

BATTLE DIGEST™

Lessons for Today's Leaders

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World War II:

Battle of the Bulge

DATE:

Dec. 16, 1944 – Jan. 28, 1945

LOCATION:

Ardennes Region of France and Belgium

OPPOSING FORCES

Germans: Over 300,000 men and 2,000 tanks of Army Group B, commanded by Field Marshal Walther Model, launched the attack. Model's three armies included SS Gen. Sepp Dietrich's 6th Panzer Army, Gen. Hasso von Manteuffel's 5th Panzer Army, and Gen. Erich Brandenberger's 7th Army. Model reported to Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, commander of OB West. The overall architect of the Ardennes offensive was Adolf Hitler.

Americans and Allies: Initially, 80,000 Americans from four divisions of Maj. Gen. Troy Middleton's VIII Corps defended the Ardennes sector. Middleton was part of Lt. Gen. Courtney Hodges's 1st Army, along with Maj. Gen. Leonard Gerow's V Corps and Maj. Gen. J. Lawton Collins's VII Corps. They, in turn, were part of Gen. Omar Bradley's 12th Army Group, which also included Lt. Gen. William Simpson's 9th Army in the north and Lt. Gen. George Patton's 3rd Army in the south. Bradley reported to the Supreme Allied Commander, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower ("Ike"). Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, commanding the 21st Army Group, also played a role in the battle. Allied forces eventually swelled to 600,000 Americans, backed up by 55,000 British troops.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

After the invasion of Normandy in June of 1944 and the breakout that followed, U.S. and Allied forces pushed Adolf Hitler's armies back toward Germany. By September, after three months of hard fighting, the Germans had their backs against their own borders, defending along the West Wall/Siegfried Line. As the Allies regrouped for another push, Hitler struck in a bold counteroffensive that would become known as the Battle of the Bulge. The surprise attack broke through the thinly held American sector in the Ardennes before driving west. Initially, the surprised American defenders were overwhelmed. Soon, however, adaptive commanders and resolute soldiers stopped the German assault in what would become the largest single land battle in American history. In the end, Hitler's desperate gamble – his last major offensive in the Western Theater – only hastened his defeat.

doggedly to resist Allied advances through France and Belgium. Through difficult fighting and a string of defeats, the Germans were eventually pushed back against their borders. By the end of August,



FM Gerd von Rundstedt



FM Walther Model

Hitler's western armies had been battered, losing 400,000 soldiers (half of whom were prisoners), 1,300 tanks, 1,500 artillery pieces, and 3,500 aircraft since the D-Day landings.¹ By September, they were defending against their West Wall/Siegfried Line, a fortified defensive line built at the beginning of the war on Germany's western border. As his soldiers held off repeated attacks, Hitler decided on a bold counterattack to alter the course of the war. If he could deprive the Allies of the port at Antwerp while driving a wedge between British and American forces, the Allies might sue for a settlement, letting him focus on the Soviets in the east. As he activated new divisions and transferred units west, he conferred with Field Marshals Gerd von Rundstedt and Walther Model, both of whom recommended a less ambitious plan. Hitler, however, was adamant. And soon, Model, commanding Army Group B, issued his warning order to his commanders about an attack they would launch

before Christmas from the forested and hilly Eifel region, where large forces could be concealed from Allied view. (*Map 1*)

The Germans worked meticulously on their deception, implementing some of the best security measures in the history of warfare. Only the highest-level commanders – under strict oaths punishable by death – knew of the plan. Anyone, soldier or civilian, of questionable loyalty was evacuated from the front. Unit headquarters changed their codenames. And all unit movements into assembly areas were made at night, without lights, and with no motorized movement permitted within five kilometers of the Ardennes front. By the end of November, "The whole area between the West Wall and the Rhine and Moselle was jammed with Nazi troops – hiding in the pine forests, keeping off the roads, pinpointing the artillery positions of the Americans in the Ardennes, ready for the battle that was to win the war."² It was no coincidence that the attack would spring from the same area Hitler had used with great success in 1940.

The operation was planned for the end of November but was delayed by the weather. The attack began on December 16, 1944, and lasted for 36 days.

STRATEGY & MANEUVER