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From Bulge to Bump



Field of Infamy: *This column of Nazi prisoners is passing by a field at Five Corners, near Malmédy, Belgium.*

The Battle of the Ardennes was practically over. The salient which once poked 52 miles into Belgium from the German frontier had been ground down to a nub by last week. From all sides the American First and Third Armies, now presumably returned to the command of Lt. Gen. Omar N. Bradley, hammered back at the Nazis. At least fourteen American divisions fought in the rugged, cruel terrain.

The Germans retreated slowly and in good order. In the sleet and fog of the Ardennes they pulled back their armor and other vehicles while their artillery and infantrymen put up stiff rear-guard actions. On the northern flank the Americans closed in on St. Vith, the bloody crossroads town which was the main German escape route. To the south Third Army divisions punched up into the other flank and hastened the German withdrawal over the border into the West Wall.

By contrast, in the foggy Rhine River Valley of Northeastern France the Germans were on the offensive, and the Allied Sixth Army Group was fighting a full-scale battle in defense of Alsace. After more than two weeks of thrust and parry thirteen divisions of Gen. Hermann Balck's First and Nineteenth Armies set out to capture Strasbourg, the city which France and Germany have alternately coveted and taken for centuries.

The recapture of Strasbourg would give Germany a powerful morale boost, and at the same time it might have serious political repercussions in France. So, with tanks and infantry Balck reinforced his bridgehead across the Rhine 11 miles north of the city, then struck up the valley to join his other forces on the American Seventh Army front above Haguenau. This accomplished, he squeezed a pincers on Strasbourg from this area with a northward thrust of his forces in the Colmar pocket about 20 miles to the south. From the Belfort Gap area the French First Army immediately launched an offensive to hit the Colmar pocket from the rear.

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Bulge

Flailing the North: In one area, however, the Allies regained the over-all initiative. Above the American Ninth Army line on the Roer River, the British Second Army went on the attack in a sector which has long been quiet. At 7:30 on the morning of Jan. 16, under cover of a thick fog and an artillery barrage, the Britons jumped off between Sittard and Maeseyck in the "Maastricht appendix" of Holland, about 20 miles northwest of Aachen.

Apparently the offensive took the Germans by surprise. The principal initial defenses were thick minefields. Flail tanks, painted white for camouflage, burst through them. Behind, through the fields and on the ice-glazed roads, came tanks and infantry.

Then the Germans rushed in reinforcements and slowed the British. In this region the West Wall is not so formidable as in other places, and the British, already across the Maas River, need only to force the small Roer River, to reach the industrial area directly across the Rhine from the Ruhr. Farther north, they would have to cross the wide Maas. Last fall the Germans predicted that General of the Army Eisenhower, using Aachen as a holding action, would swing over the Roer in this region and head for Düsseldorf and the Ruhr by way of Mönchengladbach.

The British offensive last week was given additional significance by Prime Minister Churchill's disclosure that only one corps—two or three divisions—had been detached from Field Marshal Sir Bernard L. Montgomery's 21st Army Group for use in the Ardennes. That meant that this British-Canadian force of fifteen to twenty divisions was still largely intact and presumably ready for more action.