



In early December 1944, Allied armies were hunkered down in the Ardennes Forest in eastern France, Luxembourg, and Belgium, near Germany’s Siegfried Line. Unknown to them, Adolf Hitler was organizing a tremendous buildup in the Eifel Mountains opposite the Ardennes Forest, preparing for a shock assault that would, he thought, turn the tide of the war.

Germany had already suffered four million casualties. Its cities and industries were being pulverized from the air, and it was running out of oil and coal. But Hitler was ready to roll the dice in what would be his last great gamble of the war. The plan was for his armies, reinforced by old men and young boys, to break through the rough terrain of the Ardennes, slice through the Allied lines, and swing north to capture the important port of Antwerp, cutting the flow of supplies to the Allies and splitting the British and Canadian armies in the north from the American armies to the south. Hitler hoped the element of surprise and blindingly bad winter weather would be on his side. “Fog, night, and snow,” he predicted, would ground the Allied air forces and give him his victory.

The Germans struck at daybreak on December 16, unleashing a devastating **panzer** assault supported by thunderous artillery and a quarter of a million infantrymen. The American units hit hardest were on rest duty in a so-called safe area, many of them having just fought a prolonged and savage battle in Germany’s Huertgen Forest just to the north. Advanced German units crushed through bewildered American outfits, causing mass panic.

Some men, dumb with fear, threw down their weapons and ran like wild cattle. Nearly 10,000 were captured. “The shelling surprised us,” said Sergeant B.O. Wilkins. “When this continued on and on and on, I thought . . . this isn’t just some spoiling fire. This has to be something bigger.” The Germans were pushing nearly everything they had on the Western Front through the Ardennes. Within a matter of days they created a deep “bulge” in the Allied lines.

Fog and heavy clouds kept Allied aircraft grounded, but American soldiers in small rifle companies, engineering groups, and antitank teams fought in swirling snow and zero-degree temperatures, slowing the German penetration and inflicting tremendous casualties on Hitler Youth, who had no idea how to fight but kept coming on, machinelike boys marching straight into enemy fire.

Finally the Americans blunted the German advance, and it became a battle of attrition, one that an undermanned, fuel-starved German army could not hope to win. Conditions were appalling. Keith Schmedemann, an adjutant

ONLINE RESOURCES

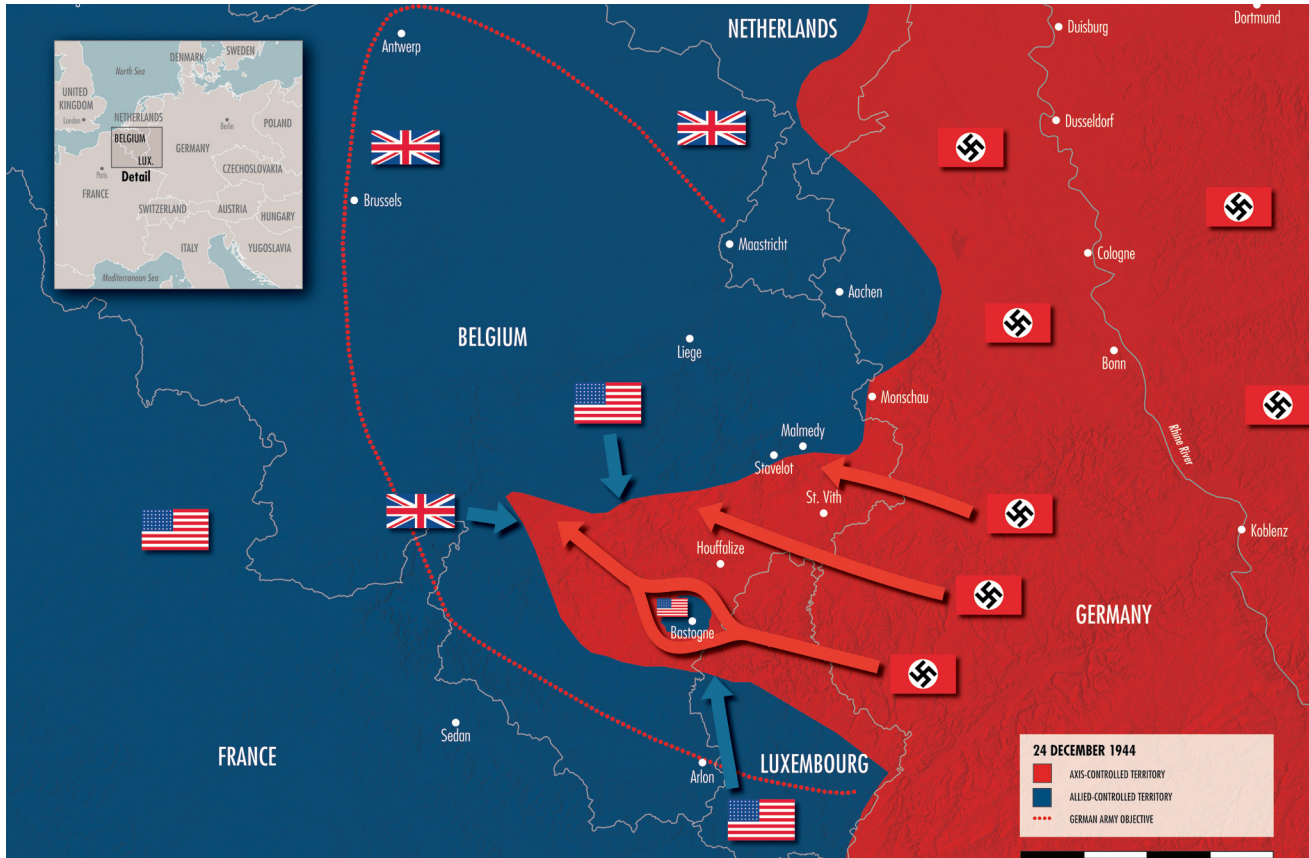
ww2classroom.org



Battle of the Bulge Map



German Resistance Stiffens Map



In the Battle of the Bulge, the Germans hoped to push through a thinly defended part of the Allied lines and recapture Antwerp. Despite achieving initial surprise, the “bulge” they created in the Allied lines was soon reversed. (Image: *The National WWII Museum.*)

for the 38th Infantry Regiment, remembered the fog being so thick the men could barely tell the difference between their comrades and the enemy. “You didn’t know who was in front of you,” he said. “Friend or foe or just what.” German commandos added to the confusion. They had crossed into Allied territory wearing stolen American uniforms and dog tags and speaking unaccented English. They cut telephone lines, gave wrong directions to tank drivers, and switched road signs to slow down the American response.

When the skies finally cleared on December 23, Allied planes—over 10,000 of them—began chewing up the *Wehrmacht*. Running low on fuel and harassed by engineering units with antitank guns, some **panzer** crews abandoned their tanks and started walking back to Germany. By the end of January, the fighting was over and the Americans were back to the positions they held when the German offensive started.

“I had never seen such an armada of airplanes in my life . . . I think you could have gotten up there in the sky and walked from one wing to another and walked all the way to Germany.”

Robert Walter, 99th Infantry Division

The Battle of the Bulge was almost entirely an American battle, the biggest and costliest fought by the US Army. Over one million German and Allied combatants were engaged—600,000 of them Americans and about 50,000 British. Nineteen thousand Americans were killed, 47,000 wounded, and 15,000 captured. The Germans suffered over 100,000 casualties.

It was the last great ground battle on the Western Front, the beginning of the end for the German army.