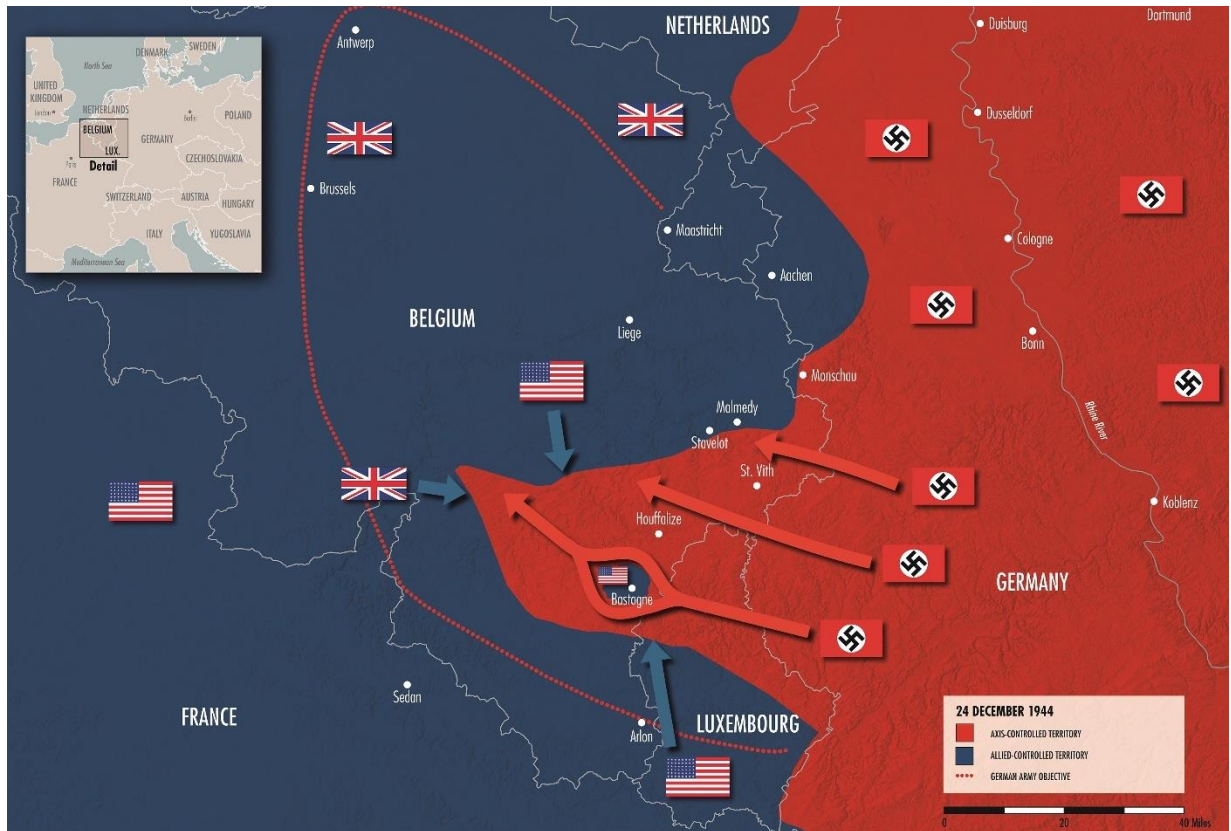


BATTLE OF THE BULGE



In late 1944, during the wake of the Allied forces' successful D-Day invasion of Normandy, France, it seemed as if the Second World War was all but over. On December 16, with the onset of winter, the German army launched a counteroffensive that was intended to cut through the Allied forces in a manner that would turn the tide of the war in Hitler's favor. The epic battle that ensued is known historically as the Battle of the Bulge.

Early on the misty winter morning of December 16, 1944, more than 200,000 German troops and nearly 1,000 tanks launched Adolf Hitler's last bid to reverse the ebb in his fortunes that had begun when Allied troops landed in France on D-Day. Seeking to drive to the coast of the English Channel and split the Allied armies in two as they had done in May 1940, the German's primary objective was the capture of the vital Belgian port of Antwerp. Hitler, who by this time had assumed direct command of the German armed forces, believed that German success would compel the Western Allies to negotiate a peace treaty in the Germany's favor. By this time, it was obvious to the entire German leadership including Hitler himself that they had no realistic hope of repelling the imminent Soviet invasion of Germany unless the Wehrmacht was able to concentrate the entirety of its remaining forces on the Eastern Front. They desperately needed a victory in the West. It was do or die for the German Army.



German Tiger II tanks and troops preparing to be deployed for the Ardennes Offensive.



Well-equipped Wehrmacht troops moving into position for the attack.

The Germans struck in the Ardennes Forest, a 75-mile stretch of the front characterized by dense woods and few roads, held by four inexperienced and battle-worn American divisions stationed there for rest and seasoning. Due to a combination of Allied overconfidence and poor reconnaissance, the Germans achieved total surprise. After a day of fighting, the Germans broke through the American front, surrounding and capturing most of the front-line divisions. Those American troops that were able to escape fled in panic. In the days that followed, the Germans pressed on, seizing key crossroads, and advancing their spearheads toward the Meuse River, creating the projection that gave the battle its name. German paratroopers also dropped behind the American lines causing

confusion. English-speaking German soldiers, disguised as Americans, captured critical bridges, and cut vital communication lines.

For those who had lived through 1940, the picture was all too familiar. Belgian townspeople put away their Allied flags and brought out their swastikas. Police in Paris enforced an all-night curfew. British veterans waited nervously to see how the Americans would react to a full-scale German offensive, and British generals quietly acted to safeguard the Meuse River's crossings. Even American civilians back home, who had thought final victory was near were sobered by the Nazi onslaught.



German troops advancing through the Ardennes Forest, December 1944.



German troops moving past wrecked American equipment.

But this was not 1940. Within a week, American resistance began to stiffen, and the German advance began to slow. As the German supply lines grew longer, their advanced units were plagued by supply problems. Many of the German Tiger and Panther tanks began to run out of fuel. Isolated American units, unaware of the overall picture, also did their part to slow the Nazi advance. They defended vital crossroads and burned critical gasoline stocks to keep them from the fuel-hungry German tanks. In the north, around Elsenborn Ridge, stubborn American troops blocked German access to key roads to the northwest and west that they counted on for success. German armor and infantry that were supposed to advance along parallel routes found themselves crammed on the same roads. This congestion, and the terrain that favored the defenders, threw the German advance behind schedule.

The supreme Allied commander, General Dwight D. Eisenhower rushed reinforcements to hold against the German penetration. In only a few days, General George S. Patton had turned his entire Third U.S. Army to the north and was counterattacking against the German flank. At the critical road junctions of St. Vith and Bastogne, American tankers and paratroopers fought off repeated German attacks. On December 24, the skies began to clear and Allied air power began to take its toll on the German armored columns. To the north, the 2nd U.S. Armored Division stopped enemy tanks short of the Meuse River on Christmas. By December 26, the lead element of Patton's U.S. Third Army reached Bastogne from the south, relieving the besieged American troops fighting there.



American troops being rushed in to slow the German advance.

On January 1, the Luftwaffe launched an all-out attack in an effort to cripple Allied air forces and gain air superiority so that the German Army and Waffen-SS troops could resume their advance toward Antwerp. The operation achieved some surprise and tactical success, but was ultimately a failure. Allied losses were heavy, and a great many Allied aircraft were destroyed on the ground. Most were replaced within a week. The Germans, however, lost many planes and pilots who could not be replaced. They simply did not have the resources or the manpower to replace these critical losses. The offensive faltered once again.



American troops on a King Tiger that had been knocked out by American planes.

Throughout January, American troops, often wading through deep snow drifts, attacked the shrinking bulge until they had restored the front and set the stage for the final drive to victory. The Battle of the Bulge, as it became known as, was the largest and bloodiest single battle fought by the United States in World War II. Never again would Hitler be able to launch an offensive against the Allies in the West. By May, Hitler would be dead and the war in Europe would be over. Of the battle, an admiring British Prime Minister Sir Winston Churchill stated, "This is undoubtedly the greatest American battle of the war and will, I believe, be regarded as an ever-famous American victory." In terms of the courage and fortitude of the American troops in the face of great adversity, the Battle of the Bulge is arguably one of the greatest battles in American military history.