

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 461

“Wacht am Rhein”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

All Hitler wants me to do is to cross a river, capture Brussels, then go on to take Antwerp. And all this at the worst time of the year through the Ardennes when the snow is waist deep and there isn't room to deploy four tanks abreast, let alone armored divisions. When it doesn't get light until eight and it's dark again at four and with re-formed divisions made up chiefly of kids and sick old men—and at Christmas.

Sixth SS Panzer Army commander Sepp Dietrich.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 461. Wacht am Rhein.

Let's face it. Germany's military position was very bad by the autumn of 1944. One sign of this came on October 16, when Heinrich Himmler announced the creation of the Volkssturm, literally the “People's Storm.”

It was conceived as a sort of national militia that would assist the regular German Army in defending the German homeland. You can think of it as the ultimate expression of Joseph Goebbels's call for “Total War,” back in early 1943. You can also think of it as an act of desperation by a government that was running out of soldiers but refused to brook any talk of suing for peace.

The Volkssturm was to be organized by the Nazi Party. All German men 16-60 years old who were not already in the military had to register. Training and equipment was minimal. Most Volkssturm members got only an armband for a uniform, although the German government did seek and secure assurances from the Western Allies that captured members of the Volkssturm would be treated as prisoners of war, despite not having a full uniform. There was no expectation of such treatment from the Soviet Union, not after the German military's treatment of Soviet prisoners.

The German public and regular military found it hard to take the Volkssturm seriously. It consisted mostly of old men and teenage boys carting around Panzerfausts, the portable anti-tank rocket that was the German answer to the American bazooka. Some Germans dubbed the Volkssturm the *Eintopf*, the German word for stew, because it was made from old meat and fresh greens.

Speaking of fresh greens, US Army units in Europe had experienced heavy casualties from D-Day up through Hürtgen Forest. Killed and wounded soldiers were replaced by fresh-faced teenagers shipped in from America just out of basic training, who received quick lessons in combat technique from their comrades when they arrived. One story tells of a new private arriving in France; three weeks later, he was a sergeant leading his own platoon.

One of the many frustrations faced by American commanders in Europe in the fall of 1944 came when the top brass announced a 15% reduction in the number of reinforcements to be sent to Europe because MacArthur needed them for the fight to retake the Philippines. Whatever happened to “Germany first?”

The US First Army, commanded by General Courtney Hodges, held the portion of the Western Front that ran roughly along the German borders with Belgium and Luxembourg. Within First Army, the US VIII Corps was stationed in the Ardennes. This corps consisted of four divisions, including two veteran divisions that had suffered casualties and were resting and reinforcing; these were the 4th and the 28th Infantry Divisions. The other two were the newly arrived 99th and 106th Infantry Divisions, which had not yet seen combat.

The Americans were using this part of the line as a rest area, because intelligence reports indicated the Germans were also sending units to the Ardennes portion of the line to rest and recover. The Ardennes was regarded as an unlikely place for an enemy attack, as it was thickly forested apart from a few narrow roads, which made it unsuitable for rapid movement or maneuver. Of course, the French had thought the very same thing in 1940, and that time the misjudgment had cost them their country.

In November and early December, the biggest problem the units of VIII Corps struggled with was boredom. American GIs had taken to throwing hand grenades into the rivers and then collecting the dead trout that floated to the surface following the explosion or hunting wild boar from Piper Cub reconnaissance planes. Some fresh fish and barbecued pork made an appealing change from the famously unappetizing and monotonous rations the Army offered them.

On November 28, a cold sleet fell over Belgium as Dwight Eisenhower visited the headquarters of Bernard Montgomery. Montgomery again complained about the lack of progress on the Western Front and once again proposed that American forces north of the Ardennes be attached to his British army group, which would then begin an offensive into Germany. Eisenhower reluctantly agreed, until he met with Omar Bradley, who vehemently opposed loaning a chunk of

his army group to the British. On December 7, Eisenhower, Montgomery, and Bradley all met to thrash out this disagreement. Bradley got his way.

Meanwhile, Allied intelligence had lost track of the German Sixth SS Panzer Army. It and the Fifth Panzer Army had been lurking behind the Rur River, near Cologne. Bear in mind that the US First Army was still on the offensive in the nearby Hürtgen Forest. Allied intelligence assumed the two panzer armies were poised to guard the river and counterattack against any American attempt to cross it.

At that same meeting on December 7, Eisenhower queried Bradley about the relatively thin defensive line in the Ardennes. Bradley explained that the line was thin here so that more units would be available for future offensives north and south of the forest.

Alas, they had no idea that those two German panzer armies had been redeployed to the Ardennes sector of the front. They were to be the two spearheads of the coming German offensive. The Fifth Panzer Army was to advance to Brussels; the Sixth SS to Antwerp. Neighboring German armies would guard their flanks.

Adolf Hitler had a superstitious tendency to rely on historical precedents to guide his decisions. The 1940 Ardennes offensive had been key to the fall of France. Now, in 1944, he intended to repeat his triumph. And there was some truth to the parallel, in that the Allies both in 1940 and again in December 1944 had disregarded the possibility of a German offensive in the Ardennes.

It's been a while since 1940, so let me remind you that the Ardennes is rugged terrain filled with hills and ridges, crossed by steep river valleys, and carpeted with dense forest. It is next to impossible for vehicles to traverse the forest except along its roads. An important difference between 1944 and 1940 is that back in 1940, the Ardennes was empty. German armored units took three days to pass through the forest, but they passed unobserved because the Luftwaffe controlled the sky. Their emergence from the west side of the forest caught the French Army by surprise, with devastating consequences.

This time, however, there would be American infantry in the forest. They were not the US Army's strongest units and they would indeed be caught by surprise, but there they were, in superb defensive terrain, and the Germans would have to push them aside in order to advance. Let's see what happens.

The German offensive was delayed for two weeks because of difficulties in assembling the necessary forces. Hitler's plan originally called for 45 divisions, including reserves. In the end, the German Army was barely able to muster 30 divisions. Because of heavy losses on the Eastern Front, the German Army was short on infantry and the Wacht am Rhein offensive would be conducted mostly by armored units. Hitler felt pressed for time because German military intelligence predicted yet another Soviet offensive, which they judged likely to begin on December 20. Hitler wanted his western offensive to begin before then, because he anticipated

that once it did begin, Stalin would postpone his own offensive and wait to see what happened in the West before deciding what to do next.

On December 15, the day before the operation was to begin, Rundstedt's order of the day to the soldiers involved called on them to "give their all and make superhuman sacrifices for our Fatherland and our *Führer*."

On that same day, President Roosevelt nominated generals George Marshall, Douglas MacArthur, Hap Arnold, and Dwight Eisenhower to the newly created rank of General of the Army. He also nominated US Navy admirals William Leahy, Ernest King, and Chester Nimitz to the comparable naval rank of Fleet Admiral. These ranks entitled them to wear five stars and were equivalent to the British ranks of field marshal, air chief marshal, or fleet admiral.

Before dawn on the morning of the 16th, nearly 2,000 German artillery pieces opened fire on the American line. Half-asleep US soldiers grabbed their rifles and sought cover from the bombardment. When it ended, the Americans saw a strange glow in the eastern sky. It was not dawn. It was what the Germans called "artificial moonlight." German searchlights shone their beams on the low cloud cover overhead; the scattered light reflecting off the clouds illuminated the battlefield in a pale gray glow, as German soldiers dressed in white winter camouflage advanced through the mist and across the snow-covered ground into the forest.

American communications soon broke down. Half of the untried US 106th Infantry Division was surrounded and captured. But to their north, the equally green 99th Infantry fell back slowly, assuming defensive positions along a ridge line and giving the German *Hitler Jugend* Division a tough fight.

Along with the attack, the Germans fired a salvo of V-2s at Antwerp, hoping to damage the port. The rockets failed to reach their target, but that afternoon one of them landed on a movie theatre in the city while it was showing *The Plainsman*, a 1936 American Western starring Gary Cooper and Jean Arthur. There were about 1,100 people in the theater at the time. The explosion killed 567 of them, among them 296 Allied military personnel and 74 Belgian children. Hundreds more were injured. It was the deadliest single V-2 rocket attack of the war.

The initial German artillery bombardment had cut the field telephone lines, so Courtney Hodges and the First Army headquarters at the Belgian town of Spa, so famous for its mineral baths and resorts that its name became synonymous with such places, received only a few isolated reports and believed they were looking at a local diversionary attack. Hodges issued orders for the US 2nd Infantry Division to advance toward the River Rur, unaware that the unit was at that moment fighting a desperate holding action against German panzers.

In order to have any hope of success, this German offensive needed first, to achieve surprise. Okay, they got that one. Second, they needed the weather to be bad enough to keep Allied warplanes on the ground. Check. Third, they had to move rapidly, and through the unforgiving

terrain of the Ardennes. We'll see. Fourth, they had to capture fuel from supply dumps in the American rear, since these mechanized units began the offensive with less than half the fuel they would need to reach their assigned destinations. We'll see!

At Versailles, Dwight Eisenhower was equally unaware of the offensive. That day, he attended the wedding of his orderly, who was marrying a Women's Army Corps jeep driver. Eisenhower had dinner with Omar Bradley that evening, when their meal was interrupted by the news of a German breakthrough in the Ardennes. Bradley was unconcerned. South of the Ardennes, George Patton had just finished a six-week battle to capture the fortified city of Metz in Lorraine, and was preparing to advance toward the Saar, and Bradley concluded this was a diversionary attack meant to distract Patton from his objective.

Eisenhower, on the other hand, felt uneasy. He told Bradley to order the US 7th Armored Division, which was being held in reserve farther north, to move south toward the Ardennes to assist the units there, and to send the US 10th Armored Division in the south, part of Patton's Third Army, north toward the Ardennes. They agreed that George Patton would not be pleased at having one of his armored divisions reassigned just as he was at last prepared to move into Germany.

Bradley stayed overnight at Versailles, but he must have had one of those moments when he woke up in the middle of the night and couldn't get back to sleep because as he lay there in the dark, he couldn't shake the sudden feeling that the situation at the Ardennes might be far more serious than he had believed, and if so, the consequences could be catastrophic. Does that sort of thing ever happen to you? It sure happens to me.

Anyway, the following morning, December 17, Bradley had his driver take him back to his headquarters as fast as possible. He hurried into the room where they kept the big map on the wall. It was now showing ominous red arrows pointing west. Bradley blurted out, "Where in the hell has this son-of-a-bitch gotten all his strength?"

The German offensive looked formidable to the Americans, but across the line, German soldiers experienced much frustration. The combination of rugged terrain, narrow roads, and bad weather made progress slow and created traffic jams. Vehicles spent hours burning precious fuel, waiting for the vehicles in front of them to get moving, already. That morning, the 1st SS Panzer Division, which had been stuck for most of a day, overran an American supply depot and captured 50,000 gallons of badly-needed fuel. Soon afterward, they came across an artillery battalion attached to the US 7th Armored Division. The lightly-armed artillery observers were no match for panzers and were easily taken prisoner.

They and other Americans taken prisoner were disarmed and held under guard in a roadside field, about 150 in all. Just minutes later, more SS soldiers arrived and began firing at the prisoners, who fled in panic. Most of them were killed, though about forty made it to the US-controlled Belgian city of Malmedy. In the days to come, Waffen-SS soldiers would murder

hundreds more American POWs, including one instance of eleven Black American POWs who were tortured before being killed. These incidents collectively are known to history as the Malmedy Massacre.

Those who escaped brought news of the killings, which spread quickly through American lines. US soldiers adopted an unofficial policy of executing all captured SS soldiers. And some of them weren't very picky about the distinction between soldiers of the Waffen-SS and the regular German Army.

Apart from the conventional armored assault that made up most of the German offensive, the battle plan also included a paratrooper drop behind American lines and some unconventional deception tactics.

The parachute drop was made by a specially assembled paratrooper unit of around 1,300 in the early morning of December 17. The force was assembled and sent into action hastily to avoid alerting Allied intelligence and the drop took place at night to avoid detection. The Germans did not do any aerial reconnaissance of the drop zone, also to avoid alerting Allied intelligence that something was up. The main objective of the assault was a crossroads. The paratroops were to seize this crossroad and hold it until the panzers arrived.

That Hitler would risk using paratroopers for the first time since the costly assault on Crete demonstrates the degree to which this offensive was a last-ditch gamble. Unfortunately for the paratroopers, their odds were never good. Their transports were flown by inexperienced pilots and the drop was executed at night in the middle of a raging snowstorm with high winds. Many of the paratroopers themselves lacked experience.

As a result, the drop was disorganized and the paratroopers scattered over a wide area. Some were killed or injured by the drop. Many landed behind German lines, or so close to the advancing panzers that German ground troops caught up to them before they could do much. Only a small number actually reached the crossroad they were to seize; too few to defeat the Americans holding the position. They could only hide in the woods, harass the Americans when possible, and wait for the panzers to reach their location. Then, perhaps, the paratroopers could surprise the Americans and help the panzers capture the crossroads. In fact, the panzers never got there.

This airborne operation failed, though it did benefit the Germans in one way: by sowing confusion. As Allied commanders received reports of German paratroops landing at positions across Belgium, it appeared to them that the German operation was much larger and more threatening than it actually was.

The unconventional operation was under the command of SS commando leader Otto Skorzeny, who had become something of a legend after his daring rescue of Benito Mussolini and his operation to kidnap the son of Hungarian Regent Horthy. Hitler assigned Skorzeny the job of

assembling a panzer brigade of SS soldiers who spoke English. They would wear captured American uniforms and dog tags, carry captured American weapons, and drive captured American jeeps and other vehicles.

Their mission was to infiltrate American lines and work their way into the rear areas. Some were assigned to take control of a bridge over the Meuse. Others were to engage in various acts of sabotage, such as changing road signs, misdirecting traffic, removing warning signs from minefields and then placing the removed minefield warning signs where there was no minefield, cutting telephone lines, destroying supply and fuel dumps, and so on.

Members of Skorzeny's infiltration unit wore German Army uniforms underneath their US Army uniforms, apparently in the belief this would entitle them to POW protection if captured.

As was the case with the paratroop assault, Skorzeny's force achieved little. German Army units involved in the offensive were not advancing as rapidly as had been hoped, and on the second day of the offensive, December 17, Skorzeny proposed that his unit enter combat as a normal panzer unit.

As it happened, Skorzeny was only able to recruit around 150 English speakers, and only a handful of them spoke English well enough to be able to conceal that they were German. And only 44 of Skorzeny's soldiers managed to infiltrate the American lines before Skorzeny called off the operation. As was the case with the paratroopers, the most important contribution Skorzeny's commandos made during the offensive was to create the impression that many more of them had infiltrated American lines and they were a bigger threat than was actually the case.

In particular, three commandos were captured on the 17th after they failed to give the correct password. They were taken prisoner and their German uniforms were discovered. They told their interrogators that their mission was to kill or capture General Eisenhower. The commandos were tried and executed, but because of the misinformation they had given the Americans, Eisenhower was forced to spend Christmas in isolation, surrounded by armed soldiers for his own safety, until he got fed up with it and ordered an end to the heightened security, announcing that he had to get outside and didn't care if anyone intended to kill him.

Similarly, the news that German commandos wearing US Army uniforms had infiltrated American lines created anxiety and confusion everywhere. US soldiers began challenging each other with questions they judged only an American would know the answer to, such as naming state capitals, baseball trivia, and other questions related to popular culture. One popular question was, "Who sleeps with Jiggs?" The correct answer was "Maggie." The question referred to the popular comic strip *Bringing Up Father*, in which the two principal characters were a married couple, Maggie and Jiggs.

Of course, this system wasn't foolproof. One American general was held at gunpoint for a time after he kept insisting that the Chicago Cubs were in the American League. Omar Bradley

himself was delayed when a soldier asked him to name the capital of Illinois. Bradley gave the correct answer, which is Springfield, but the soldier asking the question believed it was Chicago.

George Patton came up with an imaginative solution to the problem. You may recall that I mentioned the 761st Tank Battalion back in episode 452. This was an “experimental” African-American unit known by the nickname “The Black Panthers.” The US Army was segregated and African-American soldiers generally barred from combat, but by this time the Army was putting together these “experimental” units to test the ability of Black soldiers to fight on the front line.

And you should also note that George Patton, like most white Americans of the time, was a stone racist and acknowledged this in his writings, but he was apparently the sort of racist who accepted the supposed overall inferiority of Black people in principle, but was willing to give individual Black people the opportunity to show what they could do, and acknowledged merit when he saw it. When the 761st was sent to the Western Front in October 1944, Patton requested the unit be assigned to his own Third Army. It was made part of the 26th Infantry Division. On their arrival, Patton reviewed the unit and told its soldiers:

I would never have asked for you if you weren't good. I have nothing but the best in my army. I don't care what color you are as long as you go up there and kill those Kraut sons-of-bitches...[Y]our race is looking forward to your success. Don't let them down, and damn you, don't let me down! They say it is patriotic to die for your country. Well, let's see how many patriots we can make out of those German sons-of-bitches.

Patton's solution to the perceived problem of German infiltrators was to assign Black soldiers, including members of the Black Panthers, to guard American checkpoints, and ordered them to shoot any white soldier they regarded as suspicious.

[music: Wilhelm, “Die Wacht am Rhein.”]

Morale sank at the various US Army headquarters as the full scale of the German offensive became clear. Those two armored divisions Eisenhower ordered deployed into the Ardennes from either German flank helped keep the German breakthrough from getting any wider, but the Americans needed to get some reinforcements in front of the German advance. The only reserves Eisenhower had left were America's two airborne divisions, the 82nd and the 101st, which were resting and refitting following Operation Market Garden. The two divisions were sent to important road junctions in the Ardennes that would be critical to the German advance. The 101st was sent to the Belgian town of Bastogne.

On the plus side, stiff American resistance along the enemy flanks was preventing the Germans from widening their salient, but the advance units, especially the Fifth Panzer Army, were still moving westward. For these reasons, the battle maps showed a long, narrow German salient extending west through the American line. Eisenhower ordered a press blackout for the first two days of the offensive, but when the news finally reached American newspapers, they published

the maps and reporters began calling the conflict “The Battle of the Bulge,” which is the name by which the German offensive and the Allied counteroffensive are known, at least in English-speaking countries. In France and Belgium, French speakers call it “The Battle of the Ardennes,” which is a more logical name. German-speakers usually call it *die Ardennenoffensive*, the Ardennes Offensive. In 1944, some Germans called it the Rundstedt Offensive, as Gerd von Rundstedt was commander-in-chief of the Western Front at the time. Reportedly, Rundstedt himself was offended when he heard it called that, since he had opposed the idea and had tried to talk Hitler out of it.

On December 19, Eisenhower met with his top commanders at Verdun to discuss the German offensive. The mood as the meeting opened was somber, except for Eisenhower himself, who told the assembled commanders they should not see the German offensive as a disaster, but rather as an opportunity. George Patton, picking up on Eisenhower’s mood, quipped, “Hell, let’s have the guts to let the sons of bitches go all the way to Paris. Then we’ll really cut ’em up.”

That broke some of the tension. Eisenhower replied that he was not willing to let the German offensive reach quite that far, but ordered the line be drawn at the River Meuse and ordered engineer units to rig the bridges over the Meuse for demolition, if necessary. He also ordered those engineers to be armed; if the Germans did indeed reach the Meuse, they would be expected to help hold the line there. Other rear echelon support units were also ordered to defend the river, along with some British units from XXX Corps.

Eisenhower next turned to Patton and asked him how much time he would need to attack the German flank from the south. Patton calmly told Eisenhower he could begin an attack with three divisions on December 21, which was just two days away. The other commanders in the meeting were stunned. Some thought this was just bluster on Patton’s part, but in fact Patton had come to the meeting with three battle plans in his pocket, plans his staff had already drawn up. He had anticipated Eisenhower’s request.

Eisenhower questioned whether three divisions would be enough. He asked Patton how long it would take to assemble six divisions for the counterattack. Patton objected. He told Eisenhower that, first, it was important to begin the counterattack as soon as possible, and second, that he could beat the Germans with three divisions.

The combination of Eisenhower’s optimism and Patton’s aggressive confidence inspired the rest of the room. Commanders who had entered the meeting glum and uncertain left with a new sense of purpose.

On December 20, Eisenhower detached the US First and Ninth Armies from Omar Bradley’s 12th Army Group and assigned them to Bernard Montgomery’s 21st Army Group. This is what Montgomery had been asking for, and the Americans resisting, for some time now, but at this moment, with the First and Ninth Armies isolated north of the German salient and out of

communication with Bradley, it made sense. Under Montgomery's command, they would attack the Germans from the north while Patton attacked them from the south.

Patton might have been joking about letting the Germans advance to Paris, but there were those in France who took the possibility seriously. Units as far west as Brittany made plans to evacuate to England if necessary. In the capital itself, French collaborators being held in Parisian prisons taunted their guards with the warning that soon their roles would be reversed, after the Germans returned.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd like to thank John for his kind donation, and thank you to Neil for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like John and Neil help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone always, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, you are most welcome; just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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Next week is a bye week for the podcast, but I hope you'll join me in two weeks' time, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, when we'll see how the Ardennes Offensive plays out. Nuts, in two weeks' time, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. I should say a word about the whole five-star general thing. George Washington was the original commander of the United States Army. In his lifetime, he held the rank of lieutenant general, denoted by three stars.

The next US Army officer to hold that rank was Ulysses Grant during the Civil War. After the war, Congress granted him the rank of General of the Army, which at the time meant he was in command of the entire US Army, and this entitled him to wear four stars. After Grant resigned his commission to run for President, the rank was awarded to William T. Sherman and then Philip Sheridan, his successors as Army commander. Following the death of Sheridan, the rank was no longer used.

In 1903, US Navy Admiral George Dewey was promoted to Admiral of the Navy, a five-star rank, for his service in the Spanish-American War. The appointment lasted until his death in 1917.

In 1919, after the end of the First World War, John Pershing was granted the rank of General of the Armies, which had been created to be a higher rank than any previous rank in the US Army.

On December 14, 1944, Congress created the rank of General of the Army and Fleet Admiral, the naval equivalent. The following day, President Roosevelt nominated seven generals and admirals to the new rank, as I told you in today's episode. The Army rank was comparable to field marshal, a rank that has never existed in the US Army, and among other reasons was meant to give Dwight Eisenhower a rank equal to Bernard Montgomery's.

Apparently some thought was given to creating a US rank of field marshal, but the awkwardness of bestowing the rank on George Marshall, thus making him Marshal Marshall, was an argument against it, as well as the fact that in the United States, the rank of marshal has traditionally been associated with civilian law enforcement.

Officers holding one of these five-star ranks wore five stars on their uniforms, the stars arranged in a pentagon with the points touching.

Only one other Army general was ever promoted to five-star rank. That was Omar Bradley, who received the promotion in 1950, when he became Army Chief of Staff. Bradley was granted the rank because another five-star general, Douglas MacArthur, was still on active duty at the time and therefore under Bradley's command. US Navy Admiral William Halsey was promoted to five-star rank in 1945. No general or admiral has been granted five-star rank since.

In 1976, the year of the Bicentennial of the United States, Congress passed a resolution posthumously promoting George Washington to the rank of General of the Armies, elevating him to the same rank as John Pershing, as it was judged inappropriate for any other US Army officer to hold a higher rank than Washington. The same resolution declared that this rank, General of the Armies, should hold precedence over any other rank in the US Army, past or present.

In 2024, Ulysses Grant was also posthumously promoted to the rank of General of the Armies, in observance of the 200th anniversary of his birth.

[music: Closing War Theme]

