with von Manteuffel. This took place that same afternoon, with von Manteuffel, Model, and Krebs present.

When the three men met, Model opened by saying that he basically agreed with von Manteuffel, but that he wished him to develop his ideas further. To what he had previously said, von Manteuffel now added the importance of the reserves arriving in due time, thus preventing any interruption in the advance, and 'an immediate and highly prioritized' assignment of additional motor vehicles to the first-line units.[50] But first and foremost, he stressed that a local air supremacy over the entire are, extending from the battlefield and back to River Rhine, was the prerequisite for any success at all.[51]

Von Manteuffel also had objections against the use of the preparatory artillery fire. First of all, he said, the proposed time for the opening of the attack, between ten and ten thirty in the forenoon, was far too late in the day, since it meant that the assault forces would have no more than seven hours of daylight during the first day of the attack. Furthermore, a two-hour artillery preparation was too long and would unnecessarily alert the Americans.[52] Von Manteuffel was opposed to a 'general' artillery fire. Instead he advocated a flexible use of artillery against enemy points of resistance, but only when assaulting units requested so. He said that he might consider 'doubtlessly identified strong [American] points of resistance and artillery positions' to be 'occasionally shelled by artillery at a time that had to be decided upon in advance—on the condition that the caliber of their own artillery pieces, the supply of ammunition, and the terrain made it possible to expect success from such an artillery fire.' But even such a use of artillery had to be restricted to no more than 45 minutes. 'In general,' von Manteuffel said, 'we must strive as far as possible to attack without any "spectacular fireworks"'. He would rather see a 'hunter's stealth' toward the American positions, without—as he expressed it—any 'awakening with music.' [53]

Von Manteuffel also suggested that the time for the launching of the attack would be moved back to 0530 hrs, combined with an initial infiltration of the American lines while it still was dark, on a wide front and conducted by small assault units, before any artillery fire at all was opened.* The latter, he added, was 'a method that both we and the Red Army has used with great success on the Eastern Front'—it was to the letter the method the Soviets had used in order to puncture the German defense lines when Operation 'Bagration' was launched on 22 June 1944.[54] He also argued that the attack date should be moved forward from 25 November until no sooner than 10 December, in order to grant the preparatory work sufficient time.

Model wanted to sleep on it, and when the three men met again on 3 November, this time at one of the corps headquarters in the 5. Panzerarmee, he expressed his support for all of von Manteuffel's proposals.[55] During the continued discussion, Model and von Manteuffel agreed on an alternative operational plan: Instead of advancing across the Meuse, once the operational breakthrough had been achieved, the two panzer armies would turn north, with their left flank protected by the Meuse and the 7. Armee covering the southern flank. Simultaneously, the 15. Armee would strike from the Sittard area in the southeasternmost corner of the Netherlands, and linking up in the Tongres area northwest of Liège in eastern Belgium, the two attack forces would trap between twenty and twenty-five British and American divisions. Which step to take next was left open, depending on how the battle developed, but both commanders could imagine a resumed advance towards the west, with the objective of reaching Antwerp once the enveloped enemy forces had been annihilated.[56] They called this the 'small solution,' opposite to the original plan, which they referred to as the 'big solution.'** Nevertheless, in his reply to Jodl's proposed offensive plan which the supreme commander in the West, Generalfeldmarschall von Rundstedt, sent Hitler on 3 November, there was no hint of any questioning of Antwerp as the prime target. Quite to the contrary, von Rundstedt declared that he 'basically was of the same opinion as the High Command.'[57] However, he did suggest that the northern pincer attack would be launched simultaneously with the main attack, which might be regarded as a kind of combination of the 'small' and the 'big' solutions. But this, as well as the 'small solution,' was turned down by Hitler, who argued that it would mean that

* Von Manteuffel used the German expression *einsickern*, ('seep into') to express the infiltration of – or rather between – the American lines, and this quite vividly describes how he imagined this.

** In the headquarters these plans became known as Little Slam and Grand Slam from the card game bridge.

the spearhead of the German attack prematurely would become sucked into costly fighting with strong Allied forces.

Percy E. Schramm, in charge of the war diary in the headquarters of the German Armed Forces (OKW) between 1943 and 1945, characterizes the differences between the military commanders and Hitler in this regard as a meeting of different approaches.[58] On one hand, Model, von Manteuffel, and von Rundstedt represented the scientific approach—the science called art of war, and which includes a falsification of the hypothesis which each military plan actually can be described as. This 'cooler' scientific approach, deriving from a strictly military viewpoint, met Hitler's thinking, which can be described as both holistic and idealistic (here in contrast to materialistic), as well as strongly emotional. Hitler had grown accustomed to regarding his generals as overly cautious and narrow in their thinking. After all, the Nazi dictator's personal experience—his almost unequalled political career from his time as a member of an inconspicuous political sect in 1919 to becoming the Leader of one of the world's most powerful states fourteen years later—seemed to indicate that 'the impossible was possible' for a man with 'a will of steel.'

Not without reason, Hitler felt reassured because there had been a similar disagreement between him and his generals before the previous great offensive in the West, the one which was launched on 10 May 1940, ending in Great Britain's expulsion from the Continent and total victory over France. When Hitler on that occasion ordered preparations to be made for the great offensive in the West, the commander of the German Army at that time, von Brauchitsch, and his chief of staff, Halder, had expected the German offensive to become 'stalled at the Franco-Belgian border, where a positional war of attrition would ensue.'[59] The army group commanders on the Western Front also had submitted their misgivings in writing, and this was distributed to the commanders of all armies.[60] Then, when a bold lieutenant general by the name of Erich von Manstein in the fall of 1939 suggested that the attack was to be launched in the Ardennes, which won Hitler's appreciation, the Army High Command had dismissed the idea of 'an attack through the Ardennes, poor in adequate roads, broken by deep valleys running in a north-southerly direction' as something completely impossible.[61] And still, it would be precisely this plan which just a few months later resulted in one of the brightest victories in military history.

However, it would be an error to think that Hitler was totally insusceptible to objections from the military commanders—after all, he held many of them in the highest regard, not least of whom was Model. On 5 November 1944, the Führer ordered the assault force to be reinforced, much in line with von Manteuffel's proposals. According to the original draft of 11 October, the attack force would consist of twenty-three divisions with another seven held in reserve; this force now was expanded to thirty-eight divisions, including fifteen panzer or panzer grenadier divisions.[62] And although Hitler did not immediately agree to move forward the attack date as far as von Manteuffel and Model requested, on 10 November he decided to postpone the date until 1 December. Eight days later, when he issued modified instructions, he also had restricted the preparatory artillery fire to one hour.

Hitler's promise that the offensive would be supported by 'incessant waves of 4,000 of the newest type fighter planes' may have sounded as merely an expression of wishful thinking, but as a matter of fact, this assertion was based on actual strength reports from the Luftwaffe. As we have seen previously, German aircraft production reached its peak in September 1944, when over four thousand aircraft were manufactured. Following the retreat from France that same month, the Inspector of the German Fighter Aviation, Generalmajor Galland, had accomplished a great work in the rebuilding of the Luftwaffe's fighter force. By the formation of new fighter wings, tucking away several units to the reserve, and strictly limiting the combat operations of those remaining in first-line service, Galland was on 12 November 1944 able to report a never hitherto seen strength of the German fighter force: 3,700 aircraft and pilots. To this figure should be added around twelve hundred night fighters, of which several would be used as night attack aircraft during the Ardennes Offensive, plus nine hundred ground-attack aircraft (of which the bulk served on the Eastern Front) and over five hundred bombers.[63] Hence, in total, the Luftwaffe disposed around 6,500 aircraft by that time.*

On 14 November, the C-in-C of the Luftwaffe, Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring, presented the outlines for the Luftwaffe's participation in Operation 'Wacht am Rhein.'[64] In September 1944, Generaloberst Hans-Jürgen Stumpff's Luftflotte Reich, responsible for the air defense of the Reich, also took command of Luftwaffenkommando West, which organized and led air operations in the West.*

Generalfeldmarschall Walter Model (left), Generalfeldmarschall Gerd von Rundstedt (center), and Generalleutnant Hans Krebs (chief of staff in Model's Heeresgruppe B) study the map over the Ardennes during a conference at von Rundstedt's headquarters on the Western Front in November 1944. (BArch, Bild 146-1978-024-31)

* Nevertheless, Hitler was a bit too optimistic regarding the possibilities to bring forward large quantities of the new jet planes within reasonable time; only 19 Messerschmitt 262s were produced in September, 52 in October, and 101 in November 1944, while at the same time 18 Arado 234s were produced in September and 40 each month October and November 1944. Still, the 'stab-in-the-back myth' concerning the Me 262, according to which the production of this aircraft was decisively delayed because of Hitler's demand that it must be constructed with a bomb-carrying capacity must be dismissed as a pure myth. It was only in the winter of 1944/1945 that serious technical faults in the construction could be overcome, allowing serial production to commence. The Ar 234s that flew on operations in August and September 1944 actually were prototypes that had been sent into action. Even in December 1944 and January 1945, no more than 124 and 153 respectively Me 262s and 35 respectively 35 Ar 234s were produced. Production figures from Vajda and Dancey, *German Aircraft Industry Production*.

Luftwaffenkommando West, which on 16 November was subordinated to Generalleutnant Josef Schmid, was tasked to despatch the fighter and ground-attack units of the II. Jagdkorps, as well as the bombers, night ground-attack, and night fighter aviation of the 3. Flieger-Division to the support of 'Wacht am Rhein.'

The II. Jagdkorps (Generalmajor Dietrich Peltz), with its subordinate 3. Jagd-Division, Jagdfliegerführer Mittelrhein (Fighter Command Middle Rhein), and 5. Jagd-Division, would be used to neutralize the menace from the Allied aviation and provide the advancing ground units with close air support. The 3. Jagd-Division (Generalmajor Walter Grabmann)—consisting of Jagdgeschwaders 1, 6, 26, and 301, plus the ground-attack wing Schlachtgeschwader 4—was tasked to lead the air operations over the Netherlands, the German territory just to the east of the Netherlands, and the northernmost part of Belgium.**

The bulk of the units in II. Jagdkorps—Jagdgeschwaders 2, 3, 4, 11, 27, 53, and 77—were stationed in the area from the Bonn region and southward, operating directly under Jagdfliegerführer Mittelrhein (Oberstleutnant Hans Trübenbach) in the north, and the 5. Jagd-Division (Generalmajor Karl Hentschel) in the south.

The 3. Flieger-Division (Generalmajor Sigismund Freiherr von Falkenstein) was assigned with the task of providing air support at night: Twin-engine Junkers Ju 88s and Junkers Ju 188s of I. Gruppe/ Kampfgeschwader 66 and Lehrgeschwader 1, Me 262 jet planes from Kampfgeschwader 51, and Arado 234s from Kampfgeschwader 76 were to carry out bombing attacks against lines of communication in the Allied rear area. The night ground-attack groups Nachtschlachtgruppe 1 and 2 (equipped with old Junkers 87 dive bombers) and NSGr 20 (Fw 190) were to strike at night against Allied airfields and troop concentrations. The night fighter wing Nachtjagdgeschwader 2 (Ju 88) would also be deployed in these operations, but its main task was to cover the German troop assembly areas against Allied air attacks during the hours of darkness. Furthermore, the special unit III. Gruppe/ Kampfgeschwader 66 (incorporated into Kampfgeschwader 200) was supposed to launch so-called 'Mistel' planes against particularly important bridges in the Allied rear area.***

On 16 December 1944, a total of 1,492 fighters, 171 bombers, 91 ground-attack aircraft, and 40 reconnaissance aircraft were ready to support the Ardennes Offensive.[65]

The cooperation between air and ground forces was carefully prepared. Each of the army divisions that would take part in the offensive was assigned with an air surveillance unit, and strong efforts were made to secure a smooth direct radio connection between the various headquarters of the first-line Army units, the Luftwaffe liaison officers assigned to ground units, and the Luftwaffe's various operational headquarters.

Fliegerführungstruppe 1, where Oberst Gordon Gollob led the fighter operations and Major Heinrich Brücker led the close air support, was to lead the direct air support of the 6. SS-Panzerarmee. The direct air support of the 5. Panzerarmee was led by Fliegerführungstruppe 2, where Oberstleutnant Karl-Gottfried Nordmann was in charge of fighter operations and Oberstleutnant Alfred Druschel directed the close air support.[66] These were well-versed and highly decorated air officers: Gollob was the first pilot of the war to reach 150 aerial victories, Brücker was one of the early Stuka and ground-attack fliers of the Luftwaffe, Nordmann had flown more than 800 fighter missions since 1939, and Druschel was the first and most experienced unit commander of the German ground-attack aviation, in action since 1938.

The Luftwaffe anti-aircraft corps III. Flak-Korps under General Wolfgang Pickert also was tasked to cover the attacking ground forces and their rear area against Allied air attacks. This AAA corps' 2. Flak-Division (Oberst Fritz Laicher), with 35 heavy and 37 medium or light anti-aircraft batteries, was assigned to the 6. SS-Panzerarmee; Flak-Brigade XIX (Oberst Paul Schluchtmann), with 20 heavy and 44 medium or light anti-aircraft batteries, to the 5. Panzerarmee; Flak-Brigade I (Oberst Oskar Schöttl), with 16 heavy and 15 medium or light anti-aircraft batteries, to the 7. Armee. Each of these anti-aircraft batteries was composed of two or three groups of eight guns apiece. Apart from the Luftwaffe's anti-aircraft batteries, the various Army and SS units had their own air defense units. Moreover, three battalions of anti-aircraft searchlights were allocated to the Ardennes Offensive.[67]

While the attack plans were developed and refined, the turn of events at the front would influence the German assault force as well as the German assessment of the chance the attack had to achieve success. Repeated attacks by U.S. First Army against the German city of Aachen, close to the location where Germany's, the Netherland's and Belgium's (present) borders meet, provided the Germans with new and important lessons regarding their American opponent. To begin with, the object of the attack, Aachen, with its strong fortifications (the city had been incorporated into the West Wall), can hardly be regarded as a good choice: The German generals shook their heads in disbelief as they watched the Americans run headlong into this strong point in the German defense instead of simply bypassing the city to the south, where the defense was considerably

* Previously, Luftwaffenkommando West was designated Luftflotte 3, but was re-organized in conjunction with the discharge of its commander, Generalfeldmarschall Hugo Sperrle, because of the failure at Normandy in the summer of 1944.

** Schlachtgeschwader 4, equipped with the specially designed assault version of Focke Wulf 190, Fw 190 F-8, was assigned with the special task to operate over the Meuse river crossings.

*** 'Mistel' was the designation of a single-engine fighter of the type Messerschmitt 109 or Focke Wulf 190 which carried an unmanned twin-engine bomber with a warhead containing several tons of explosives. With the aid of the engines of both aircraft, this load could be carried at quite a high speed. At the target, the unmanned bomber was detached, directed as a missile against the target. Tests had shown that the 'Mistel' was able to penetrate even very thick armored concrete. However, due to various reasons, no 'Mistel' planes were used in action to support the Ardennes Offensive.

weaker. In spite of their manifold numerical superiority, the Americans were pushed back with bloody losses when they assaulted the city in the second half of September.

Here another American weak spot became obvious. It turned out that they rapidly replaced their losses with insufficiently trained recruits and officers who displayed an amazing lack of tactical knowledge. On 1 October, U.S. 1st Infantry Division, which had been bloodied at Aachen, had been rebuilt to its assigned strength, but 70 percent of the troops were hastily trained recruits.[68] The Germans noted that the Americans were yet another opponent who seemed to favour quantity over quality. It was not until the Americans brought forward an entirely new army—the Ninth under Lieutenant General William Simpson—that they finally managed to squeeze the German defenders out of Aachen. On 21 October, the city was in American hands.

But the capture of Aachen was a hollow victory. The Ninth Army was unable to continue further into Germany because of the River Rur/Roer, which flows past in a northeastern direction to the east of Aachen, until four miles further to the north it joins the Maas/Meuse.* Since the Germans controlled the large Roer dams at Schwammenauel, about fifteen miles southeast of Aachen, they were in the position to let the Roer overflow its banks at any time. To save his troops from a veritable deluge, Lieutenant General Simpson had little choice but to hold back his forces.

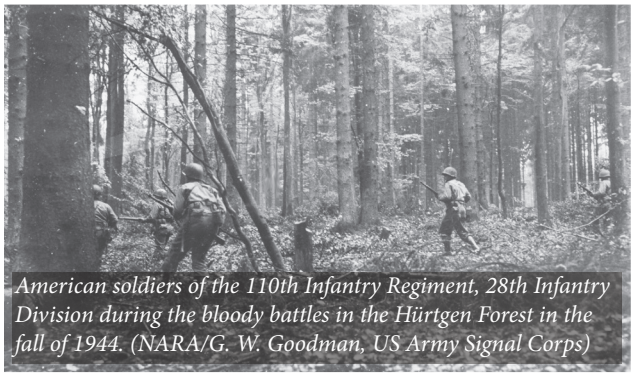
In this situation, Lieutenant General Courtney Hodges despatched his U.S. First Army straight into the Hürtgenwald, a 50 square mile area of dense forests in a terribly rugged terrain half-way between Aachen and the Roer dams. Here the Americans got stuck in a battle lasting several months against a numerically inferior opponent who with utmost skill used the terrain to his own advantage. Military historian John Ellis is harsh in his judgement of this American operation:

> Another fastness that the Americans would have done well to avoid was the Hürtgen Forest, just to the south of Aachen. The dense and dark terrain, worthy of the grimmest fairy-tale vision, formed a tactical quagmire for any attacking force. In September and October, however, the Americans insisted on plunging straight in, claiming that it represented a serious threat to their right flank. This was doubtful, as the Forest sheltered only one weak infantry division and was too dense to screen the assembly of a substantial force. By attacking into the Forest the Americans both multiplied the combat effectiveness of the incumbent division, fighting from strong prepared positions, and nullified the effects of their own aircraft, artillery and tanks.[69]

Having been repulsed by the German defense force, including the 116. Panzer-Division, the Americans despatched 4,000 aircraft, of which 2,400 were heavy bombers, against Hürtgenwald on 16 November. Around 10,000 tons of bombs were dropped, which of course had a terrible impact on the German defenders. However, when this massed air effort was made, the U.S. ground troops had pulled back several miles, and when they finally were able to move forward across the cratered ground to attack the Germans, these had already managed to re-organize their defense positions. This led the Americans to the somewhat erroneous conclusions that not even the strongest air assault sufficed to break the defense of the Hürtgenwald. The Battle of the Hürtgenwald nevertheless provided the Germans with further lessons ahead of 'Wacht am Rhein.' The OKW noted, 'The fact that an average of around 200 U.S. troops were captured each day, although we fought a defensive battle, is a clear evidence of the superiority of our own troops.'[70]

The Battle of the Hürtgenwald ended with a German defensive victory that cost U.S. First Army at least 33,000 casualties, whereby two entire divisions were so badly mauled that they had to be pulled out of combat. One of these, the 28th Infantry Division, had sustained 7,500 casualties in only a few weeks starting on 2 November. The fact that the 28th Infantry Division on 28 November was regrouped to the south to man an important sector of the Ardennes Front, was a clear indication that the Allies might be running out of reserves.

But the Battle of the Hürtgenwald also had a strong impact on the forces intended for 'Wacht am Rhein.' On 21 November, von Rundstedt reported that both the 9. and the 116. Panzer divisions, as well as the 3. and 15. Panzergrenadier divisions would be 'tied down for a long time' by this battle; he also reported that the 47. and 340. Volksgrenadier divisions had been sucked into the battle, and that this might also apply to the 352. Volksgrenadier-Division; it was impossible to detach the 12. Volksgrenadier-Division from Hürtgenwald, and the 10. SS-Panzer-Division probably also would have to be committed.[71] The situation was quite similar further to the south, where German 1. Armee was under heavy pressure since 7 November, when Patton's Third Army had resumed its offensive. Meanwhile, the newly formed U.S. 6th Army Group was attacking from the south, ousting the Germans from Belfort on the 21st and Strasbourg on 23 November. In this sector, the Germans had no chance to release any forces for 'Wacht am Rhein'—quite to the opposite, on 21 November, when Metz was lost, one of the panzer divisions intended for the Ardennes Offensive, the élite Panzer Lehr, was employed in an effort to halt Patton's offensive. But this met with little success, and Panzer Lehr soon was pulled back to the reserve again. Von Rundstedt's report concerning this sector on 21 November,



American soldiers of the 110th Infantry Regiment, 28th Infantry Division during the bloody battles in the Hürtgen Forest in the fall of 1944. (NARA/G. W. Goodman, US Army Signal Corps)

* The river is called Rur in Germany and Roer in the Netherlands, but to avoid a confusion with the Ruhr, the Dutch name will be used here.

reads, 'At Heeresgruppe G it is impossible to release the 11. and 21. Panzer divisions, the 17. SS-Panzergrenadier-Division or the 21. Panzer Division's task force. From this follows that about four Volksgrenadier divisions and perhaps nine motorized units will be unable to participate in the upcoming [Ardennes] offensive.'[72]

With over 800 tanks and an overwhelming air support at his disposal, Patton steadily came closer to the German border.[73] German 1. Armee, which mustered not more than seventy-four tanks and tank destroyers, barely managed to check the American attack at the West Wall in the Saar area.[74] But in mid-December, Patton prepared his army for a new great offensive into the Saar, 'the biggest blitz in the Third Army's history,' as the colorful General expressed it.[75] However, this was something that the German Ardennes Offensive would thwart.

The forces assembled for 'Wacht am Rhein' also could have dealt a severe blow against the joint offensive which by the same time involved U.S. First and Ninth Army further to the north—with much more far-reaching consequences to the Americans. The American breakthrough at Aachen and Hürtgenwald had created a thirty-mile wide wedge into the German front lines between Monschau and Sittard in the north. The Germans estimated that their opponent had massed eleven infantry and three armored divisions in this sector. On 20 November, Model proposed the launching of the 15. Armee and the 6. SS-Panzerarmee 'in a pincer operation aimed at dealing a deadly blow against the tightly grouped enemy units.' Thus, he argued, not only would the preconditions for a successful envelopment of U.S. Ninth Army and the closest elements of U.S. First and British 2nd armies be created, but this would also help facilitate a continued advance towards Antwerp.[76] Hence, this was a new combination of the 'small' and the 'big' solutions—or rather, the former's successive transformation into the latter—and the idea immediately received von Rundstedt's unreserved support. But the proposal was rejected already on 22 November by Hitler, who feared that anything similar would turn the offensive into 'a battle of attrition, which presumably would have spared so few of the reserve units, that the initial phase could not possibly be succeeded by a second one.'[77] Hitler's reply also contained directives concerning further reinforcements to the forces which were being made ready for 'Wacht am Rhein,' in order to compensate for the forces that had been tied down by the American offensives:

The 167. and 560. Volksgrenadier divisions and the 10. SS-Panzer-Division were to join the attack force during the first half of December. These were not expected to arrive in time to take part in the initial onslaught, but further reserves would be assigned, in part by pulling out units from other sectors of the Western Front, and in part by regrouping three Volksgrenadier divisions (79., 259., and 320.) and a mountain division (6. SS-Gebirgs-Division) from Norway. In addition to this, the first-line units in the Ardennes would be provided with a number of replacement battalions (so-called Marschbataillon) with altogether 50,000 recruits—20,000 men before 1 December, another 20,000 up until 8 December, and 10,000 more before 15 December.[78]

On 26 November Jodl visited Generalfeldmarschall von Rundstedt at his headquarters in Ziegenberg outside of Bad Nauheim, around a dozen miles to the north of Frankfurt. Jodl stressed that the Führer irrevocably stood firm with 'the big plan.' Jodl also had a further aim with his visit—to inspect the well-masked and heavily fortified castle Schloss Ziegenberg. Located just in the vicinity, this had been modified in 1939-1940 to serve as the 'Führer Headquarters.' However, it was better known by its code name—*Adlerhorst* ('Eagle's Nest'). Next day, Hitler announced that he accepted von Manteuffel's and Model's suggestion to move back the time for the launching of the infantry assault to some time between 0600 and 0630 hrs, following a preparatory artillery fire which had been further reduced to 30-60 minutes. Moreover, he postponed the attack date by another week to 7 December.[79] Shortly afterward, the decision was made to shift the attack date (*Null-Tag*) to 10 December.[80]

On 29 November, Model issued the attack order, based on Jodl's guidelines from 10 November. But he and von Manteuffel still wished to meet with Hitler at a conference in order to once and for all thoroughly analyze the pros and cons of the 'big' and the 'small' solutions, as well as to discuss a couple of practical details concerning the attack. Hitler agreed, and the conference was held in the Reich Chancellery in Berlin on 2 December. Present at this meeting were, apart from Hitler, the military commanders Model, von Manteuffel, and Dietrich, as well as around fifty other officers. Von Rundstedt was conspiciously absent. Model and von Manteuffel had visited the Western Commander in Ziegenberg in an attempt to win his support for the 'small' solution, but by now von Rundstedt had no interest in yet another debate around the attack plan. He had himself represented at the conference in Berlin by his chief of staff Westphal.

At the conference on 2 December it was clear from the beginning that Hitler had no intention to abandon the 'big solution.' He admitted, which von Manteuffel found to be quite remarkable, that the relatively distant objective Antwerp was a 'hazardous game,' but he also said that the present situation made it necessary to 'stake everything on one card.'[81] Continuing, the Führer stressed that immensely much was to be gained if the so-called 'big solution' became a 100-percent success: Not only U.S. First and Ninth armies, but also British 21 Army Group would thereby become enveloped and annihilated. Hitler pointed at the disagreements between the U.S. and British military commands, and maintained that if the objective of the German offensive could be reached, these disagreements would deepen and even spread to the political level. 'Canada,' he said, 'might even withdraw from the war for a prolonged time as a result of the loss of the main part of its armed forces in the battle of encirclement.'[82]

Hitler also explained that the offensive had quite good opportunities to be successful; it would be launched in a sector where, bearing in mind the weak Allied

forces, 'our available forces most certainly will achieve a breakthrough.' Since the offensive also would be opened at a time when bad weather prevented the Allied aviation from interfering, a rapid breakthrough could be expected. 'Thus,' he continued, 'the armored units will have gained freedom of movement and will be able to surge forward rapidly to establish bridgeheads across the Meuse between Liège and Namur, after which they will continue to the northeast, bypass Brussels and reach Antwerp.'[83] Even if the offensive will be only partially successful, he said, it will force the Allies to postpone their own offensive plans by at least eight to ten weeks, which will provide Germany with a badly needed breather.[84]

The result of the conference on 2 December was that the 'big solution' remained the major attack plan. However, the difference of opinion between the advocates of the 'small solution' and those in favour of the 'big solution' should not be exaggerated. The difference was mainly of tactical nature: Those arguing for the 'small solution' intended to create better conditions for the 'big solution,' while Hitler believed that this threatened to wear down the German assault units—for an aim that still would be reached if the 'big solution' was crowned with success. Still, according to Schramm at OKW, both 'sides' agreed that 'the question of adhering to Antwerp as the objective could be shelved for the time being,' since this would be decided only when and if the Germans crossed the Meuse.[85] In the event that it would be impossible to cross the Meuse, the advocates of the 'small solution' expected that they would be allowed to carry out their alternative plan, i.e. a more restricted pincer operation, through which the conditions for a renewed assault towards the west could be created. As we shall see further on, they had all the reason to expect this, since Hitler, when it later on turned out that the Meuse could not be reached, promptly adjusted and modified the aim of the offensive. If, on the other hand, the Germans could succeed in pushing their enemy back across the Meuse, it would at that stage be easier to establish whether the available forces were strong enough for a continued thrust towards Antwerp. In consequence, the differing opinions concerning the operation never resulted in a command crisis. 'Besides,' Schramm pointed out, 'insofar as Generalfeldmarschall Model was concerned, he approached the Führer's point of view by his inclination of always demanding the impossible in order to obtain the utmost.'[86]

Furthermore, Hitler met Model's and von Manteuffel's requests in several instances. By large, he undertook measures to satisfy the demands presented by von Manteuffel—with the support of Model—as preconditions for a successful offensive. Von Manteuffel's top priority, that his supply lines under no conditions were to be disturbed by enemy air attacks, was met to the best of ability, partly placing the attack at a time of a prolonged period of bad weather, and partly by a maximum concentration of German aircraft to support the offensive.

Model and von Manteuffel had requested that the armored reserves were to be assigned to the 6. SS-Panzerarmee and the 5. Panzerarmee instead of, as the original plan envisaged, using them in the flank attack by the 15. Armee. Hitler, wrote Schramm, 'inclined towards the point of view of Generalfeldmarschall Model and General der Panzertruppen von Manteuffel, that it was preferable—once the offensive was progressing successfully—to bring up all available reserves behind the attack divisions in order to take advantage of the breakthrough, instead of unnecessarily using them up for unsuccessful containing attacks on other sectors of the front.'[87] Thereby, powerful second and third attack waves were created.

Model and von Manteuffel also asked for the first attack wave to be reinforced, which was approved by Hitler. Similarly, their proposal to postpone the attack date had gained Hitler's acquiescence, and von Manteuffel had managed to restrict the timelength of the preparatory artillery fire.

At the meeting with Hitler on 2 December, von Manteuffel even was able to convince the Führer that the time of the attack should be moved back until 0530 hrs, and he gained Hitler's support for the idea that the 5. Panzerarmee would open its attack through 'infiltration,' without any preceding massed artillery fire. Nevertheless, SS-Oberst-Gruppenführer Sepp Dietrich did not believe in the latter, which is why the 6. SS-Panzerarmee would launch its attack in a more 'classic' manner with an opening artillery barrage. In addition, von Manteuffel obtained permission to create a so-called 'artificial moonlight' during the initial hours of the attack—anti-aircraft searchlights would be brought forward to the 5. Panzerarmee's forward positions in order to illuminate the low clouds over the front area, whereby the own troops would be helped to locate the direction in the dark winter morning.

With the exception of a few minor adjustments which were made on 4 December, and another couple of small modifications made on Hitler's demands on 9 December, the final attack plan now was established. In order to hide the intentions even further, Model changed—on 29 November—the operation's code name from 'Wacht am Rhein' to 'Herbstnebel' (Autumn Fog).[88] The countdown to the attack had begun.

HIDE, MISLEAD, CONCEAL!

A prerequisite for the success of the operation was that the Germans managed to take the enemy by surprise, and because of that it was imperative that the preparations were surrounded with the strictest secrecy. This was emphasized by Hitler already at the conference on 16 September 1944, when the idea of an offensive in the Ardennes in 1944 was presented for the first time. Preparations were carried out with an extensive operation of the kind known in German as *Verschleiung* – which in a military context means to hide, mislead and conceal. To begin with, the attack plan was kept secret to everyone but a very small circle of initiates until the very last moment. Not even the Fighter General Galland had any idea of what was coming when he on 20 November was ordered to transfer large parts of his fighter force back to the Western Front.

Spreading the information on the plan of attack also took place in compliance with strict confidentiality, and in the following order:

16 September: At the Führer Headquarters near Rastenburg, Generalfeldmarschall Wilhelm Keitel, commander of the German Armed Forces High Command (OKW), Generaloberst Jodl, commander of the German Armed Forces' Operations Command (Wehrmachtführungsstab), Generaloberst Guderian, commander of the German Army Staff, and, via his chief of staff, General Kreipe, the Luftwaffe's C-in-C, Reichsmarschall Göring, are informed.

11 October: In conjunction with Generaloberst Jodl's presentation of his first draft of a plan of attack, the personnel of the Wehrmachtführungsstab are also informed.

22 October: Hitler personally introduces SS-Obersturmbannführer Otto Skorzeny into the fundamentals of the plan and instructs him to prepare his secret support operation with Germans in American uniforms.

28 October: Generalmajor Westphal, chief of staff of the Superior Command on the Western Front (OB West) and Generalleutnant Krebs, chief of staff in Heeresgruppe B, are introduced to the plan, and through them, also the C-in-C on the Western Front, von Rundstedt, and the commander of Heeresgruppe B, Model. In connection therewith, the commands of the relevant armies (6. SS-Panzerarmee, 5. Panzerarmee, 7. Armee, and 15.Armee) are also informed. In these armies, however, only the commander, the chief of staff, the operations officer (Ia), and one more particularly trusted officer are informed. The intelligence officer (Ic), the quartermaster, and the commanders of the engineer troops, and the signal and artillery units within each army are not briefed on the plan until it is absolutely necessary for the operation, and the Army Group has given its consent thereto.

The corps commanders were not briefed until the end of November 1944, and the divisional commanders only from 1 December 1944 onward—but in fact, for instance Bayerlein, C.O. of the Panzer Lehr Division, still had not been oriented about the impending attack as late as on 10 December. The regimental commander were notified of the imminent offensive only on 13 December, the battalion commanders on 14 December, and the company commanders not until the evening of 15 December—when the troops were oriented about what was coming. In certain units the men were not oriented until early on 16 December.[1]

During the war, in a top-secret facility at Bletchley Park northwest of London, the British decrypted German radio broadcast messages that were encrypted with the help of Enigma cipher machines—one of which the Brits had come across a functional copy of. This was called operation 'Ultra,' and it often played a crucial role on the battlefield. But ahead of precisely the Ardennes Offensive, the Allies did not have much use of Ultra, since Hitler prohibited his men to discuss anything relating to the coming offensive by phone, teleprinter or radio. In addition, all orders and messages concerning the Offensive were ordered to begin with the phrase 'in preparation for an expected enemy offensive. . .,' and they could be passed on only personally by the initiates or well trusted officers. Couriers were not allowed to use aircraft.[2] During visits at the front, senior commanders were instructed not to wear their General's Uniform, but had to carry a uniform with a lower-ranking officer's insignias.[3]

Moreover, great efforts were made to hide, mislead and conceal the formations of the attack units, as well as their deployments. In order to release the staff of the 5. Panzerarmee (Panzerarmee-Oberkommando 5) for the preparatory work and the build-up ahead of the offensive, the staff of the 15. Armee was released from Heeresgruppe H in the Netherlands, and on 14 November assumed command of the sector which hitherto had been held by the panzer army. In order to mislead the opponent, the staff of the 15. Armee changed its designation to 'Gruppe von Manteuffel'—the name of the 5. Panzerarmee's commander. On 16 November, the new 25. Armee—which was formed on 10 November through the redesignation of Wehrmachtbefehlshaber Niederlande in the Netherlands—was officially designated '15. Armee.' The real headquarters of the 5. Panzerarmee was transferred to the Eifel region in western Germany—i.e. the area bordering to Belgium and northern Luxembourg—and was assigned with the cover name 'Military Police Command for Special Purposes' (Feldjägerkommando z.b.V.).[4] The units that were withdrawn from the front in order to replenish their strength under the 5. Panzerarmee's supervision, were carefully masked in the dense forests of the area. The troops were quartered in small and modest villages throughout the Eifel region. Any movement of troops intended for the offensive was allowed only with rigorous masking and in the hours of darkness. The air defense was ordered to under no circumstances fire at enemy aircraft at any greater extent than before. Total radio silence was ordered.

The staff of the new 6. SS-Panzerarmee was assigned with the name of 'Reconstruction Staff 16' (Auffrischungsstab 16). The various units submitted to the 6. SS-Panzerarmee transferred to northwestern Germany, where they were officially

designed 'construction staffs' or 'construction battalions' while they had their strength replenished.[5]

Several false and misleading orders and directives were despatched. To simulate the assembly of the 6. Panzerarmee northwest of Cologne, radio messages were sent to give the impression of this, while conspicuous troop movements were carried out in this area during daytime.[6] On 20 November a separate operation was initiated to create the impression that the 25. Armee grouped in the area around Cologne with ten divisions—including some of those who in fact were part of the 6. SS-Panzerarmee—for the alleged purpose to serve as a reserve against a possible Allied breakthrough at Aachen. Small groups of soldiers and radio stations worked frantically to reinforce this impression. Fictional troop quarters were established in villages in the area, and ditto directional signs were put up. In order to further mislead, large troop marches were also carried out a bit further north.[7] On 7 December, a false rumor was planted that the 5. Panzerarmee would be deployed for an offensive at Trier in January-February 1945.[8]

The real deployment of the assault units to their starting positions for the attack took place only in the very last days and hours before the offensive. To reduce the risk that the march was revealed by deserters, all so-called 'Volksdeutsche' (Polish Germans, Ukrainian Germans, etc., but primarily soldiers from the German-annexed areas of Belgium and Luxembourg and the former French Elsass/Alsace) were temporarily removed from the assault units, to be returned not before the offensive had begun. Moreover, Hitler demanded a special daily report from von Rundstedt about all deserters during the past 48 hours. As it would turn out, the number of deserters on the Western Front was surprisingly low—there were only five of them between 1 and 12 December 1944.

Altogether, these *Verschleiungs* operations resulted in the attack hitting the Allies with a total surprise at dawn on 16 December 1944.

1 Diary Horst Helmus, 26. Volksgrenadier-Division.
2 OB West Ia Nr 9548/44 g.Kdos. 25.10 1944; OKL Führungsstab Ia Nr 10321/44 g.Kdos. 10.11 1944; Jung, *Die Ardennen-Offensive 1944/45*, p. 126.
3 OKL Führungsstab Ia Nr 10320/44 g.Kdos 20.10. 1944; Jung, p. 126.
4 OB West Ia Nr 890/44 g.Kdos. 13.11 1944; Jung, p. 125.
5 Lehmann, *I SS Panzer Corps (15 Oct.-16 Dec. 1944)*. B-577, p. 3.
6 Schramm, *The Preparations for the German Offensive in the Ardennes (Sep to Dec 1944)*. A-862, p. 228.
7 Lehmann, B-577, p. 4.
8 Schramm, A-862, p. 227.

Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring, the Luftwaffe's C-in-C, during an inspection tour in Germany. (Trautloft)

CHAPTER 3

THE OPPONENTS: COUNTDOWN TO THE GREAT BATTLE

"The conduct of war is an art, depending upon free, creative activity, scientifically grounded." Field Manual of the German Armed Forces, Truppenführung: Heeresdienstvorschrift 300.

Most of the German senior military commanders in the Ardennes Offensive can be counted among the war's most professional and accomplished military leaders. They had a first-class training and were raised in an environment which provided them with the best of both a lengthy military tradition and the radical new ideas which were the fruit of a combination of the lessons learned by the defeat in World War One, and the fact that Germany after this war had been forced to concentrate only the absolute élite of its military commanders, since the country was only allowed to maintain an Army of 100,000 men. It certainly is not the author's intention to glorify these military commanders, who served the most inhumane political system the world has ever seen, Nazism, but the fact remains that these German commanders appear in pretty stark contrast to their counterparts on the Allied side. This insight is relevant to an understanding of the events before, during, and after the Ardennes Battle.

That the British tabloid press almost from the onset came to call this the 'Rundstedt Offensive' hardly was far-fetched. Generalfeldmarschall Gerd von Rundstedt, the Supreme Commander on the Western Front, was one of the German field marshals that the Allies had the greatest respect for. 'He was looked upon as one of the most brilliant strategists in the Heer, and according to some evaluations, he was rated superior to the Generalfeldmarschalls von Manstein and von Kluge,' wrote Percy E. Schramm at the OKW.[1]

Karl Rudolf Gerd von Rundstedt was born on 12 December 1875 into a family of the German noblility with military roots going back to Medieval times. His father, Gerd Arnold Konrad von Rundstedt, had served as a major general in the Franco-German war of 1870-1871. After primary school, von Rundstedt junior was accepted at a so-called military cadet school at the age twelve, and he would remain in the military until the end of World War II in May 1945. When the Great War broke out in 1914, von Rundstedt had graduated from General Staff Training at the famous Prussian War Academy in Berlin, and served with the rank of a captain (Hauptmann) as the operations officer in an infantry division.

In the Reichswehr—the small 100,000-man army allowed to Germany by the Versailles Treaty—von Rundstedt advanced rapidly, and when Hitler seized power in 1933, he was a Generalleutnant and commanded the troops in the whole of eastern Germany. According to Percy E. Schramm, von Rundstedt can be described as the 'personification of that tradition which the German General Staff had inherited from Moltke and Schlieffen,' whose 'significance—apart from inborn gifts which can never really be replaced by education and training—was methodical cultivation of the power of thinking and, by that means, a special faculty of seeing and judging which maintains a distinct ratio between imagination and sobriety.'[2]

Shortly before the outbreak of World War II, von Rundstedt retired from the Army with the rank of Generaloberst, but he returned to active duty in August 1939 and led the German Southern Army Group during the invasion of Poland. His chief of staff by that time, Generalleutnant Erich von Manstein, describes von Rundstedt as 'an operationally brilliant soldier. He always took note of what was essential and concentrated fully on that. He was absolutely indifferent to all trifle matters. His personality was one that can be described as a chevalier of the old school.'[3]

In May 1940 von Rundstedt led Heeresgruppe A which carried out the great breakthrough in the Ardennes, and then in just ten days advanced to the coast of the English Channel to surround the Allied armies, and forcing them to undertake the evacuation at Dunkirk. Thus, his army group laid the foundation for one of Germany's most brilliant military victories. After the surrender of France he was himself, in July 1940, promoted to the rank of field marshal. One year later, von Rundstedt led Heeresgruppe Süd in the invasion of the Soviet Union, and in the double envelopment battles at Uman and Kiev he won the war's greatest victories in numerical terms, with the result that most of the Ukraine fell into German hands, together with 665,000 Soviet prisoners of war.

Being a self-conscious conservative military commander, von Rundstedt frequently was at odds with Hitler—concerning anything from opposition to the appointment of von Reichenau to Chief of the General Staff in 1934, to criticism of the invasion of the Sudeten area in 1938, the ousting of an Einsatzgruppe from von Rundstedt's

sector in southern Poland, and the unauthorized retreat during the Red Army's counter-attack at Rostov in November 1941. The latter resulted in von Rundstedt getting dismissed by Hitler—and it would not be the only occasion. But von Rundstedt's high capacity as a military commander over and over again forced Hitler to turn to him and ask him to reassume his former command, which the faithful nationalist von Rundstedt always accepted. As early as in March 1942, he was appointed Supreme Commander in the West, OB West. In this position he encountered the Allied landing in Normandy on 6 June 1944, a day when he was up at three in the morning to lead the defensive battle.

Von Rundstedt's experience told him that if the Allied bridgeheads were not wiped out by the end of the first day of the Invasion, the battle would be lost, which indeed proved to be a correct assessment. Having permitted an armored force to withdraw out of the range of the Allied naval artillery at Normandy, in clear defiance of Hitler's instructions, von Rundstedt was yet again dismissed from his post. But as we have seen, Hitler had him reinstated as OB West in September 1944. By that time, von Rundstedt was an aged man—he was about to turn sixty-nine—but as it would prove, his military capacity was unimpaired. The weaknesses resulting from von Rundstedt's relatively advanced age were offset by his young and energetic chief of staff, Siegfried Westphal, who at the age of only 42 was a general.

Von Rundstedt's counterpart on the Allied side, the American four-star General Dwight D. Eisenhower—Supreme Commander of the Allied forces in Northwestern Europe, Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF)—was different from the aged nobleman von Rundstedt in several respects. To begin with, Eisenhower was twenty-five years younger, and grew up in a poor Kansas family in the 'Wild West Era' at the end of the Nineteenth Century. At twenty-one, 'Ike,' as he was called already by then, began his studies at the U.S. Military Academy West Point. English was his best subject, but otherwise there was nothing special about his study results.[4]

When Eisenhower in November 1942 was appointed Supreme Commander of Allied Forces of the North African Theater of Operations, he neither had any combat experience, nor any previous experience commanding a larger military unit. Throughout World War One, he had served as a troop trainer in the USA, and in 1918 he was promoted to the rank of major, a rank he would keep for sixteen years. In the years between the wars he served as a staff officer under several generals, including Douglas MacArthur in the Philippines and the future Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army, George C. Marshall. But during the fourteen years that preceded America's entry into World War II in December 1941, Eisenhower had spent no more than nine months as a commander of a military unit, an infantry regiment during training.

In December 1941, recently promoted to Brigadier General, Eisenhower was posted to the General Staff in Washington, where he was charged with the responsibility for creating major war plans against Japan and Germany. The talent he displayed during this work led Marshall to appoint him Commanding General, European Theater of Operations. In June 1942 he was sent to England to prepare the invasion of France. Shortly afterward, he also was appointed to become Supreme Commander of the Allied Force of the North African Theater of Operations. In this theater of war, a counter-attack by Rommel in February 1943 dealt the U.S. Army a stinging defeat. Although Eisenhower had his merits when it came to selecting skilled staff officers and subordinate commanders, the ability to develop budding talents was not his forte. 'Subordinate commanders and staff had to perform or leave. When an officer disappointed him, he immediately asked Marshall for a replacement.'[5] Eisenhower dismissed the commander of the Army Corps that had sustained the hardest blow from the Germans, and re-organized the troops, but the turning point in North Africa was more due to a growing Allied superiority—not least in the air.

In early 1944, Eisenhower reassumed command of the military forces in England, and in February 1944 was officially designated as the Supreme Allied Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF)—the position where we shall find him during the Ardennes Battle. Chester Wilmot describes Eisenhower as 'the most successful commander of Allied forces in the history of war.'[6] Omar Bradley, commanding U.S. 12th Army Group, nevertheless felt that 'Ike's African record clearly demonstrates that he did not know how to manage a battlefield.'[7] British Field Marshal Montgomery wrote in his memoirs:

> It was always clear to me that Ike and I were poles apart when it came to the conduct of war. My military doctrine was based on unbalancing the enemy while keeping well-balanced myself. I planned always to make the enemy commit his reserves on a wide front in order to plug in holes in his defences; having forced him to do this, I then committed my own reserves on a narrow front in a hard blow. [. . .] Eisenhower's creed appeared to me to be that there must be aggressive action on the part of everyone at all times. Everybody must attack all the time.[8]

American military historian Steven Metz concludes his analysis of Eisenhower as a strategist: 'As a product of the American strategic tradition Eisenhower was imminently comfortable with the direct, linear, materialistic mode of warfare mastered by Grant.' Metz also opines that Eisenhower 'was cautious, sometimes to the point of debility,' which partially was due to 'a desire to minimize Allied casualties,' but possibly also 'a lack of confidence in untested American troops and leaders.'[9] One of many harsh—if also laced—assessments made by Montgomery on Eisenhower's military capacity, was: 'Nice chap, no general.'[10] Nevertheless, as we shall see, Eisenhower's strategic overview was no worse than that it would play a decisive role to the Allied victory in the Ardennes Battle; a truly weak and incompetent Supreme Commander would rather have panicked and become paralyzed, which is the direct opposite of 'Ike's' own reactions during the first days after the German breakthrough.

Something that everyone seems to agree on is

that one of Eisenhower's strongest sides was his ability to reconcile the British and the Americans, which, during the prevailing circumstances, was absolutely invaluable. According to Stephen Ambrose, who has written an extensive biography of him, 'Eisenhower's emphasis on teamwork, his never-flagging insistence on working together, was the single most important reason for his selection [to Allied Supreme Commander], much more important than his generalship, which in truth had been cautious and hesitant.'[11] This actually is well in line with the German file on Eisenhower during World War II, which reads, 'His strongest point is said to be an ability to adjust personalities to one another and smooth over opposite viewpoints.'[12]

Three of the key figures on the American side during the Ardennes Battle: From left to right, Lieutenant General Omar N. Bradley, the supreme commander General Dwight D. Eisenhower, and Lieutenant General George S. Patton. Bradley advanced to become the Chairman of the NATO Military Committee after the war. He passed away in 1981 at the age of 88. Eisenhower made a post-war political career as the Republican Party's presidential candidate, and was the president of the United States in 1953-1961. Eisenhower passed away in 1969. Patton was killed in a car crash in Germany a few months after the war ended in 1945. (NARA, US Signal Corps 199996)

In some respects, Generalfeldmarschall Walter Model, the commander of German Army Group Heeresgruppe B, had more in common with Eisenhower than with his superior von Rundstedt. Model and Eisenhower were of almost the same age. As the son of a humble music teacher in a small German town, the former was quite far from the spheres of the Nobility. Just as Eisenhower, Model was a devout Christian, and there also was a certain similarity in appearance between them. But apart from their military careers, the similarities between the two end there.

Model's merits on the Eastern Front rendered him the nickname of 'the Führer's Fire Soldier,' and Hitler described him as 'my best field marshal.' Walter Model was one among very few men who were able to subdue Hitler. It has been said that during a heated discussion between the two on a tactical matter on the Eastern Front, Model looked Hitler straight in the eyes and said, 'Who is actually in command at the Front—you or I, *mein Führer*?'—whereafter Hitler backed down.

Model's military career began as a staff officer during World War One and in the Reichswehr. Early in World War II he served as chief of staff in the 16. Armee, and during the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 he advanced from a divisional commander to a corps commander, and in January 1942 was appointed to lead the 9. Armee. In this position he contributed most decisively to overcome the German crisis caused by the Red Army's great Winter Offensive. Model's character has already been described in the previous chapter. However, it must be added that it has been asserted that he was at his best on the defensive. After all, he had utterly failed when in July 1943 he had attacked the Red Army north of Kursk, but on the other hand the opponent he was up against in the Ardennes in December 1944 was not as powerful as his enemy on the Eastern Front had been eighteen months earlier.

Omar Nelson Bradley, commanding U.S. 12th Army Group which stood against Model's forces, was born in 1893, also as the son of a school teacher. 'Brad' Bradley graduated with the score 'Excellent' at West Point in 1915, in the so-called 'Class the stars fell on,' to which not only Eisenhower, but also several among the future commanders in the Ardennes Battle belonged. He never participated in World War One, but in the inter-war years he studied at the War Academy at Fort Leavenworth, and served as a troop trainer at the Infantry School at Fort Benning. In North Africa in 1942 he was Eisenhower's closest associate, and he commanded U.S. II Corps during the final battle of Tunisia in the spring of 1943 and the invasion of Sicily.

The assessments of Bradley differ quite substantially. Eisenhower called him 'the greatest battle-line commander I have met in this war.'[13] On the other hand, the American general Patton characterized Bradley as 'insufferably cautious, predictable and orthodox.'[14] However, it should be kept in mind that the difference in temper hardly could be greater than between the choleric and flamboyant Patton and the more phlegmatic, and quiescent Bradley. Chester Wilmot is of the opinion that Bradley was a skilful tactician but less able in the strategic field. Wilmot wrote, '[Bradley] was successful in conducting operations so long as someone else was controlling the battle as a whole, preserving the balance of the force, maneuvering the enemy into a vulnerable position and then developing the concentration necessary for a decisive stroke. Bradley could deliver the stroke but he was less able to create the opportunity for it. The basic difference between Bradley and Montgomery was that, whereas Bradley moved at the dictates of the situation responding tactically, Montgomery endeavoured to mould situations to his will acting strategically.'[15]

Field Marshal Bernard Law Montgomery, the commander of the British-Canadian 21 Army Group, was born in 1887 as the son of a clergyman. His grandfather was a well-known British colonial administrator in India. Having graduated from the Royal Military College, Sandhurst in 1908, Montgomery junior served as an officer in India, and in World War One on the Western Front, where he was highly decorated for bravery in combat. After studies at the Staff College, Camberley, he held various positions, among them as the commander of an infantry brigade which fought the Irish Rebellion in the 1920s. Early in World War II he commanded first a division, and then an army corps which was evacuated at Dunkirk in 1940. However, owing to his outspoken and fearless candor, it took quite some time before he was promoted again.

His victory against Rommel at el-Alamein in 1942 decided Montgomery's continued military career as well as his obituary. Montgomery undoubtedly was one of the most able among the Allied senior commanders.* In the Ardennes Battle in the winter of 1944/1945, he was without question the most experienced allied senior commander. Chester Wilmot summarizes the difference between Montgomery and the American generals in the conduct of military operations as: 'Montgomery's approach was scientific; theirs [the American generals] was emotional.'[16] Patrick Delaforce describes Montgomery as 'the master of the totally planned battle, usually with attritional artillery, tank and air support.'[17] The file on Montgomery in von Rundstedt's headquarters agrees that he was 'very systematic,' adding—perhaps not without bitterness—'which is all right if you have sufficient resources and sufficient time.'[18]

Military historian John Ellis is strongly critical of Montgomery, who, according to Ellis, 'relied, like a latter-day Verdun [the notorious battle of attrition during World War One] on brute force and sheer material preponderance.'[19] Ellis is of the opinion that Montgomery's 'aggressiveness was that of the energetic fencer, not that of the general who annihilates enemy armies, of Napoleon, of Grant, of Moltke.'[20] On Montgomery's accomplishments during the sweep through France and Belgium in August 1944-1945, Ellis writes, 'Just as with Patton during the dash to the Meuse, the advance to Antwerp was simply a case of the British taking up the slack as the Germans withdrew. The hallmark of the good mobile commander would have been to catch the Germans rather than simply to plough along in their wake. And surely even a moderately competent commander would have put the lid on the [German] Fifteenth Army *Kessel* around the Scheldt Estuary.'[21] Moreover, Ellis asserts that the failure of Operation 'Market Garden' showed 'Montgomery and the army he had created in the worst possible light, revealing serious lapses in planning as well as severe shortcomings in operational and tactical command.'[22]

Montgomery indeed made a number of mistakes, particularly so during the pursuit operation in late summer of 1944, but the 'caution' he often is accused of also can be regarded as an expression of a realistic assessment of the ability of his own troops against their German opponent, as we shall see in conjunction with Montgomery's counter-offensive in the Ardennes further on. It also is the author's opinion that the criticism voiced by Ellis against Montgomery during the Ardennes Battle is exaggerated and fails to take take some vital conditions into consideration. More on this later.

The flamboyant George Smith Patton, Jr., born on 11 November 1885, commanded U.S. Third Army in France and belonged to Montgomery's harshest antagonists. Patton was both eccentric and exhibitionistic, and became famous for his outspokenness. Patrick Delaforce describes him as 'a swashbuckling aristocrat, egotistical, bombastic and frequently reckless, [. . .] nevertheless a brilliant armored formation commander.'[23] As an athlete—he represented the United States in modern pentathlon at the Olympic Games in Stockholm in 1912—Patton had a remarkable physical and mental energy. His indomitable energy, fighting spirit and optimism were invaluable when it came to instilling courage and motivation in his troops—who knew him as 'Ol' Blood and Guts.' None of the other American generals in the Ardennes Battle could compete with Patton in that regard. He was born in an American family with strong military traditions; his grandfather—after whom Patton Junior received his name—had fallen as a Confederate colonel in the American Civil War. Having participated in the 'punitive expedition' against Mexican rebel leader Pancho Villa, Patton Junior took part in the fighting on the Western Front during World War One, as the first officer of the new U.S. Armored Corps.

Stationed in Hawaii during the inter-war years, Patton drafted a defensive plan that foresaw the Japanese air attack on Pearl Harbor—ten years before this took place, which says quite a lot about Patton's strategic ability. Patton also pioneered the development of armored warfare doctrine in the USA, and with the rank of a major general he commanded the U.S. troops that landed in Morocco in November 1942. During the subsequent invasion of Sicily—where he with the rank of a lieutenant general commanded U.S. Seventh Army—his brusqueness came into the limelight through a couple of incidents. Ahead of the invasion, he encouraged his men not to show the enemy any mercy. This was taken too literally by some of his soldiers, resulting in the infamous 'Biscari Massacre,' when American soldiers killed a number of prisoners of war. In his diary, Patton described this as 'a great error,' and he wished the officers to 'certify that the dead men were snipers or had attempted to escape or something, as it would make a stink in the press.'[24] To the German Army, such events were commonplace, at least on the Eastern Front—Model, for instance, was described as 'undeniably harsh in his dealings with Russian civilians'[25]—but the American Army claimed to serve a Democracy, and also was scrutinized by a relatively free press. When Patton a few days later assailed a U.S. soldier who had been admitted to medical care because of post-traumatic stress, the press got wind of it, with the result that he was deprived of his command.

Patton's rivalry with Montgomery has been

** This however is far from uncontested. Montgomery was, and still is, a highly controversial character; the causes thereof will be discussed later.*

** Occasionally this even had some humorous expressions, like when Patton one day in France 1944 exhorted one of his officers, 'Take this 5-gallon gasoline can to Montgomery with this message: "Although I am sadly short of gasoline myself, I know your admiration for our equipment and supplies and I can spare you this 5 gallons. It will be more than enough to take you as far as you probably will advance in the next two days."' *WW II Musings*. Volume 2, Issue 7, Sep. 1994.