

THE COMMONWEAL

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Dark December. Robert Merriam. Davis. \$3.00.

THE BATTLE of the Bulge has already received an enormous amount of attention, both from professional military men and from that authoritative and articulate group of critics, the American public. Of all the stories of great battles to come out of the war, the report of this battle is perhaps the most fascinating. It was the greatest defeat inflicted upon American arms during the war, preceded by titanic victories and followed by further astounding triumphs. But most important, the story is full of the fascination which is most intense—that of morbidity, of disaster, of indescribable confusion and outrageous error, of calamity and failure at the very moment of dizzy success.

There was an appalling optimism among the American forces (at least on all high headquarters levels) just before the Germans struck. Intelligence officers vied with one another in their estimates of the catastrophe facing the Germans and in their jubilant prose summaries of the hopelessness of the German situation. No one was more optimistic than 12th Army Group Headquarters itself, which, through its G-2, estimated simply that the Germans had a thinner and more brittle defensive front than even our own front line troops realized. Merriam takes intelligence staff operations for a ride, and well he might. One or two men, notably the First Army G-2, Colonel "Monk" Dickson, had previously indicated a concentration for a possible counterattack, but such prognostication was made only once, and never given the emphasis it apparently deserved. (Merriam adds further that the divining power of Colonel Dickson was oftentimes demonstrated to be something less than effective.) For, strangely enough, this very counterattack, far from being a desperate German lunge built up in record time, was planned months in advance by a cagey and frantic Fuehrer, who started thinking about it in the hospital after the bomb attempt on his life; who drained his other fronts and supplies, who committed his reserves, who demanded and got the impossible from his armies—all the while we were still driving furiously toward the German frontier and the consolidation of a continent-long front. It was to be *the* gigantic German effort in the West, and was to split the Allied armies, and plunge to the north, seizing supplies, encircling whole corps and armies, and capturing the crucial cities of Brussels and Antwerp. The minimum gains were to be dislocation, demoralization, and even temporary disintegration of our forces. The attack finally achieved all these in varying degree.

Merriam is at his best analyzing the actual confusion that was rampant from the very beginning of the German drive on December 16th. I know his handling is expert here, for I was in the midst of the chaos, and can vividly recall, for example, the blank stares I met at various headquarters when I would ask what road net was clear, and to what point. It was really no one's fault, after the first day or two. *People simply did not know what was happening.* And it was days and days before there was any concerted agreement among the different levels as to just what was going on. I was dispatched once on a security mission to Marche, and was assured that the whole area was clear well toward the east. I discovered, as I roared into the town in the evening, that it was under

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heavy shelling from the approaching Germans. After a nightmare blackout trip through suspicious guards, who held us at Tommygun point time after time until I had produced countless passwords and local Americana, I was stopped from completing a second mission by a road block which told me that there was no use going through another few kilometers to Beauraing—it was occupied. I saw repeated evidence of the confusion that Merriam describes so well, and sometimes one could sense the beginnings of a panic which fattened on the thousands of rumors of actual or mythical German achievements and plans.

But our forces achieved the miracle. The attack was stopped, and resolved, and the Eisenhower decisions during this phase of the war in Europe rank in importance and genius with the great military decisions of history. (In an interesting note, by the way, Merriam tells of a letter that Ike wrote, months before the attack, pointing out to Monty that such a German operation was possible —“we might get a nasty little Kasserine. . . .” Ike himself, later, did not recall his accurate crystal-gazing.) The effort failed because of stunning courage, e.g. St. Vith (most important) and Bastogne; bitter heroism, superior generalship, overwhelming logistical achievement, and German exhaustion.

Merriam writes a very factual narrative, complete, heavily detailed, and amply validated. He was an officer of the historical section of the Army, and later compiled for the War Department the detailed history of the Ardennes counterattack. “Dark December” is excellent reading for military men, or for those who are ex-military, and compelling reading for those of the European fraternity, who were fighting and milling around in the Bulge during all these events. It will prove absorbing, at least in sections, to the general reading public. It is not only a complete operation report on the Bulge, but also a substantial record of the entire European campaign, from pre-invasion days. And Merriam analyzes a good deal of the strategy, without ever setting himself up as a Field Marshal Ingersoll. I like especially his restraint in judging the turn of events, and the way he simplifies so many confused things: the criticism of the split in command between Montgomery and Bradley; the spread of confusion by the wildfire myths and rumors, which actually made the German infiltration-spy-paratroop-sabotage plan successful beyond their highest hope; the reasons for the swift collapse of the American front; and a multitude of other cloudy issues. He has augmented and substantiated much of his evaluation by personal talks with both Allied and German commanders in this wild fight. The total effect is one of clarity, honesty, and justice in telling the story of the Ardennes.

Even those who will feel that they are being roasted will admit that this record is one of complete objectivity. There is none of the irate and bitter hostility which characterized “Top Secret.” There is really a far better understanding of the myriad details and problems that marked this weird interlude. And incidentally, I know the Ardennes campaign, through experience and study. I know intelligence operations. I also know intelligence officers. I was one of them.

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