The Round Tablette

Founding Editor: James W. Gerber, MD (1951–2009)

Welcome to the December meeting of the Harold C. Deutsch World War II History Round Table. Tonight’s speakers are Leo Barron and Don Cygan, authors of No Silent Night: The Christmas Battle for Bastogne. Combat veterans from Bastogne will join them to explore the turning point in the Battle of the Bulge.

This year marks the 70th anniversary of the Battle of the Bulge, and although there have been many historical monographs have been written about it, a number of controversies still exist. Many question Hitler’s real intentions; did he really believe that if he could reach Antwerp and split the British and Americans to broker a separate peace? Or was he being a modern Samson, who – realizing his defeat – decided to destroy the German nation by allowing the Russians to wreak havoc?

Whatever the motivations the idea of an offensive in the West came to Hitler in September of 1944. Hitler’s chosen target was Antwerp; the destruction of a vital logistical link for the Allies. He gave his Generals the task of putting it together, and shifting troops from the Eastern Front to the Western Front. The Germans realized that four things were imperative for a successful attack: surprise; poor weather to effectively negate Allied air superiority; rapid progress; and, the capture of Allied fuel stocks to refuel the Wehrmacht on the march.

The Allied high command optimistically believed the Germans did not have enough remaining capability to launch a major offensive. Eisenhower met with Bradley and Montgomery in early December 1944 to outline plans for a January 1945 offensive. While maintaining the broad-front strategy, that is pushing the Germans back all along the front, Ike wanted a strong strike in the north.

Following the Normandy landings and breakthrough in the summer and fall of 1944, the Allies had pushed the Wehrmacht out of France and into Belgium. Allied bombers did a fine job destroying rail links and roads that the Germans were trying to use in retreat; those successes seriously impeded the Allied pursuit of the Germans. Logistical links were stretched thin; most supplies had to be carried overland on the Red Ball Express, a trucking system that brought supplies to the line, but also ate up much needed fuel supplies. The Allied advances slowed in October 1944 to allow for re-supply - especially of gas and ammunition - and rest. The densely forested Ardennes area, between Wallonia in Belgium, Luxembourg, and France, appeared to be a quiet sector perfect for the aclimatization of inexperienced divisions, such as the US 99th and 106th Infantry Divisions, and a rest area for battle weary troops like the 28th Infantry and the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions.

There were indications that the Germans were up to something. Ultra intercepts indicated that they were building up ammunition and fuel dumps in the Ardennes. With the advantage of short, interior lines, and the use of telephone and telegraph lines instead of radio, the Germans reduced their problems of supply and the effectiveness of Ultra.

The Wehrmacht struck on 16 December along a fifty mile front in the Ardennes between Monschau and Echternach. The weather cooperated with thick cloud cover and snow which obscured the area and negated the Allied air superiority; the Germans took the First US Army by surprise. They launched a three-pronged offensive. In the north Sepp Dietrich’s Sixth SS Panzer Army attacked against stiff resistance from the 99th and 2nd Divisions, holding the critical Monschau and Eisenborn Ridge, which denied the Germans critical roads. In the south, Brandenberger’s Seventh Army pushed toward Luxembourg to secure the left flank from Allied armies. In the center, von Manteuffel’s Fifth Panzer Army attacked toward Bastogne and St. Vith, each having critical road junctions.

While St. Vith held out for six days before British Field Marshall Bernard Montgomery ordered a withdrawal to more defensive positions, Bastogne was different. A critical juncture in the Germans drive toward Antwerp,
eleven hard-top roads converged at Bastogne. It was imperative for the advance that it be taken. The Allies had other things in mind. Defended by the elements of the 10th Armored Division, reinforced by the 101st Airborne, the forces in Bastogne refused to surrender. The Germans flanked the town to the north and south, causing considerable delays to their offensive schedule. By 21 December the Germans had Bastogne surrounded, and they asked the acting commander of the 101st Airborne, Brigadier General Anthony McAuliffe to surrender. His immortal reply: “NUTS”. The “Battered Bastards of Bastogne” refused to be overrun and were finally relieved by Patton’s 4th Armored Division on 26 December.

(Forwarned by Col. Oscar Koch, his G-2 (Intelligence), Patton had anticipated the need to shift his axis of advance 90° and move almost the entire Third US Army northward - all moving under Verbal Orders that provided routes, movement times, and so on. Trusting XIX Tactical Air Command and Magic, Patton used the 1303rd Engineer General Service Regiment, a combat engineer unit, as his right flank guard. Patton’s lead element, the 4th AD, first entered the fray near Bastogne on 22 December.)

By mid-January 1945, the Germans were pushed back to their Main Line of Departure. They lost 100,000 men and severely crippled their remaining military capabilities. As for the Americans, the Battle of the Bulge was the bloodiest battle of World War II, with over 100,000 casualties.

Further Readings:

Anouncements:
Twin Cities Civil War Round Table - Dec. 16, 2014 – 1st Minn at Gettysburg.
St Croix Valley Civil War Round Table - Jan. 26, 2015 – Caribines, Cavalry & Re-enacting - 715-386-1268 - rossandhaines@comcast.net
Rochester WWII History Round Table - 507-280-9970; wwwww2roundtable-rochester.org
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Friends of Ft. Snelling, www.fortsnelling.org


We need volunteers to drive our veterans to and from meetings. Please contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or coldpatton@yahoo.com

Round Table Schedule 2014 - 2015
8 Jan. Myth of the German Offensive
12 Feb. Italian Struggle
12 Mar. Logistics of War
26 Mar. Return to the Philippines
9 Apr. Air War in the Mediterranean
14 May Retrospective: Goals of WW2 Leaders


See our programs on YouTube at http://youtube.com/ww2hrt