

The 101st Airborne Division's Defense of Bastogne

by Colonel Ralph M. Mitchell

CONCLUSIONS

Assessing their actions at Bastogne, German generals concluded that they had failed for a number of reasons. Poor terrain and a restrictive road net had caused them to have disastrous traffic jams that disrupted their timetable from the start. Moreover, they had no forces available for traffic regulation. Poor weather favored a German advance until 23 December but created a thaw which kept German tanks bound to the roads. After 23 December, Allied air superiority made any German advance difficult and interdicted lines of communication, causing all logistical activities to be slow and cumbersome. Supply depots could not be moved forward with the advance, nor could fuel depots remain operational for long.⁴⁶ Fighting under such circumstances was an army whose leaders and soldiers were weary from six years of war. Commanders doubted the feasibility of their mission, and after a small surge of morale as the offensive kicked off, the already tired soldiers soon lost the will to fight. Units were understrength in personnel and equipment, and there were significant shortages in the officer and NCO ranks. Replacements for the ground forces were not well trained, many having come from the naval and air forces. Combined arms tactics were either nonexistent or uncoordinated.

The piecemeal German attacks at Bastogne illustrated the deficiencies. American forces were allowed time to react at each decisive sector where the Germans attacked, thus preventing any serious breakthroughs. Continued refusal by *Heeresgruppe* and Fifth Panzer Army Headquarters to permit XLVII Panzer Corps to concentrate all of its forces against Bastogne (obviously influenced by Hitler's insistence that the offensive continue) clearly saved its gallant defenders from a horrible defeat. Sheer weight of forces would have given the Germans control of Bastogne, if they were willing to pay the price in casualties. But the German's overall timetable was considered more important. German generals also expressed grudging admiration for the Americans who rapidly met the German offensive with strategic forces. The American tactic of delaying through the use of successive positions was highlighted as was the continuous artillery support made available to the infantry. The continuing ability of American artillery units to fight was also cited. Proper credit was given American leadership, which "played a very essential role by making the proper tactical resolution with great flexibility and with equal rapidity adopting all countermeasures and performing them with great energy and skill." Repeatedly cited was the brave determination of the men of the 101st Airborne Division.⁴⁸

An in-depth analysis of the Battle of Bastogne, focusing on the ability of a light division to defeat heavier ones, leads to predictable conclusions. At Bastogne, well-coordinated combined arms teams defeated uncoordinated armored and infantry forces committed to an unrealistic plan. Results of isolated cases in which American infantry fought German armored forces point out how important the attached package of tanks and tank destroyers was to the 101st. Without them, even the bravest of infantry actions would have been no match for the tanks. The infantry, fighting alone, would have lost Bastogne early in the battle. Coordinated German attacks in mass, rather than the small-unit attacks they employed, might also have resulted in a decisive German victory over the 101st and its attachments.

In the final equation, moral strength, luck, and the "fog of war" must also be considered. The Americans had advantages in all three of these categories. The right combination of events and situations—conditions unfavorable to the Germans and favorable to the Americans—produced the American victory at Bastogne. At Bastogne, a light infantry division, properly augmented by good artillery and armor support, was able to defeat a numerically superior and heavier opponent. But the conditions of that victory were particular, not universal in application.

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