

= Wehrmacht forces for the Ardennes Offensive =

This is a sub @-@ article of Battle of the Bulge

The Wehrmacht forces for the Ardennes Offensive were the product of a German recruitment effort targeting German males between the ages of 16 and 60 , to replace troops lost during the past five months of fighting the Western Allies on the Western Front . Although the Wehrmacht (German Armed Forces) was keeping the Allied forces contained along the Siegfried Line , the campaign had cost the Wehrmacht nearly 750 @,@ 000 casualties , mostly irreplaceable . However , the rapid advance of the Allied armies in August and September after Operation Overlord had created a supply problem for the Allies . By October , the progress of the Western Allies ' three army groups had slowed considerably , allowing the Germans to partly rebuild their strength and prepare for the defense of Germany itself . The German leader , Adolf Hitler , decided that the only way to reverse his fortunes would be to launch a counter @-@ offensive on the Western Front , forcing both the United States and Great Britain to an early peace , and allowing the Wehrmacht to shift its forces to the Eastern Front , where it could defeat the Soviet Red Army .

Hitler earmarked three field armies for the offensive : the Sixth Panzer , Fifth Panzer and Seventh . These accumulated over 240 @,@ 000 soldiers , spread over seven panzer divisions , two panzer brigades and thirteen infantry divisions . The bulk of the offensive 's armored strength was in the Sixth Panzer Army , which was tasked with the capture of the Belgian port of Antwerp . To its south was the Fifth Panzer Army , outfitted to protect the Sixth 's flank while it crossed the Meuse river . The southernmost flank was covered by the Seventh Army , composed of three infantry corps and ordered to protect the Fifth Army 's southern flank and tie down American reserves in Luxembourg .

Apart from these three armies the Wehrmacht also designed two special units to aid the offensive . One of these was a battalion @-@ sized airborne formation tasked with dropping behind American lines during the first day of the offensive , allowing a panzer division from the Sixth Panzer Army easy access across the Meuse . The second unit was a panzer brigade , intending to go behind enemy lines dressed in American uniforms to give false orders and spread confusion among American defenders in the Ardennes . Also earmarked for the offensive were around 800 aircraft , deployed by the Luftwaffe (German Air Force) , to provide air support to German forces and destroy much of the Allied air power on the ground .

To prepare these forces the Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (German High Command) increased the call @-@ up age range and recruited from Eastern European countries controlled by German forces , increasing manpower on the Western Front from roughly 400 @,@ 000 to just over 1 million soldiers . Hastily organized into new divisions , these infantrymen lacked training and sometimes even weapons . Despite an immense German effort in the face of intense Allied bombing to build the necessary stocks for the offensive , there were shortages of fuel , ammunition , weapons and manpower by the scheduled date of the counterattack . Even the elite Waffen @-@ SS divisions were often deficient in manpower .

= = Background = =

By 1 December 1944 , the only sector of the front where the Western Allies were not on the offensive was along the Ardennes . In late July 1944 , Allied forces in fighting in Normandy were able to break out of the Normandy beachhead in Operation Cobra , forcing a general eastwards retreat of German forces . General Dwight D. Eisenhower , the Supreme Allied Commander on the Western Front , used the opportunity to encircle the German army in Normandy . In an effort to reverse their misfortunes , the Wehrmacht launched Operation Lüttich on 7 August in the vicinity of the town of Mortain . Despite efforts to break through the U.S. 30th Infantry Division to cut off Allied forces in Northern France , by 13 August it was clear that the offensive had failed . Even while battle was raging around Mortain , Allied armies continued the encirclement of the Wehrmacht in Normandy , closing what would be known as the Falaise Pocket on 20 August ; the encirclement cost the Germans an estimated 10 @,@ 000 dead and another 50 @,@ 000 wounded . Although a much larger number of German soldiers were able to escape eastwards , they were forced to leave

behind their heavy weapons and equipment . Paris was liberated on 25 August 1944 , marking the end of Operation Overlord .

Almost immediately , the Allied drive across the Seine River continued , although the Wehrmacht was able to prevent a complete rout ; according to the Germans , the equipment abandoned as they retreated from the Seine was as much of a disaster as the Falaise Pocket . Field Marshal Walter Model , who had temporarily replaced Gerd von Rundstedt as commander of German troops in France , reported that some panzer divisions only had five to ten operational tanks , while he could not match the Western Allies ' mobility with his poorly outfitted infantry divisions . By early September , as the Allies pushed to the German border , Model calculated that the actual strength of the 74 divisions at his disposal was no more than that of 25 . In an effort to stabilize German lines in the West , von Rundstedt was reappointed as Commander @-@ in @-@ Chief West on 7 September 1944 . Approaching the Belgian border in early September the Allied offensive came to a grinding halt , as its supply lines struggled to keep up with the pace of the advance . For example , on 2 September , Lieutenant General George Patton 's U.S. Third Army requested 2 @,@ 840 @,@ 000 liters (750 @,@ 000 U.S. gal) of gasoline , and received 96 @,@ 000 liters (25 @,@ 000 U.S. gal) .

The Wehrmacht began to reorganize itself along a defensive front known as the Siegfried Line . Eisenhower felt that he could relieve the supply problem by using Antwerp to unload supplies in Europe ; however , German troops held the Scheldt estuary and consequently Allied shipping could not get through to the Belgian port city . In an effort to open the Scheldt estuary , Eisenhower approved Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery 's Operation Market Garden , which was launched on 17 September . However , by 21 September the operation had failed to dislodge German defenders from the southern Netherlands and open the seaway to Antwerp ; the supply problem was at its worst .

Using the opportunity to rebuild their strength , the German Army in the West was able to accumulate a strength of around 500 tanks and assault guns by late September , despite prioritization of new equipment for the Eastern Front . This was in stark contrast to the estimated 100 which had been available before . German defenses along the Siegfried Line continued to strengthen , and the Wehrmacht was able to establish a defensive depth of an average of 4 @.@ 8 kilometers (3 @.@ 0 mi) , with the strongest defenses built opposite of Patton 's Third Army .

Despite Germany 's reorganization , their manpower was still incomparable to that of the Western Allies . While Germany 's Army Group B was able to increase their armored strength from 100 to 239 vehicles , these were opposed by 2 @,@ 300 Allied tanks . Field Marshal Model reported that only 6 @,@ 500 replacements had been sent to cover the 75 @,@ 000 casualties suffered during the month of September . General Eisenhower commanded three army groups , totaling eight field armies with 55 divisions ; these provided a two @-@ to @-@ one advantage in artillery guns and a twenty @-@ to @-@ one advantage in tanks , and could count on almost 14 @,@ 000 combat aircraft , as compared to the Luftwaffe 's 573 .

= = = Battles along the Siegfried Line = = =

Patton 's Third Army was tasked with the capture of Metz and the Lorraine ; his first obstacle was Fort Driant , built in 1902 and improved over the years by both the French and the Germans . Expecting only a small garrison , the Third Army launched its attack on 27 September 1944 . Despite heavy aerial and artillery bombardment , no appreciable damage was done to the giant fortress . Several ground attacks carried out between 27 September and 11 October failed in taking the fort , and ultimately General Patton was forced to call off the attack and look for another route to Metz . Fort Driant did not fall until after Patton had successfully taken Metz and the majority of forts around Driant . The Third Army 's battle around Metz had cost an estimated 47 @,@ 000 American casualties . This was reflected in the fact that , while in August the Third Army had advanced 600 kilometers (370 mi) , it advanced only 35 kilometers (22 mi) between September and December 1944 .

The 256 @,@ 300 man strong U.S. First Army , commanded by General Courtney Hodges , was

ordered to break through the Siegfried Line around the area of Aachen , in order to reach the Rur river . Although the First Army began to encircle the area around Aachen in early September , the Battle of Aachen did not end until 21 October . The city cost the Americans roughly 3 @, @ 000 casualties , but had opened the path to the Rur (river) river . Despite the casualties taken the ground gained was comparatively worthless , and the fighting for Aachen had not necessarily brought German defeat any closer .

The Germans , too , had suffered heavy casualties ; the 116th Panzer Division , for example , had lost its offensive capabilities after countless attempts to break the U.S. First Army 's encirclement of Aachen . This gave American and British commanders a false sense of security , believing that the Wehrmacht did not have the strength to launch a counteroffensive . Given their view on the state of the German armed forces and their need to push to the Rur , the First Army decided to drive German forces out of the Hürtgen Forest ? located on the Belgian ? German border ? in an attempt to take a series of dams which could be used by the Germans to flood the valley below .

The Battle of Hürtgen Forest began on 19 September , with the assault of the 3rd Armored and 9th Infantry Divisions . The battle quickly turned into one of attrition ; by mid @-@ October the two Allied divisions had lost nearly 80 % of their total combat strength , or roughly 4 @, @ 500 men , while the Germans had lost close to 3 @, @ 300 . On 2 November the U.S. 28th Infantry Division entered the fight , but was not able to make headway and was forced to defend itself against German counterattacks between 5 ? 7 November . The 28th Infantry Division lost over 6 @, @ 100 combat casualties in Hürtgen .

Unable to pry the Hürtgen from German hands , the Americans pitted the 4th Infantry Division into the battle and between 7 November and 3 December this division lost over 7 @, @ 000 personnel . After also throwing the 8th Infantry Division into the attack it was able to take the town of Hürtgen , but was not able to advance much farther given the amount of casualties it had sustained . In total , American forces suffered 24 @, @ 000 combat casualties and had failed to reach their original objectives , the dams .

The Germans also suffered heavily ; the 47th Panzer Corps had committed its last reserves into the battle and could hardly afford to maintain its defensive line , while the 47th Volksgrenadier Division had suffered over 4 @, @ 300 casualties during the fighting and the 340th Division had lost nearly 2 @, @ 000 soldiers . This latter division was replaced by the 363rd Volksgrenadier and 10th SS Panzer Divisions , as the 340th was pulled out in order to be rebuilt .

While the Allied armies continued their slow eastward drive between September and November 1944 , the Germans prepared for a counteroffensive . Adolf Hitler , the German leader , believed that by launching an offensive in the West he could force the United States and Great Britain to an early peace , and thereby transfer the entirety of the Wehrmacht to the Eastern Front , where he could bring the Soviet offensive to a standstill and defeat it .

A German victory would be of greater magnitude against the Western Allies than it would against the Soviet Union . According to General Alfred Jodl , " The Russians had so many troops that even if we had succeeded in destroying thirty divisions it would have made no difference . On the other hand , if we destroyed thirty divisions in the West , it would amount to more than a third of the whole invasion Army . " Hitler believed that inaction in the West would only conclude in an inevitable German defeat . His basic plan involved an early morning breakthrough along the lightly defended sector of the Ardennes Forest , with the eventual task of crossing the Meuse River and capturing Antwerp in order to deny the Western Allies a crucial port .

= = Wehrmacht dispositions = =

By December 1944 , German forces defending against continued Western Allied offensives were organized into four separate army groups ; three (Army Groups H , B. and G) fell under the command of Field Marshal von Rundstedt , while the fourth (Army Group Oberrhein) fell under the command of Heinrich Himmler . Army Group H , containing the Twenty @-@ fifth and First Parachute Armies was commanded by Luftwaffe Colonel General Kurt Student , while to his south lay Model 's Army Group B , containing the Fifteenth , Sixth Panzer , Fifth Panzer and Seventh

Armies . The Sixth and Fifth Panzer armies , as well as the Seventh Army , were slated to take part in the upcoming Ardennes offensive . Model 's southern flank was protected by Army Group G , commanded by General Hermann Balck , which was composed of the German First Army . In total , the attack would involve thirty divisions , including twelve panzer divisions ? roughly 240 @,@ 000 men .

The offensive 's main effort would come from the Sixth Panzer Army , commanded by SS General Sepp Dietrich . The core of the Sixth Panzer Army , composed of four Schutzstaffel (SS) panzer divisions , had been withdrawn from battle early and had gone through a period of rest and refit , redeploying to the front in early November . This army was made up of the I SS Panzer Corps , commanded by General Hermann Priess ; this corps included the 1st SS Panzer Division Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler , 12th SS Panzer Division Hitlerjugend , 3rd Panzergrenadier Division , and the 12th and 277th Volksgrenadier divisions . The I SS Panzer Corps also included a number of ad hoc vanguard units , including Kampfgruppe Peiper (forming part of the 1st SS Panzer Division) , which contained a panzer battalion (72 mixed Panzer IV and Panther tanks) from the 1st SS Panzer Regiment , the 501st SS Heavy Panzer Battalion (45 Tiger Is) and the 3rd SS Panzer Grenadier Battalion . Under the 12th SS Panzer Division was Battle Group Kuhlmann , containing the 1st SS Panzer Battalion (80 tanks) and the 560th SS Heavy Panzer Battalion . Also in the Sixth Panzer Army was the II SS Panzer Corps , offering the 2nd SS Panzer Division Das Reich and the 9th SS Panzer Division Hohenstaufen . Finally , Dietrich 's army also included the 326th and 246th Volksgrenadier divisions , forming the 67th (LXVII) Infantry Corps under the command of General Otto Hitzfeld .

South of Dietrich 's forces was General Hasso von Manteuffel 's Fifth Panzer Army . Manteuffel 's army was formed up by the 66th Infantry Corps (18th and 62nd Volksgrenadier divisions) , 58th Panzer Corps (116th Panzer Division and 560th Volksgrenadier Division) , the 47th Panzer Corps (2nd Panzer Division and 26th Volksgrenadier Division) , the Panzer @-@ Lehr @-@ Division and the Führer Begleit Brigade . Although held as a reserve , the Panzer @-@ Lehr @-@ Division was officially attached to the 47th Panzer Corps . The Fifth Panzer Army was tasked with supporting the Sixth Panzer Army 's left flank , and breach the Meuse River by the third day of the offensive . The Fifth Panzer Army was positioned directly opposite the American 28th Infantry Division .

The third army which was to take part in the impending German offensive was General Erich Brandenberger 's Seventh Army , which was tasked with protecting the Fifth Panzer Army 's left flank and tying down Allied reserves in Luxembourg . This army included General Baptist Kniess ' 85th Infantry Corps (consisting of the 5th Fallschirmjäger and 352nd Volksgrenadier divisions) , General Franz Beyer 's 80th Infantry Corps (276th and 212th Volksgrenadier Divisions) and Kavallerie Graf von Rothkirch und Trach 's 8th Infantry Corps . These three armies offered five panzer divisions , thirteen infantry @-@ type divisions (airborne and Volksgrenadier) for immediate assault , and another two panzer divisions and a panzer brigade in immediate support ; these represented 70 % of the strength which Hitler had originally decided to allot to the Ardennes offensive .

= = = Special units = = =

The Germans also planned an airborne operation (Operation Stösser) in the area north of Malmédy in order to take the road junction at Baraque Michel , allowing the Sixth Army 's 12th SS Panzer Division to advance to the Belgian city of Liège . The operation would be undertaken by a special unit formed up of one hundred paratroopers from each battalion of Army Group H 's First Parachute Army . The battalion @-@ sized unit would be commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Friedrich August Freiherr von der Heydte and was named Battle Group von der Heydte . Although von der Heydte originally requested to use the entirety of the 6th Parachute Regiment , this was denied on the basis that it would alert the Western Allies to the intentions of the Wehrmacht ; ultimately , however , the German general was allowed to hand pick his platoon and company commanders .

Unfortunately , many of the men to choose from were not even airborne qualified , and about 20 %

of those chosen for the operation were not qualified to jump with weapons . General von der Heydte immediately dismissed the worst 150 men given to him and replaced them with volunteers from the parachute school , some of whom did not have any jump experience . In the little time available some men received basic jump training , although matters were complicated by the lack of transport aircraft . Kampfgruppe von der Heydte also had at their disposal some 300 dummy parachutists , meant to be dropped north of the actual drop zone in order to confuse American forces . By 15 December 1944 , von der Heydte was able to put together a decent fighting force .

Operation Greif , commanded by Otto Skorzeny 's 150th Panzer brigade , was designed to capture certain bridges over the Meuse River . Skorzeny was ordered to dress his brigade in American and British uniforms , while using Western Allied vehicles and speaking English , in an effort to not only capture those bridges , but to pass on false orders and confuse Allied forces defending the breakthrough sector . The unit 's men were not alerted to the intentions of the offensive until the very last minute ; they were warned that their preparations were for an impending Allied offensive . The effort to recruit for the unit was nearly compromised by an army @-@ wide order requesting the names of English @-@ speaking personnel and any captured Allied vehicles ; although Skorzeny originally attempted to cancel the operation , he later turned the misfortune around by allowing rumors of the unit to circulate freely in order to hide the truth . Skorzeny was also wary of the fact that he and his men would have to wear American uniforms , which risked having them shot as spies if captured ; ultimately , his men were allowed to wear German uniforms under their American clothing .

Ultimately , of the 500 men attached to the force , only around 10 were able to speak English fluently , while 30 ? 40 could speak it well enough , 120 ? 150 fairly well and the rest only what they had learned in grade school . With only two working M4 Sherman tanks available , 13 Panther tanks were doctored to resemble American tanks and attached to the unit ; Skorzeny was also given 10 Allied scout cars , with six of them breaking down during the training period . The unit was also low on American small @-@ arms and ammunition , not to mention American uniforms ; nevertheless , the unit continued training .

= = = Luftwaffe deployments = = =

Hitler promised his army commanders complete air support , reporting that Goering had told him that the Luftwaffe was able to deploy some 3 @,@ 000 fighters for the operation ; although the German leader also commented to discount 1 @,@ 000 from the report , due to Goering 's tendency to exaggerate , he said that there would be nonetheless at least 2 @,@ 000 fighters to protect German ground forces . These aircraft were to support the Fifth and Sixth Panzer Armies , as well as launch a preemptive aerial offensive aimed at destroying Allied aircraft on the ground , before they had a chance to be used against the Germans . This figure was later revised to 800 ? 900 aircraft , which would be taken from squadrons slotted to defend against Allied bombing raids over German cities . The offensive had also been scheduled to take place when the weather prohibited Allied air support .

= = Mobilization and movements = =

The Wehrmacht suffered nearly 750 @,@ 000 casualties between June and November 1944 , forcing the German leadership to recruit from the Kriegsmarine , Luftwaffe , and industry , while extending the call @-@ up age to all males between 16 and 60 years of age . This extension allowed the Germans to increase their manpower in Western Europe from around 410 @,@ 000 on 1 December to just over 1 @.@ 3 million on 15 December . These new soldiers were poorly trained , and this was exacerbated by the fact that most did not know of the offensive until days before it was launched , meaning many were not even informed of their objectives . The volksgrenadier divisions ordered to protect the flanks of the three advancing armies were not even properly reinforced , because the Germans found it difficult to detach these units from areas of the front being pressured by the slow Allied advance .

Field Marshal von Rundstedt made repeated requests for more men , noting that the Western Allies were completely superior in manpower , yet was denied by Wehrmacht High Command . Rundstedt noted the difficulty of holding encircled American troops once the operation began , due to the lack of sufficient infantrymen . New infantrymen received a maximum of eight weeks worth of training , and the new divisions were deficient of anti @-@ tank and artillery weapons ; their make @-@ up was at best eclectic , as divisions were formed from the remnants of units which had taken heavy casualties in fighting in the West or on the Eastern Front . Some new infantrymen had been recruited from occupied territories in the East , and so many new soldiers did not even know German .

The forces in best condition , earmarked for the Ardennes Offensive , were those which belonged to the Waffen @-@ SS ; these forces were refitted and trained inside Germany , and then deployed to the front . But , even these were sometimes undermanned ; the 2nd SS Panzer Division , for example , was 10 % below the established manpower requirements . Even by 15 December , the transfer of personnel to the West had not been completed .

Although Western Allied bomber missions increased in intensity as the war progressed , 1944 was marked with some of the highest production rates for German industry ; for example , while in January 1944 1 @,@ 017 fighter aircraft had been manufactured , in September of that year 2 @,@ 878 were built . Similarly , in 1943 6 @,@ 083 tanks of all types had been produced , while 8 @,@ 466 were manufactured in 1944 . However , the effects of the air raids did deal damage ; for example , Panzer IV production decreased from 300 in August 1944 to only 180 in September , because the steel plant producing the tank 's armor had been destroyed by Allied bombers . Panther tank production also decreased since July 1944 due to the Allied bombing raids .

Nevertheless , the Germans amassed close to 1 @,@ 400 armored fighting vehicles for the offensive . Allied bombers also affected the movement of supplies to the front , though some 500 trainloads of equipment , fuel and ammunition were delivered without being discovered , despite Allied control of the skies . This , however , was not able to cope with the shortage of small @-@ arms ; 1 @.@ 5 million infantry weapons were required to arm the new volksgrenadiers . Ammunition was in dire need , as well , and ultimately the rail system was forced to stop troop movements in favor of moving more supplies to the front .

Fuel was in considerable shortage , as well ; although the Germans stockpiled the 2 @,@ 303 @,@ 000 @,@ 000 litres (507 @,@ 000 @,@ 000 imp gal) of fuel required for the initial phase of the offensive , half of it was not delivered because of transportation shortages . Of the petroleum stocked for the offensive , much of it was released to units operating along the front , fighting against American and British actions in the Lorraine and around Aachen . Some 18 @,@ 184 @,@ 360 litres (4 @,@ 000 @,@ 000 imp gal) were supposed to be accumulated for the first days of the offensive , in the hope that much more would be captured by the advance ; by early December less than 9 @,@ 092 @,@ 180 litres (2 @,@ 000 @,@ 000 imp gal) were available , and only around 14 @,@ 411 @,@ 100 litres (3 @,@ 170 @,@ 000 imp gal) were available by the start of the offensive . Furthermore , initial fuel consumption estimates were incorrect because they had not taken into account the increase in fuel consumption which resulted from movement over the terrain of the Ardennes , including the snow .

= = Impact on the Eastern Front = =

On the eve of the Soviet Vistula ? Oder Offensive , in January 1945 , the Red Army had an impressive force of 1 @,@ 670 @,@ 000 soldiers , 28 @,@ 360 artillery guns and heavy mortars , over a thousand Katyusha rocket launchers , 3 @,@ 300 armored fighting vehicles and nearly 3 @,@ 000 aircraft . Against this , two out of five army groups positioned on the Eastern Front , Army Group Center and Army Group A , lay in the path of the Soviet offensive ; together , they could count on roughly 980 @,@ 000 personnel , 1 @,@ 800 armored fighting vehicles , and nearly 900 combat aircraft . During December 1944 the Wehrmacht had concentrated the bulk of its mechanized forces and logistical support on the Western Front , reducing its ability to defend Germany 's eastern border from the Soviet Union . For example , 2 @,@ 299 new and refitted tanks

had been delivered to the Western Front by December 1944 , while German forces in the East had only received approximately 920 . In January 1945 the Wehrmacht was roughly 800 @, @ 000 men short of complete strength , despite the reorganization of German units in order to take into consideration manpower losses , much if its strength used for the Ardennes Offensive .

This was made clear to the German Armed Forces ' high command when General Heinz Guderian presented them with intelligence on the impending Soviet assault , and on a comparison of strength ; the German general claimed that the Red Army had an advantage of eleven to one in infantry , seven to one in armor and twenty to one in artillery . It was then mentioned that the defense of the Eastern Front would require the redeployment of armored divisions from the Ardennes . In fact , von Rundstedt had asked for the Ardennes Offensive to be called off on 22 December 1944 , in favor of reorienting Germany 's armored strength to the East , but this was flatly refused by Hitler . The offensive against American forces in the Ardennes forest had preoccupied Hitler 's mind , and the Eastern Front had suddenly become of secondary importance to the Wehrmacht High Command . For example , the Sixth Panzer Army would not be transferred to the Eastern Front until 16 January 1945 .