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# The Round Tablette

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Written by Dr. Connie Harris

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**Welcome to the December session of the Dr. Harold C. Deutsch World War II History Round Table.** Tonight's speaker is Greg Fontenot author of *Loss and Redemption at St. Vith: The 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division in the Battle of the Bulge*. Veterans of the battle will join him to discuss the defense, including disputed aspects of intelligence.

The Battle of the Bulge has continued to fascinate historians and the general public more than seventy years after the fact. Although there have been many historical monographs written about the German Ardennes offensive, 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; 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 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. Gen. Dwight Eisenhower met with Gen. Omar Bradley and Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery in early December 1944 to outline plans for a January 1945 offensive. While maintaining the broad-front strategy, to push the Germans back along the entire front, Ike wanted a strong strike in the north.

Following the Normandy landings and breakout 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. Allied logistical links were stretched thin and most supplies had to be carried overland on the *Red Ball Express*, a trucking system that brought supplies to the line, but also consumed much needed fuel supplies. The Allied advances slowed in October 1944, primarily to allow for re-supply of gas and ammunition. The densely forested Ardennes area, between Wallonia in Belgium, Luxembourg, and France, appeared to be a quiet sector perfect for the acclimatization of inexperienced divisions, such as the US 99<sup>th</sup> and 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Divisions, and a rest area for battle weary troops like the 2nd and 28<sup>th</sup> Infantry 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*. Deception activities were successful in portraying this buildup as understrength and *defensive* in nature.

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 as they launched a three-pronged offensive. In the north SS Oberstgruppenführer Sepp Dietrich's Sixth SS Panzer Army attacked against stiff resistance from the 99<sup>th</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Divisions, holding the critical Monschau and Eisenborn Ridge, which denied the Germans critical roads. In the south, Gen. Erich Brandenberger's Seventh Army pushed toward Luxembourg to secure the left flank from Allied armies. In the center, Gen. Hasso von Manteuffel's Fifth Panzer Army attacked toward Bastogne and St. Vith, each having critical road junctions.

Atrocious December weather precluded off-road vehicle movement, confining the armies to the paved road network, and denied the Allies their accustomed close air support or aerial resupply. American units were substantially more vulnerable to German attack. The three roads passing through St. Vith and the

**If you are a veteran, or know a veteran, of one of these campaigns** – contact Don Patton at cell 612-867-5144 or [coldpatton@yahoo.com](mailto:coldpatton@yahoo.com)

railroad line were essential to Manteuffel's timely westward movement. Small units in defensive positions that controlled a road junction thus were able to contain much larger forces.

American forces in the St. Vith junction at the beginning of the German offensive came under effective command of Brig. Gen. Robert Hasbrouck (7th Armored Division) who constructed a highly effective defense that denied Manteuffel the quick victory he needed. Enveloping St. Vith to the north and south (double envelopment) and nearly cutting them off took the Germans precious days, as at Bastogne. Once Maj. Gen. Matthew Ridgeway (XVIII Corps) was given overall command, he ordered St. Vith abandoned, and Hasbrouck's plans for that process were largely effective in saving most of the forces involved. Unfortunately, local civilians who had not left during the German retreat in the fall now found themselves again under German control, interrogation, and execution. Delayed at St. Vith and at Bastogne (and other small choke points), the German offensive ground to a halt. As the Allies redeployed and reinforced their divisions, the Germans began a retrograde movement, and by mid-January 1945, they 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:**

- Gregory Fontenot, *Loss and Redemption at St. Vith: The 7th Armored Division in the Battle of the Bulge* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2019) .
- Ernest R. Dupuy, *St. Vith: Lion in the Way*, (Washington DC: Infantry Journal Press, 1949).
- Michael Collins, Ken Johnson and Martin King, *Warriors of the 106th: The Last Infantry Division of World War II*, Havertown PAL Casemate. (2017).
- Jerry D. Morelock, *Generals of the Bulge: Leadership in the U.S. Army's Greatest Battle*, (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole, 2015).
- Frank James Price, *Troy H. Middleton: A Biography*, (Baton Rouge, LA Louisiana State University Press, 1974).

**Announcements:**

- Vietnam War Roundtable - 16 Dec. 2019, *Wounded in Action* - [rldietrich@mnmilitarymuseum.org](mailto:rldietrich@mnmilitarymuseum.org)
- Twin Cities Civil War Round Table - 17 Dec. 2019 - *Fredricksburg* - [www.tccwrt.com](http://www.tccwrt.com) - [info@tccwrt.com](mailto:info@tccwrt.com)
- St. Croix Valley Civil War Round Table - 27 Jan. 2020 - *Civil War Medicine* - 715-386-1268 - [rossandhaines@comcast.net](mailto:rossandhaines@comcast.net)
- Military History Book Club, Har Mar Barnes & Noble -29 Jan. 2020 - Nolan, *Allure of Battle: A History of ... Wars... Won and Lost* - [sdaubenspeck52@gmail.com](mailto:sdaubenspeck52@gmail.com)

- Civil War Symposium - 4 Apr. 2020 - [info@tccwrt.com](mailto:info@tccwrt.com)
- Minnesota Military Museum, Camp Ripley, 15000 Hwy 115, Little Falls, MN 56345 - 320-616-6050 - <http://www.mnmilitarymuseum.org/>
- Minnesota Air Guard Museum - 612-713-2523 - [www.mnangmuseum.org](http://www.mnangmuseum.org)
- 8th AF Historical Society of MN, KC Hall Bloomington, Wednesdays at 1130 - <https://www.8thmn.org>.
- Friends of Ft. Snelling - [www.fortsnelling.org](http://www.fortsnelling.org)
- World Without Genocide - 651-695-7621 - <http://www.worldwithoutgenocide.org/>
- Fagen Fighters WWII Museum, Granite Falls, MN - Air show - 20 June 2020 - 320-564-6644 - <http://www.fagenfighterswwiimuseum.org>.
- Wings of the North Airshow - Eden Prairie - 18-19 July 2020 - 952-746-6100 - [www.wotn.org](http://www.wotn.org)
- Winston Churchill Book Club - [lin.hopkins@hotmail.com](mailto:lin.hopkins@hotmail.com)
- Alliance Francaise 612-332-0436 - [www.afmsp.org](http://www.afmsp.org) - Honor Flight - Jerry Kyser - 651-338-2717 - [crazyjer-ry45@hotmail.com](mailto:crazyjer-ry45@hotmail.com)
- CAF - Commemorative Air Force - 651-455-6942 - [www.cafmn.org](http://www.cafmn.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](mailto:coldpatton@yahoo.com)**

**Round Table Schedule 2020**

- 14 Jan. Evolution of Russian Military
- 11 Feb. Battle of Manila
- 10 Mar. OPERATION VARSITY
- 24 Mar. Bedel Smith
- 9 Apr. Tanks at Bataan
- 12 May Last Battle

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R. W. Hasbrouck



H. von Manteuffel

