

The Round Tablette

October 2006

Volume 15 Number 2

Published by WW II History Roundtable

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Welcome to the October meeting of the Dr. Harold C. Deutsch World War Two History Roundtable. Tonight's topic is about the Battle of the Huertgen Forest. We welcome to our program historian and author Edward G. Miller. He is author of the book: [A Dark And Bloody Ground](#). Copies of this book are available for purchase tonight.

The Huertgen Forest

The Battle of the Huertgen Forest is the name given to a series of fierce battles fought between the American and German forces between September 19, 1944 and February 10, 1945. The battles took place in the Huertgen forest which was a strategically insignificant corridor of 50 square miles, east of the Belgian-German border. The initial objectives were to take the town of Schmidt, clear the town of Monschau, advance to the Roer and Rhine Rivers and take control of the dams located there. The official US history says that as the battle progressed, the American commanders lost sight of these objectives.

The American commanders were flush with success after the breakout from Normandy and hoped that they could quickly breakthrough and push further into Germany. Several divisions were sent into the Huertgen forest only to be decimated and replaced by still more divisions. The Americans had advantages in men, armor, air and artillery support. Yet, these advantages were negated by the severe terrain. Despite their smaller numbers, the Germans were able to impede the stronger American forces thanks to the difficult

terrain and their superior defensive positions. It was really the perfect military scenario for the over stretched German army. If they should be overrun, the Germans could easily flood the entire Huertgen Valley from the surrounding dams, thus delaying the Americans' advance. The Germans were heavily entrenched in the forest and inflicted heavy casualties in the longest single battle the US Army has ever fought in its history. The Germans inflicted well over 24,000 casualties on the American forces during the battle. The Americans suffered an additional 9000 casualties due to fatigue, illness and friendly fire. Twelve thousand German casualties were also claimed. Despite this, the battle of the Huertgen forest is largely forgotten because the Battle of the Bulge, which began shortly afterwards, took the spotlight away from it. The fact that the victory was hard to obtain, and the length of the engagement, plus the large number of casualties, made it difficult to glorify from either side.

The Battlefield

The Huertgen Forest occupies a rugged area between the Roer River and Aachen. The dense conifer forest is broken by few roads, tracks or firebreaks and vehicular movement is very restricted. In the autumn and early winter of 1944, the weather was cold and wet and often prevented air support. Ground conditions varied between snow and just wet. The German defenders had prepared the area with blockhouses, minefields, barbed-wire and booby-traps, all hidden by the snow. The dense forest allowed infiltration and flanking attacks and it was sometimes difficult to establish a front line or to be confident that an area was cleared of the enemy. The small

numbers of routes and clearings had allowed the German machine-gun, mortar and artillery teams to pre-range their weapons and fire accurately.

The American advantages of numbers, armor, mobility and air support were greatly reduced. In the forest, a relatively small number of determined and prepared defenders could be highly effective against a much larger attacking force. As the American divisions took casualties, the replacements were inexperienced recruits. The US Official History says, "Any numerical advantage the Americans may have possessed lay in bug-eyed replacements who began to arrive in small, frightened bunches". The impenetrable forest also limited the use of tanks and hid anti-tank teams armed with Panzerfausts. Later in the battle it became necessary to blast tank routes through the forest. Transport was similarly limited by their lack of routes through the forest. At critical times, it proved difficult to reinforce or supply front line units or to evacuate their wounded.

The tall forest canopy also favored the defenders. Falling artillery shells were often primed to detonate as airbursts in the canopies of the trees. While defenders were protected from shell fragments (and wooden splinters from the trees) by their dug-in defensive positions, attackers were in the open and much more vulnerable. Also, US mortar teams needed clearings in which to work. These were very few and very dangerous, so support was often unavailable to the rifle platoons.

There is an ongoing discussion of whether or not the American battle plan made any sense. One possibility is that the US strategy grossly underestimated the individual strength and determination of the psyche of the German soldier this late in the war. In addition, the Americans concentrated on the village of Schmidt and did not seem to recognize the importance of

nor try to conquer the strategic Roer-dams.

More Reading on Tonight's Topic

A Dark and Bloody Ground

By Edward G. Miller
Texas A & M University Press
College Station, TX 1995

Shavetail

By William L. Devitt
Versa Press, Inc.
East Peoria, Ill. 2001

The Battle of the Huertgen Forest

By Charles Whiting
Combined Publishing
Conshohocken, PA 2000

Bloody Aachen

By Charles Whiting
Combined Publishing
Conshohocken, PA 2000

Follow Me And Die

By Cecil B. Currey
Stein and Day
New York, New York 1984

Civil War History Roundtables:
St. Croix Valley Civil War Roundtable
October 23 - "Company Aitch"
Ray J's Restaurant in Woodbury
Dinner 5:30 and Program at 7:00

Twin Cities Civil War Roundtable
October 17 - Confederate Flag
Officer's Club Fort Snelling
6:00 PM

Next month there will be a book sale for the Roundtable. Here's your chance to get the books you might have missed at one of the programs at a discount. Do some pre-Christmas shopping. There will also be a special raffle of two of the books written by Dr. Deutsch. Help support the Roundtable.

