STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

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MISSED OPPORTUNITY: REDUCING THE BULGE

BY

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Missed Opportunity: Reducing the Bulge

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ABSTRACT

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On December 16th 1944 the Germans launched a surprise offensive that was to be known as the Battle of the Bulge. Although caught by surprise, the battle was ultimately one of the greatest triumphs of the U.S. Army. The German attack created a deep salient in American lines, some 40 miles wide and 60 miles deep. The Allies missed a tremendous opportunity by not cutting off and trapping the units in the salient. Had they done so, it could have significantly reduced the number of Allied casualties and destroyed a significant portion of the combat power of the German Army on the Western Front. It may have also ended the war in Europe earlier. Instead, they reduced the "Bulge" by pushing the salient back in a battle of attrition. The purpose of this paper is to determine how the Allies lost such a tremendous opportunity.

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MISSED OPPORTUNITY: REDUCING THE BULGE

> When the Germans launched their Ardennes counteroffensive in December and created the huge salient in the American line—the Bulge—they became vulnerable to counterthrusts all along their enlarged front. The best place for the Allies to strike was at the base of the Bulge, where they could cut off and trapped the enemy inside. Their failure to do so is beyond belief. Rather than implementing a daring strategy aimed at eliminating the enemy, the Allies preferred to push him back. As a result, at least as seen from this remove in time, 50 years afterward, the Allies unnecessarily prolonged the war.
>
> —Martin Blumenson

On 16 December 1944 the Germans launched a major surprise offensive on the Western Front. The blow focused on the American sector in the Ardennes. For the U.S. Army, this battle was to be known as the Battle of the Bulge. The Germans took a great risk in their offensive. Hitler committed a considerable part of his combat reserve and dedicated precious resources to the attack. With great risk there comes great opportunity, for both sides. When the Germans failed to achieve a breakthrough, the attacking forces found themselves surrounded on three sides and critically short of supplies. The Germans were in danger of having those forces cut off and isolated. The loss of such a huge portion of the Wehrmacht's remaining strength could have been a knockout blow to the Germans on the Western Front. Such a blow would have shortened the war in Europe. Somehow American commanders failed to recognize and take advantage of the strategic opportunity that developed in the Battle of the Bulge. The purpose of this paper is to explore why the Allies missed such a tremendous opportunity.

THE GERMAN PLAN

Hitler had decided at least as early as September 1944 to strike a decisive blow on the Western Front. He felt that a major blow could cause a rift in the Allied coalition. Specifically, he thought that a successful offensive might force Britain to seek a separate peace.[1] He decided on a drive through the Ardennes with two purposes in mind. He would attack a seam between Allied forces and split them, creating the opportunity to defeat them in detail. Failing that, his offensive would seize Antwerp and cripple the Allies logistically. Hitler thought that either one of these two objectives might cause the Allies to end the war. There may also have been the thought in the back of Hitler's mind that he could repeat the Wehrmact's stunning 1940 drive through the Ardennes.[2]

The Allied drive toward Germany had stalled by the first week of September 1944 and the Germans managed to reestablish a coherent defensive line. This gave Hitler a respite in which to build his forces for the offensive. Despite the losses of the Eastern Front, the Allied invasion of France and the constant toll of the Allied strategic bombing campaign, the Germans managed to mass over 200,000 men, 700 tanks and assault guns, and 1900 artillery pieces for the attack.[3] More amazing was the fact that they were able to assemble this attack force and stage it into the Ardennes without being detected. The stage was set for the last great German offensive on the Western Front.

THE ALLIED SITUATION

The mobile warfare the Allies established after the breakout from the beachheads in 1944 bogged down by September of that year. The Allies had reached their culminating point through a combination of heavy casualties, failing logistics and bad weather. The Allies had outrun their supply base and could no longer supply the hard driving mechanized forces. Once the Allies lost their mobility, they spent October and November battering at the German's new defensive lines on the West Wall in a series of purely attritional offensives. By December, the Allies were exhausted. Their supply situation had not improved, the weather turned against them and the previous months slogging matches left them seriously short of personnel (especially infantry) and equipment. In particular, the bloody battle for the Huertgen Forest was a meatgrinder for the infantry. The Allies simply could not continue to attack all along the front.[4] By December, Eisenhower had to reach a compromise to continue offensive actions. He had decided to allow his commanders to continue the attack in selected areas and go on the defensive across the rest of the front. Because of the troop shortages, commanders thinned the units in the designated defensive areas to strengthen the attacking forces. The center of Bradley's XII Army Group in the Ardennes was one of those defensive compromises.

Only six U.S. divisions held the sixty miles of front directly in the path of the German offensive.[5] Despite the few voices raised in concern and the few but critical intelligence indicators the Allied gathered, the Allies never seriously thought the Germans were capable of a major offensive. Most of the leadership never expected any type of attack in the Ardennes. The terrain was thought to be too restrictive for an attacker to successfully exploit any break-through. As such, the Ardennes was a rest and refit area for units exhausted in the Hurtegon Forest. It was also a sector where newly arrived units were sent to complete their training before being committed to combat. Thus it was a mix of green and exhausted units, some 83,000 men, that

faced over 200,000 Germans[6] in the storm that was about to rage out of the mist and snow of the Ardennes.

THE BULGE AND ALLIED REACTION

The German assault began with a predawn artillery barrage on 16 December 1944. The surprised and shocked defenders stumbled into their defensive positions where they faced 3 to 1 odds in troops and 2 to1 in tanks. At the key points of the attack, the defenders faced odds of 6 to 1 or worse.[7] The offensive pushed steadily into the Allies' lines on a broad front from Monschau in the north and Echternach in the south. Units were penetrated, surrounded and broken, but they continued to resist as isolated groups and individual soldiers. All of these actions threw off the German timetables for the attack. By disrupting and delaying the German timetables, the Allies won the races to the decisive points on the battlefield.[8] The Allied high command did not fare so well in comparison.

Hours into the attack senior commanders did not even know about the German attack. The commander of the attacked sector, Bradley, first received word of the attack the evening of the 16th while at a meeting with Eisenhower in Paris. When Eisenhower's G2 announced that an attack in the Ardennes had made at least five penetrations, Bradley dismissed the offensive as a spoiling attack. Eisenhower intuitively recognized it as a counterattack and ordered Bradley to send the 7th and 10th Armored Divisions to reinforce the VIII Corps. Bradley was more concerned with Patton's reaction in taking the 10th Armored from his Third Army than about the building German offensive. As late as 18 December while 13 infantry and 7 armor divisions smashed into the Ardennes, senior American commanders still believed that the German attack was a spoiling attack meant to disrupt the Allied advance toward the West Wall defenses.[9] Among the Allied commanders, Eisenhower had the greatest concern for what was happening in the Ardennes. Oddly though, Eisenhower briefly entertained the thought that the German attack was an opportunity to crack the West Wall defenses. The Germans must have thinned the forces defending the West Wall to constitute the attack force. They must also have committed all of their reserves to the attack. If the Allies could hold the penetration with minimum forces, then he could push forward with all of his forces outside of the Ardennes through the weakened West Wall.[10] This quickly proved unrealistic as the strength of the German attack developed. Regardless, it would have proven extremely difficult given the Allies supply and manpower situation.

By 19 December Eisenhower had a better feel for the magnitude of the attack. ULTRA intercepts identified 17 divisions committed to date in the Ardennes offensive and the Germans

were getting ready to commit two more SS Panzer Divisions under the 2nd SS Panzer Corps. The confusing situation on the ground was becoming clearer and it was not good. The Germans were threatening Bastogne and poised to break through to the Meuse River. There could be no attack to the Rhine until the German attack was contained. He called an emergency meeting of his senior commanders in Verdun for that morning.[11]

Most of the attendees were deeply shocked and concerned. One observer said that some looked like men already defeated. The meeting included Tedder, Bedell Smith, Bradley, Devers, Patton and assorted staff members. Montgomery was not there, but sent his chief of staff (Major General de Guingand). Eisenhower read the faces and began the meeting with "The present situation is to be regarded as one of opportunity for us and not of disaster. There will be only cheerful faces at this conference table."[12] Despite his own guidance, Eisenhower remained tense as the meeting got under way. He told his commanders that all offensive action was to cease until the German drive was blunted. He authorized commanders to give up ground to gain time, but ordered that there would be no retreat beyond the Meuse River. Once the German drive stalled, the Allies would counterattack. Hodges was still furiously plugging units into the line to slow the German advance and seemed in no position to launch any sort of counterattack on the northern shoulder. The earliest hope of a counterattack was from the south. Bradley said little during the meeting. Eisenhower turned to Patton and told him that he was to be in charge of the attack from the south and that he wanted Patton to attack with at least six divisions. He asked Patton when he could attack. Patton's answer, "The morning of December 21, with three divisions."[13] Eisenhower, as well as all the others, was incredulous. Some of the British officers even laughed. After all, Patton was claiming that he could turn Third Army ninety degrees to the north with practically no warning and attack along icy roads and horrible weather conditions. All that changed as Patton outlined his proposal.

Patton had been the first to realize that the German attack was more than a spoiling attack. His G2 had been tracking major German units being pulled out of the line since October and had convinced Patton that the attack was a major effort. Patton had ordered his staff to prepare contingency plans for a counterattack into the flank of a potential penetration. He recognized that any attack through the Ardennes would have to capture Bastogne and the critical road nets that it controlled if it was to succeed and keyed his plans to seizing or relieving Bastogne. He had gone to the meeting at Verdun with three complete contingency plans, each needing only a code word from him to set in motion. As he outlined his plan, there was some skepticism but then "through the room the current of excitement leaped like a flame. Witnesses to the occasion testify to the electric effect of the exchange."[14] Patton received approval for his

attack, but all thought and hope focused on the immediate objective of Bastogne. Patton saw the larger prize.

Patton recognized the danger the Germans exposed themselves to. Speaking directly to Bradley he said "Brad, the Kraut's stuck his head in a meat grinder. And this time I've got hold of the handle."[15] Patton wanted to let the Germans drive deep into Allied lines. Then he wanted to attack the base of the penetration, as U.S. doctrine called for, to cut off and destroy the penetrating forces. He found absolutely no support for that kind of nerve.[16] Eisenhower was firmly fixed on holding Bastogne and stopping the German advance. In the end, Patton got his orders to execute the counterattack not at the base of the bulge, but to Bastogne. From there he was to drive northward to meet with a later attack by 1st once the situation stabilized there.[17] The Third Army attack began as scheduled on 22 December and that was to set the counterattack plan irrevocably on an axis from Bastogne to Houfalize, the middle of the salient.

After the meeting Eisenhower was to make one more decision that was to ultimately have an important impact on the Allied counterattack plan. The German offensive had essentially split Bradley's army group in half. Bradley was having extreme difficulty communicating with Hodges on the northern shoulder of the bulge. Eisenhower penciled in a new boundary between Bradley's XII Army Group and Montgomery. This new boundary gave Bradley the southern half of the bulge and Montgomery the northern half, along with Hodges' troops. From a command and control perspective it made sense, but operationally it split responsibility for a critical sector between two commanders who were to have difficulty working together. Bradley immediately protested the move. It was to cause friction in the command structure and color the relationship between Bradley and Eisenhower afterwards. However, Montgomery was also the only force with significant reserves that could influence the northern shoulder. He immediately moved his 30th Corps into position to secure the Meuse bridges from Liege to Namur, effectively the point that the Germans were driving for.[18] With those forces in position on the Meuse, the Germans had little or no chance of crossing even if they successfully broke through to the Meuse. Montgomery also brought a sense of calm and stability to the northern shoulder. He was an excellent choice for restoring the Allied defensive line. However, he was too innately cautious later when there were opportunities to counterattack. It was to be a key element in shaping the final counterattack plan.

Bradley saw Montgomery's assumption of command as a personal affront. It was to be an important influence on his actions during the Battle of the Bulge and colored his relations with Montgomery. He also seemed to look for opportunities to point out what he saw as Montgomery's failures to anyone who would listen. Although no longer in command of Hodges'

forces, he maintained contact with Hodges. Bradley was not above giving Hodges thinly veiled "advice" that usually conflicted with guidance Hodges was getting from Montgomery. Not only was he working at cross-purposes with Montgomery, but his "guidance" also served to increase the friction between Montgomery and his new American subordinates.

On the 20th Montgomery visited Hodges Headquarters to assume control and immediately caused a furor. According to the Americans, he arrived like "Christ come to cleanse the temple."[19] Whatever his intentions, he managed to infuriate and alienate the American chain of command. Prior to Montgomery's arrival, Hodges had furiously plugged troops in front of the German advance to slow it down. He had even managed to pull Collins' VII Corps out of the line as a counterattack force to hit the German flank. Montgomery generally approved Hodges' dispositions, but preferred to think of Collins as a reserve instead of a counterattack force. Montgomery ordered Collins to assemble farther to the rear on the Marche Plains as a reserve force. Hodges and Collins were both to argue that the Marche plain was too far to the west (rear) and that Collins' mission should be to counterattack as soon as possible. Montgomery would not budge. Collins was one of the most aggressive of the American commanders and over the next few days continuously argued for permission to counterattack. Montgomery was convinced that the full weight of the German attack had not fallen yet. He was content to wait, withdrawing forces as appropriate to "tidy up the line", as he preferred to call it.

The Germans continued to press hard into the Ardennes but were experiencing serious problems. They were well behind their original timetable. The weather and unexpected American resistance delayed them. As early as the 19th, the panzer divisions were suffering from fuel shortages. They had not captured the anticipated enemy fuel supplies. Vehicles also idled precious fuel away as they sat in the massive traffic jams of units trying to move up to the front on icy roads. The traffic jams were also due to their failure to capture the critical road hubs of St. Vith and Bastogne.[20] Although the Germans were able to eventually surround Bastogne, they were never to capture it. In the south, the action swirled around this epic fight. In the north, the 5th Panzer Army continued to make progress, but at a slow pace.

Patton's counterattack kicked off on the 22d, but progress was slow. In the north, Eisenhower waited patiently for word from Montgomery that he was ready to counterattack. Hodges and Collins continuously badgered Montgomery for permission to counterattack. Montgomery, however, was too cautious for any bold moves into against the shoulder of the German salient.

On Christmas Day, Bradley visited Montgomery at his headquarters. He told Bradley that Patton's offensive toward Bastogne would not slow down 5th Panzer Army's attack in his sector.

Montgomery said that he was not about to attack until "he was certain that the enemy exhausted himself."[21] Besides 1st Army was still too weak for any type of offensive action. Montgomery recommended that Bradley withdraw to shorten his line so that he could free up units to reinforce Hodges 1st Army. Bradley left the meeting with the impression that Montgomery would not consider launching a counterattack for 3 months. He also left in a cold rage that prompted him to call Bedell Smith, Eisenhower's chief of staff, and demand that his detached units be returned to him. When he was denied, he actually went straight to Hodges and told him that the Germans were seriously weakened and vulnerable to an attack by 1st Army. He told Hodges to attack "as soon as the situation seems to warrant,"[22] in complete conflict with Montgomery's guidance. Collins was to use this conflicting guidance to unleash Harmon's 2nd Armor Division into an attack that was to all but annihilate the spearhead of the German attack in the northern portion of the salient. Clearly Montgomery's assessment of the enemy situation did not match reality, but Bradley's interference did nothing to help the situation.

On the 26th, elements of Patton's 3rd Army broke through to Bastogne on a very narrow front. Until then, Eisenhower had seemed content to wait for Montgomery to tell him when he was ready to attack. Now Eisenhower called Montgomery to get him to attack from the north to take the take some of the pressure off of Bastogne. Again Montgomery refused saying that the final German effort had yet to come in the North and he needed to wait and meet defeat that attack.[23] All the while, Harmon's 2nd Armor Divisions was annihilating the 2nd Panzer Division on the northern flank of the battle near Celles.[24] Eisenhower continued to pressure Montgomery for a counterattack from the north. Either Eisenhower's insistence finally wore Montgomery down or he started to reassess the enemy situation because on the 27th Montgomery let it be known that he was ready to consider a counterattack plan. Eisenhower in an uncharacteristic display shouted "Praise God from whom all blessings flow."[25] He made plans to visit Montgomery the next day to discuss plans for a counterattack.

Meanwhile Patton and Hodges were pressing their own solutions for reducing the salient to Bradley. Patton pushed for the doctrinal solution, attacking the shoulders of the penetration to cut off the enemy in the salient. "If you get a monkey in the jungle hanging by his tail, it is easier to get him by cutting his tail than kicking him in the face."[26] Patton wanted to go on the defensive at Bastogne and launch the counterattack at the base of the penetration. He wanted Hodges to counterattack the northern shoulder along the Elsenborne Ridge. Hodges agreed with Patton's concept in the meeting, but then changed his mind in a later meeting with Collins. Montgomery had visited Collins headquarters earlier and he had pushed Montgomery for an attack from Malmedy to St. Vith. Montgomery had been adamant that Collins simply could not sustain his

corps along what would essentially be one road. Collins conceded and changed his plan to an attack toward Houffalize where he could link up with 3rd Army attacking from Bastogne. This is the plan that he pitched to Hodges, emphasizing the difficulty in supporting the attack Patton called for. Without consulting Patton, Hodges went straight to Bradley with this modified plan that was a much shallower attack on the German flank. Bradley had been sharp in his criticism of Montgomery's lack of aggressiveness, but he was quick to seize this much more modest counterattack plan. He chose to ignore Patton's plan (without telling Patton) and adopted the most conservative of the two plans. For reasons of his own, Bradley was about to kick the monkey in the face.

On the 28th, before Eisenhower left to visit Montgomery, Bradley stopped in at Eisenhower's headquarters to pitch "his" counterattack plan. Patton was to attack from Bastogne to Houffalize. The fateful decision on the 19th of December was to keep Patton on the Bastogne axis. Bradley's argument was that Patton was already in position for this attack toward Houffalize. To keep Patton from shifting to his plan to attack the base of the salient, Bradley specified that two new divisions about to be sent to Patton had to go to VIII Corps for the attack from Bastogne. Hodges was to attack from the north to Houffalize. Once the two attacking forces linked up, First and Ninth Armies were to be returned to his command. From there Bradley would then use those forces to turn east, flatten the Bulge and then be the main effort for the drive to the Rhine. Surprisingly, Eisenhower approved the plan, minus the return of the troops (not until after the salient was reduced) and the priority of effort to the Rhine. What was surprising is that as supreme commander, it was Eisenhower's responsibility to plan and coordinate the effort of his two army group commanders. Yet as the discussion unfolded, there is no indication that he had done any planning even though he was on his way to discuss the counterattack with Montgomery. Eisenhower should at least have had a concept in mind so that he could issue planning guidance to Montgomery. Instead, Bradley dropped in on Eisenhower unexpectantly to brief his plan and Eisenhower adopted it on the spot. Eisenhower went to see Montgomery with Bradley's plan.

He arrived to find Montgomery again trying to pull back Collins' VII Corps as Hodges' (12th Army) reserve. Hodges and Collins were resisting, arguing to commit VII Corps into an immediate counterattack. Montgomery protested to Eisenhower (with Hodges and Collins present) that he still thought the Germans had not launched their final attack in the north. He argued that the Allies should continue to delay until the German's had reached their culminating point. Eisenhower desperately wanted an attack from the north to take some pressure off of Bastogne. Even though 3rd Army pushed a narrow corridor to Bastogne, the Germans were still

launching attacks to take the town. Eisenhower could not totally refute Montgomery's concerns. He agreed to allow Montgomery to strengthen the front and reorganize units, but Montgomery had to preparations for a counterattack by 1 January.[27] Eisenhower discussed the concept that he had approved that morning. Montgomery, with Collins persuasion, agreed to the general outline of the plan. Eisenhower left the meeting convinced that Montgomery had agreed that if there were no new major attack by 1 January, Montgomery would launch a counterattack from the north.

With Montgomery agreeing to an attack, Bradley's proposal became the Allied plan. It was a plan that was conservative in the extreme, only vaguely within the doctrinal solution. "It was no drive to cut the enemy's feet from under him and trap him in the Ardennes: it was instead a conservative push against his waist, combined with drives not unlike two windshield wipers sweeping the enemy back like raindrops."[28]

Eisenhower went back to his headquarters to work out the final details of the plan. The keynote of his plan was to "regain the initiative, and speed and energy are essential."[29] But as the planning continued, he got two surprises from Montgomery. He received a letter from Montgomery on the 30th that put any planning on hold. Montgomery chose this opportunity to argue that he should be appointed as the ground commander of the allied counterattack. In his letter, Montgomery said:

> When you and Bradley and myself met at Maastricht on 7 December it was very clear to me that Bradley opposed any idea that I should have operational control over his army group: so I did not then pursue the subject.
>
> I therefore consider that it will be necessary for you to be very firm on the subject and any loosely worded statements will be quite useless.
>
> I consider that if you merely use the word "coordination," it will not work. The person designated by you must have powers of operational direction and control of the operation that will follow on your directive.
>
> It is then that one commander must have powers to direct and control the operations: you cannot possible do it yourself, and so you would have to nominate someone else.
>
> I suggest that your directive should finish with this sentence: 12 and 21 Army Groups will develop operations in accordance with the above instructions.
>
> From now onwards full operational direction, control, and co-ordination of these operations is vested in the C.-in-C. 21 Army Group, subject to such instructions as may be issued by the Supreme Commander from time to time.[30]

All thoughts of the counter-attack was pushed aside as Eisenhower dealt with what he saw as an ultimatum from Montgomery to pre-empt him as supreme commander. Montgomery was most likely simply emboldened by being assigned major units of Bradley's command for the Bulge. He chose to read that as another opportunity to reopen his argument for an overall ground commander under Eisenhower, not supreme commander. For Eisenhower, it was just

too much to deal amicably with during the crisis of the German offensive. That was followed the next day with Montgomery's chief of staff reporting to Eisenhower's headquarters that Montgomery could not attack until 3 January. Eisenhower prepared a cable to the Combined Chiefs of Staff demanding that one of the two, Montgomery or Eisenhower be relieved. Fortunately, Eisenhower's staff got him to wait 24 hours before sending the cable. They then got De Guingand, Montgomery's Chief of Staff, in to see Eisenhower and Eisenhower showed him a copy of the cable. Eisenhower told him that he viewed the situation with Montgomery at a critical point. De Guingand also pleaded with Eisenhower not to send the cable, to give him time to sort this out with Montgomery. De Guingand quickly convinced Montgomery of his precarious position. Montgomery sent Eisenhower a note requesting that he tear up Montgomery's letter and assuring him of his loyalty.[31] The immediate crisis was resolved and Eisenhower went back to his plan for the counterattack. However, two precious days had been consumed without a coordinated counterattack. The attack date slipped back to January 3rd.

Eisenhower issued his plan in the form of a directive on New Year's Eve. Montgomery's copy included a cover letter from Eisenhower telling him that he considered the issue of overall ground commander settled and that Montgomery should read the directive carefully and comply completely. Montgomery apparently got the message. The attack was on. Eisenhower's directive:

> Basic Plan- to destroy enemy forces west of Rhine, north of the Moselle, and to prepare for crossing the Rhine in force with the main effort north of the Rhur. The several tasks are:
>
> a. To reduce the Ardennes salient by immediate attacks from north and south, with present command arrangements undisturbed until tactical victory within the salient has been assured and the Third Army and Collins' Corps have joined up for a drive to the north-east. Bradley then to resume command of the First U.S. Army. (Enemy action within the salient indicates his determination to make this battle an all-out effort with his mobile forces. Therefore we must be prepared to use everything consistent with minimum security requirements to accomplish their destruction.)
> b. Thereafter First and Third Armies to drive to north-east on general line Prum-Bonn, eventually to Rhine.
> c. When *a* is accomplished, 21st Army Group, with Ninth U.S. Army under operational command, to resume preparations for "VERITABLE."
> d. All priorities to building up strength of U.S. Armies in personnel, material and units, to go to 12th Army Group.
> e. The front south of Moselle to be strictly defensive for the present.
> f. I will build up a reserve (including re-fitting divisions) which will be available to reinforce success.
> g. As soon as reduction of Ardennes salient permits, H.Q. 12th Army Group will move north, in close proximity to 21st Army Group H.Q.
> h. From now on, any detailed or emergency co-ordination required along Army Group boundaries in the north will be effected by the two Army Group commanders with power of decision vested in C.G., 21 Army Group.

> The one thing that must now be prevented is the stabilization of the enemy salient with infantry, permitting him opportunity to use his Panzers at will on any part of the front. We must regain the initiative, and speed and energy are essential.[32]

Eisenhower's plan lacked any real detail for planning and it seemed more focused on follow-on operations than on the reduction of the salient. Because of the delay caused by the ground commander distraction and in accepting a shallow attack on the middle of the salient, Eisenhower allowed the enemy to do exactly what his last paragraph said they must avoid. As the Germans began to realize that their attack was failing, they settled their infantry into defensive positions and pulled their fuel starved panzers back into reserve. During the counterattack the Germans were able to use their armor as reaction forces to seal and stall any successful attacks.

The counterattack began on the 3rd, but it was slow going. The weather was still bitterly cold with deep snow. The German attack on Bastogne had stopped under the pressure of the counterattack and the Germans clearly went over to the defensive. If nothing else, their supply situation forced them on the defensive. However, there was a new spirit of fanaticism from the Germans.[33] Though the average soldier had to know that the offensive had failed, they resisted with resoluteness complemented with the skills of veteran soldiers. On 5 January Manteuffel began pulling his panzer units farther back to form an operational reserve. On 8 January, Hitler authorized the withdrawal of the 6th Panzer Army and gave general permission to withdraw to better defensive positions. Hitler also ordered the withdrawal of the SS Panzer divisions allegedly to protect the base of the bulge. They were to quickly move from there to the eastern front. It was all but an admission by Hitler that his offensive had failed. At this point, the Allies lost the opportunity to envelop any significant German forces. As the two U.S. armies fought stubborn German resistance and the weather on their drive to Houffalize, the Germans continued to withdraw.

On 16 January elements of the 3rd and 1st Armies met at Houfallize. However, the Germans had slipped out of the area pinched off by the Allies. The attack then turned due east and continued to smash the Germans in a head on battle of attrition. The Germans continued to resistance stubbornly, but on the 22nd the weather finally cleared and the full might of allied airpower hammered the Germans. By January 28th the Allies had retaken all of the ground lost to the Germans and the Bulge disappeared. The cost had been heavy for both sides. Of the 600,000 Americans involved in the fighting, there were 81,000 casualties. Of the 500,000 Germans in the battle, there were 100,000 casualties. Both sides lost heavily in equipment, but the Germans could not hope to make up their losses. The American soldier won the Battle of

the Bulge at a heavy price and struck a telling blow against the Germans, but it was not the decisive battle that it could have been.

MISSED OPPORTUNITY, THE CAUSE

The Battle of the Bulge created a salient in the allied lines 40 miles wide and 60 miles deep. A salient occurs when an offensive fails to penetrate the defender's lines and instead pushes a large finger or bulge into the defender's positions. U.S. Army doctrine at that time in FM 100-15 clearly laid out the principles for reducing a salient. It called for holding the shoulders of the attack, containing the attack, and then counterattacking at the base of the salient to cut off and isolate the forces in the salient. If the defender manages to hold the attacker, then a salient provides a great opportunity to destroy or capture all of the enemy forces in the salient. The bulk of the enemy combat forces should be at the tip of the salient continuing to try and penetrate the defender's lines. If the counterattack penetrates at the shoulders of the salient and then links up, the attacker is encircled. The forces in the salient then face a tremendous dilemma. If they continue offensive operations, they run out of supplies. If they try and turn to break the encirclement, they must disengage from contact and attack to their rear and defeat the enemy's encircling forces before their dwindling supplies run out. This would have been an extremely difficult problem for the units at the tip of the Ardennes salient because the Germans were already critically short of fuel as early as 3 days into their offensive. The German's critical fuel and supply situation should have made encircling the Bulge an even more viable option. This is exactly what Patton had been advocating all along, yet it never happened.

The Bulge salient was an especially critical opportunity for the allies because of the forces that could have been cut off and destroyed. With German industry falling further behind and with crippling shortages in everything, Hitler dedicated almost an entire year's worth of production to the attack. He allocated seventy-five per cent of the tank production and eighty-five percent of all new airframes built. Hitler transferred 17 divisions from the Eastern Front and pulled selected units out of the line for refit in the west. He assigned 18 of 23 newly organized Volksgrenadier divisions to the Western Front. As a result, the Germans fielded nearly 76 divisions on the Western Front and 30 of those were concentrated in the Ardennes for the offensive.[34] Nearly one third of the German combat power on the Western Front was to fight in the Bulge. Those forces included almost all of the armor in the west. If Hitler had not attacked in the Ardennes and simply put those units back into the line, he may have been able to prolong the war for another six months. What impact would the loss of those elite panzer units and over 300,000

men have had on the Western Front? As it was, Hitler lost a lot of men and equipment, but enough combat power survived the battle to keep the Reich in the war until the spring.

An attack on the shoulders of the salient would also have been more sustainable for the Allies. Even before the Battle of the Bulge, the Allies were suffering extreme shortages of men and supplies. Antwerp did not become operational until November 1944. Since the fall of 1944, division commanders had complained that they did not have enough ammo or riflemen to continue their operations.[35] The logisticians were unprepared for the rapid advances after the breakout from Normandy and struggled in vain to catch up. The operators were unprepared for the vicious infantry battles with the huge casualties of October and November of 1944. When the supplies dried up and the weather turned bad, the Allies rapid pursuit slowed to a crawl.[36] The Allies chose to push the salient back with a battle of attrition, shoving the Germans back with attacks all along the front. This caused more casualties and placed an even greater strain on Allied logistics. If the Allies had gone on the defensive along the face of the salient, they would have reduced their supply demand. Rather than supplying attacking units across the entire forty-mile front of the salient, the allies could have focused their logistical effort only on the two drives along the shoulders of the Bulge. They would have taken less effort to supply and should have required fewer supplies than the general offensive that opened against the entire Bulge. The Allies were already short infantry and an attack on the shoulders of the salient would have required much fewer infantry. A successful attack would also have opened the way for armored troops to conduct the encirclement. In the long run the overall number of casualties in reducing the Bulge would have been drastically reduced, especially among the infantry.

The Allied failure lies in a mix of attrition warfare focus and force of personalities. Eisenhower bears the major responsibility for the failure because he never recognized the opportunity the German Army presented him in the Bulge. Several times Eisenhower talked about the opportunity the German attack presented. Yet based on his actions (or lack thereof) his rhetoric seemed to more in the nature of a pep talk to his subordinates than a true grasp of the strategic and operational situation of the Bulge. He was too concerned with getting on with his broad front advance to the Rhine and the attack into Germany in the spring. He was totally focused on getting the entire Allied advance to the West Wall and positioned for a spring offensive. He was simply unable or unwilling to recognize other opportunities for achieving victory. He did not seem to recognize that by destroying the forces in the Ardennes attack he would have opened the way to Germany. Eisenhower's initial reaction to the attack was that it left the West Wall defenses weakened and thus the Allies might have an opportunity to penetrate those defenses earlier than expected. Once reality set in, the focus was on containing

the attack. After the Germans reached their culminating point, there was still no discernable thought about trapping the forces in the Bulge. Eisenhower's 31 December directive still lists the drive to the Rhine as the real mission. The reduction of the salient was merely a subtask -"Basic Plan- to destroy enemy forces west of Rhine, north of the Moselle, and to prepare for crossing the Rhine in force with the main effort north of the Rhur."[37] Some historians have proposed that:

> Allied operational practices betrayed a primary concern with gaining ground. Instead of going after the enemy's throat, the Allies went after his territory. Rather than implementing a daring strategy aimed at eliminating the enemy, the Allies preferred to push him back.[38]

The Allies also had several previous opportunities to cut off and destroy enemy forces, most notably the Falaise Pocket in August 1944. Two German field armies escaped when the Allies failed to close the pocket.[39] Eisenhower's actions in the Bulge would also seem to lend some credence to that proposal.

One of the reasons that the Allies may have opted for what Von Rundstedt was to call the "Small Solution"[40] was a result of the shock of the surprise attack. Allied commanders grossly over rated the Germans real capabilities during and after the Bulge.

> Once burned, twice cautious. Having perceived no intruders at all before December 16, Allied commanders and their intelligence officers in the days that followed saw a burglar under every bed. Their alarm persisted even after the Germans in front of the Meuse on Christmas Day and the next day suffered "one of the most serious things that can possible happen to one in battle" –as Tweedledee explained it to Alice –getting one's head cut off.[41]

Concern over what new German "burglars" might do kept the Allies very conservative and may very well have kept all but Patton from considering anything as bold as holding the Germans and cutting them off deep behind the salient. Eisenhower was the first to recognize the significance of the attack and his reaction was a key factor in preventing a German breakthrough in the Ardennes. However, he over estimated the German's real capabilities as badly as the rest. A successful German offensive to Antwerp could have crippled the Allied supply situation temporarily, but they simply did not have the forces to exploit any strategic successes. Also in dedicating so much effort to the offensive, he allowed the Russians to step up their offensive on the Easter Front.[42] Early in the battle, Eisenhower pleaded for additional troops and got an airborne, three infantry and three armor divisions shipped to the European Theater earlier than planned. He also got three more infantry divisions that had been originally allocated to the Pacific. Marshall combed out all the support units in the U.S., Alaska and Panama for Europe. Those were sufficient forces to hold the German attack and deal with the salient. After his initial calm reaction, Eisenhower also fell victim to seeing "burglars"

everywhere. He continued to credit the Germans with unrealistic strength. Even at the end of December, clearly after the Germans reached their culminating point, Eisenhower asked Marshall to transfer additional divisions from Italy and even asked for 100,000 Marines.[43] Clearly the capabilities of the Germans were vastly overrated and may have contributed to concern that the Germans may have been able to stop a drive into the base of the salient.

Most damning of all was Eisenhower's failure as the supreme commander to develop and coordinate a plan for reducing the salient. Eisenhower retained overall command of the ground war. It was his (and his staff's) responsibility therefore to develop and supervise the plan to reduce the Ardennes salient. Although the attack had fallen on Bradley initially, Eisenhower had split the area of the salient between Bradley and Montgomery because of command and control concerns. This was probably the right decision at the time. However, the operation to reduce the salient then required two different army groups working together in a coordinated attack. This demanded either that Eisenhower direct the operation or that he put one army group commander in charge. Eisenhower did neither. Eisenhower's approach had been very hands-off to that point. He preferred to provide general guidance and let the army group commanders execute as they saw fit. His commanders had failed to close the pocket at the Failaise when they were enjoying much more congenial relations. At this point Bradley was stewing over what he saw as a personal slight in assigning his First and Ninth Armies to Montgomery. Montgomery was convinced that this was a concession to his old bid to be named the overall ground commander. As childish as it seems, Eisenhower should have known that at this point neither of the two was going to coordinate or cooperate in this operation without some direct guidance/pressure from him. Yet he failed to provide that guidance.

The plan that Eisenhower eventually endorsed came from Bradley. He had maintained a low profile throughout the battle up until then. During the key commander meetings with Eisenhower Patton had done all of the talking. Patton was also pushing Bradley for the doctrinal solution to the salient, attack at the base. Yet Bradley suddenly went to Eisenhower on December 28th and "urged an immediate pincer attack against the waist of the German salient."[44] In his plan to Eisenhower he even added provisions to ensure that Patton would not pull units out of the line and try and attack the base of the bulge. Bradley maintained that his plan would "trap the bulk of the German Army."[45] Pinching in at the waist would possibly have trapped some, but not the "bulk" of the German forces. Why did Bradley push that particular plan? Patton's proposal would have maneuvered deeper and longer, but would also have had Montgomery drive deep and take longer with the very troops that Bradley wanted to have returned to him. He adopted Collins plan that was almost no plan. It utilized troops in place and

ignored maneuver. The key to Bradley's plan was that it quickly rejoined the split elements of Bradley's previous command. The revealing part of Bradley's plan was that he ended his pitch with a recommendation that once the two forces met not only was he to have the First and Ninth Armies back, but he was then to be in overall command in reducing the salient. Bradley proposed that he was now to receive priority of support for a "hurry up offensive" to the Rhine and beyond. Before the Bulge Eisenhower had designated Montgomery as the main effort across the Rhine.[46] Bradley's plan appeared to be based solely on getting his troops back as soon as possible, not on any operational realities. It was also a very conservative, cautious plan very much in character for Bradley. Amazingly, Eisenhower approved the plan, minus the "hurry up offensive".

Eisenhower's commanders (other than Patton and perhaps Collins) may have also lacked the ability to conduct an operation as bold as cutting off the salient. Bradley was too consumed with his personal pride to undertake a wide sweeping move. He had in fact deliberately squashed Patton's proposal to counterattack at the shoulders of the penetration. Even before the Bulge though, Bradley had given any indications of any operational ability that would have disposed him toward encircling the salient instead of driving it back in an attritional attack.

Montgomery did not have the daring or aggressiveness that it would have required. Most of Montgomery's great successes in the war were set piece battles. The previous operations where he tried sweeping and freewheeling offensive operations failed. His forces were among those that failed to close the Failaise pocket. His attack in Holland failed to link up with the paratroops in Arnhem. Montgomery continued to resist conducting a counterattack long after the Germans reached their culminating point in the battle. He was convinced that the Germans were going to make one more effort in his area of responsibility and wanted to stay on the defensive. It is unclear if he could not have executed the attack into the salient's northern shoulder and the drive to link up with Patton from the south. It is especially certain that he could have done so without a detailed plan and a much longer preparation time for the operation. When Eisenhower visited him and talked of the plan that was ultimately executed, Montgomery had clearly not bought into that rather simple plan. Rather than start planning for the attack, he spent his time trying to get Eisenhower to appoint him the overall ground commander. When that blew up in his face, he was able to execute a counterattack on the 3rd of January primarily because he had to do no planning. The attack on the third involved primarily Hodges and Collins who had already had the planning for the drive to Houfallize in place. All Montgomery had to do was to relent and give Collins permission to execute.

Hodges is another doubtful commodity. He may not have been able to execute the doctrinal attack on the salient even if Montgomery had tasked Hodges him to. Hodges was badly shaken by the German attack. Some accounts have portrayed him as nearly breaking under the strain of the effort to hold his lines together under the attack. He was clearly overwhelmed until late in the battle. The one sure thing that Montgomery did was to calm Hodges down and help him regain both self control and control of the situation. However, Hodges was consumed with holding his front together and allowed his subordinates to do most of the counterattack planning. Hodges agreed initially with Patton's plan for reducing the salient. Yet he let himself be convinced very quickly by Collins that the best alternative was the link up at Houfallilze. This was the quickest and easiest solution. Bradley may very well also have influenced it. Bradley stayed in touch with Hodges after Hodges was placed under Montgomery's command. In all, Hodges would have had difficulty executing the attack called for by Patton.

The Battle of the Bulge presented the Allies with the opportunity to end the war early, an opportunity the Allies missed. Unfortunately, Eisenhower was so focused on a general advance strategy that he failed to recognize the opportunity. His chief subordinates also lacked the strategic vision, lacked the operational ability to carry out the operation, or were more concerned with their own selfish concerns to truly focus on the enemy. These failures left the burden of the battle and ultimately the credit for one of the American Army's greatest victories to the individual American soldier:

> The victor in the Ardennes was the American solider . . . he had met the test when it came, giving his commanders—for all their intelligence failure—time to bring the mobility and reserve power into play. Although Allied power would have told in the end in any case, the American solider in the Ardennes made the outcome a certainty by his valor and determination at the Elsenborn Ridge, St. Vith, Echternach, Clerf, Stavelot, Bastogne, Celles, and countless other places.[47]

WORD COUNT = 8278

ENDNOTES

[1] Charles MacDonald, *A Time for Trumpets: The Untold Story of the Battle of the Bulge* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1985), 21-22.

[2] Allen Millett and Williamson Murray, *A War to be Won: Fighting the Second World War* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000), 463-464.

[3] MacDonald, 44-45.

[4] Sam Newland, "Senior Level Command in the U.S. Army During the Ardennes Offensive" (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: U.S. Army War College, 1999), 5.

[5] Charles MacDonald, *The Mighty Endeavor: The American War in Europe* (New York: De Capo Press, 1992), 394.

[6] Ibid., 397.

[7] Ibid., 397.

[8] MacDonald, *A Time for Trumpets,* 618-619.

[9] John Eisenhower, *The Bitter Woods* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1969), 214-215.

[10] MacDonald, *The Mighty Endeavor,* 418.

[11] Ibid., 419.

[12] Ibid., 420.

[13] Carlo D'Este, *Patton: A Genius for War* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), 680.

[14] Ibid., 680.

[15] Ibid., 681.

[16] Ibid., 681.

[17] MacDonald, *The Mighty Endeavor,* 430.

[18] Ibid., 431.

[19] Ibid., 431.

[20] Ibid., 435-436.

[21] MacDonald, *A Time for Trumpets*, 589.

[22] Ibid., 590.

[23] MacDonald, *The Mighty Endeavor*, 443.

[24] Eisenhower, 374.

[25] Ibid., 379.

[26] MacDonald, *A Time for Trumpets*, 599.

[27] Eisenhower, 380.

[28] MacDonald, *A Time for Trumpets*, 600

[29] Ibid., 381.

[30] Ibid., 381-382.

[31] Ambrose, 575-576.

[32] Eisenhower, 380-381.

[33] Ambrose, 606.

[34] McGinnis, Thomas, *Jomini and the Ardennes*, (Alexandria Virginia: Defense Technical Information Center, 1988), 9-10.

[35] Ambrose, 539.

[36] Ibid., 540.

[37] Eisenhower, 380-381

[38] Martin Blumenson, "A Deaf Ear to Clausewitz: Allied Operational Objectives in World War II." *Parameters* (Summer 1993): 25.

[39] Ibid., 24.

[40] MacDonald, *A Time for Trumpets*, 604.

[41] Ibid., 604.

[42] John Litchfield and others, *The Ardennes: The Battle of the Bulge*, (Alexandria, Virginia: Defense Technical Information Center, 1986), 67-68.

[43] MacDonald, *A Time for Trumpets*, 604.

[44] Omar Bradley, *A General's Life*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 372.

[45] Ibid., 372.

[46] Ibid., 372-374.

[47] MacDonald, *Mighty Endeavor*, 452-453.

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