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THE ARDENNES
AND THE RHINE

The German army, adept as always at surmounting crisis, lost no time in putting distance between itself and the disaster of Normandy. Hitler had been forced to accept the result of the Falaise battle, yet previously he had refused to allow any construction of defences on the line of the Somme and Marne rivers, tentatively designated by Army Group B as an intermediate position between the Atlantic and West Walls. In consequence, once the *Westheer* crossed the Seine between 19 and 29 August it could and did not pause in its retreat until it reached defensible positions on the great northern European waterways – the Schelde, the Meuse, the tributaries of the Rhine – in the first week of September. The British captured Brussels on 3 September, to ecstatic civic rejoicing, and Antwerp, Europe's largest port, the next day. By 14 September the whole of Belgium and Luxembourg was in Allied hands, together with a fragment of Holland, and on 11 September patrols of the American First Army actually crossed the German border near Aachen. The vanguard of the Franco-American force which had landed in Provence on 15 August linked up with Patton's Third Army near Dijon on 11 September. Thereafter, as the 6th Army Group, it went into the line in Alsace. By the end of the second week in September there was a continuous battlefront in northern Europe running from the banks of the Schelde in Belgium to the headwaters of the Rhine at Basle on the Swiss frontier.

However, Patton and Montgomery, Eisenhower's two most thrusting subordinates, arrived at the approaches of the German frontier both believing that a more clear-cut strategy and a more calculated allocation of supplies would have resulted in the West Wall's being breached. The roots of this dispute, subsequently known as the 'Broad versus Narrow Front Strategy', lay far back in the Overlord campaign, when the air campaign against the French railway system was at its height. The Allied forces had then been so successful in destroying French railway bridges, lines and rolling stock that when the armies at last broke out of the bridgehead in August the means to supply their advance

could be provided only by truck and by road. It was hoped that, as the armies advanced, the truck route would be shortened by the progressive capture of ports along the Channel coast (also desirable because Hitler's flying-bomb launch sites lay in the same area); but Hitler's insistence on Army Group B's leaving garrisons to hold Le Havre, Boulogne, Calais, Dunkirk and the mouth of the Schelde vitiated that hope. Although Le Havre was captured on 12 September, Boulogne on 22 September and Calais on 30 September, Dunkirk held out until the end of the war, while, more critically for the Allies, the defences of the Schelde estuary were still in German hands at the beginning of November.

In retrospect it can be seen that the failure to clear the Schelde estuary, and thus to open the way for the Allies' fleet of cross-Channel supply vessels to deliver directly to Antwerp in the immediate rear of the Canadian First, British Second and American First Armies, was the most calamitous flaw in the post-Normandy campaign. It was, moreover, barely excusable, since Ultra was supplying Montgomery's headquarters from 5 September onwards with intelligence of Hitler's decision (of 3 September) to deny the Allies the use of the Channel ports and waterways; and as early as 12 September Montgomery's own intelligence section at 21st Army Group reported that the Germans intended to 'hold out as long as possible astride the approaches to Antwerp, without which the installations of the port, though little damaged, can be of no service to us.'

Montgomery – despite every warning, and contrary to his own military good sense, which was acute – refused to turn his troops back in their tracks to clear the Schelde estuary. Instead he determined upon using the First Allied Airborne Army (the British 1st and the American 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions) to leap across the Meuse and the lower Rhine, establish a foothold on the North German plain and capture the Ruhr, heartland of Germany's war economy. On 10 September – the day on which formal command of ground forces in north-west Europe passed from himself to Eisenhower, and he became a field marshal in recognition of his achievements – he secured the Supreme Allied Commander's assent to the plan and on 17 September the operation, codenamed Market Garden, began.

Market, the seizure of the bridges at Eindhoven and Nijmegen by the American airborne divisions, proved a brilliant success. Garden, the descent of the British 1st Airborne Division on the more distant Rhine bridges at Arnhem, did not. Because of the experience of the German 7th Parachute Division in Crete, where it had been massacred while dropping directly into its objective, the Allied airborne forces had established the doctrine that airborne descents should be made at a distance from the chosen target, on which the parachutists should concentrate only after having assembled and collected their equipment. The 1st Airborne Division got safely to earth; but when it advanced on the Arnhem bridges it found their vicinity held by the remnants of the 9th and 10th SS Panzer Divisions, which were refitting in the district after their ordeal in Normandy. Between them the two divisions mustered only a company of tanks, some armoured cars and half-tracks; but even the remnants of a Panzer division deployed more firepower than the 1st

Airborne, whose artillery support was provided by 75-mm pack howitzers which one of its own gunner officers described as 'quite unlethal'. The British parachutists, after seeing one of Arnhem's two bridges fall into the Rhine as they approached it, succeeded in seizing and holding the other. They held it steadfastly until 20 September, hourly expecting the arrival of British tanks to their relief, but the Guards Armoured Division which was advancing to join them found itself confined to a single road between inundated fields and could not move forward at its planned speed. German reinforcements had now gathered around the Arnhem perimeter, constricting it ever more closely, and on 24 September the British received orders to withdraw. Some managed to do so by improvised ferry, many swam the Rhine back to the southern bank. Just over 2000 men succeeded in escaping; 1000 were killed in the course of the battle, and 6000 became prisoners. The 1st Airborne Division had effectively ceased to exist.

Arnhem was the German army's first overt success since decamping from Normandy. It had also, however, fought a little-noticed but successful defence of Aachen and was meanwhile busily reinforcing its position along the Schelde estuary apparently unobserved and certainly unhindered by Montgomery's 21st Army Group. During its pell-mell drive to Brussels 21st Army Group had bypassed the unmechanised elements of the German Fifteenth Army left in northern France and along the south Belgian coast. Its new commander, General Gustav von Zangen, took advantage of the distraction of Arnhem to evacuate these remnants, amounting to 65,000 men of nine divisions, across the mouth of the Schelde on to the island of Walcheren and the coastal area of South Beveland, leaving a bridgehead on the south bank at Breskens. The reconstituted Fifteenth Army was left undisturbed by Montgomery until 6 October, when, at last alerted to the precariousness of the liberation armies' logistic position as long as Antwerp remained unusable – with its outlet to the sea in German hands – he set his Canadian troops to capture and clear the Schelde's waterlogged banks in what would become the most difficult and unpleasant operation fought by any of the Allied armies in the winter of 1944. When the battle was concluded on 8 November, two river minefields still had to be cleared and it was not until 29 November, eighty-five days after its capture, that Antwerp was at last open to shipping.

Logistic improvisation, including a high-speed truck route carrying 20,000 tons of supplies daily over the 400 miles separating the Normandy beaches from the zone of operations, was meanwhile permitting the resumption of offensives up and down the front. On the American front, next to Montgomery's, Bradley's 12th Army Group was confronted by the West Wall, which had fallen into disrepair in 1939 but had been hastily rehabilitated. Eisenhower hoped that a concerted drive either side of Aachen would allow a breakthrough to Cologne before the winter brought campaigning to an end. The West Wall, however, proved a still formidable obstacle when the First and Ninth Armies attacked on 16 November, and, although it was penetrated, the terrain beyond, particularly the dense thickets of the Hürtgen forest, defied their efforts to break out. At the southern end of the front, Patton, still annoyed about Eisenhower's refusal to support his 'Narrow

Front' advance from the Seine the previous August, was fighting a more mobile battle in Lorraine against Balck's Army Group G, consisting of the divisions which had escaped from the south of France and hastily raised reinforcements from the German Home Army. The Germans benefited from the defensive advantages offered by a succession of river lines, the Moselle, Meurthe and Seille, and by the old French fortification zone built in 1870–1914, and they conducted a step-by-step withdrawal, denying Patton's Third Army possession of Metz in a bitter battle that lasted from 18 November until 13 December. Not until 15 December was it fully in contact with the lower reaches of the West Wall which followed the line of the Saar river. Patton's spearheads succeeded in seizing some small bridgeheads across the Saar as the first heavy snow of the winter set in. Devers's 6th Army Group, consisting of the American Seventh and French First Armies, had been more successful in clearing the Germans out of Alsace to the south, despite having to fight through the difficult mountainous sector of the Vosges. American troops entered Strasbourg on 23 November, but a pocket of resistance around Colmar, protecting the Upper Rhine and the West Wall behind it, still resisted the French army's efforts to take it in mid-December.

— *Germany gains a respite* —

The deceleration of the Allied drive against the outer defences of Germany in the autumn and early winter of 1944 was caused largely by the logistic difficulties under which they campaigned enhanced by their far greater divisional needs than those of the Germans, 700 tons a day as opposed to 200 tons a day. There was also the improved fighting power of the German army. In early September Hitler had charged Goebbels to raise within the Home Army (now commanded by Himmler since the dismissal and execution of its commander, Fromm, after the July Plot) twenty-five new *Volksgrenadier* divisions to man the western defences. The manpower was found by 'combing through' headquarters, bases and static units inside Germany, a process which also yielded replacements for the broken divisions which had struggled back to the West Wall from Normandy. Between 1 September and 15 October an additional 150,000 men were found in this way – though losses in the west in that period exactly equalled that figure – and another 90,000 from within the resources of OB West (to which post Rundstedt had again been appointed on 2 September). Moreover, despite the full resumption of the Anglo-American Pointblank bombing offensive after Normandy, German industry had achieved higher levels of output of war material in September than in any month of the war, thanks to the success of Speer's policy of dispersal of production and assembly away from the traditional centres. As a result, tank and assault-gun production during 1944 approached that of the Soviet Union during the same period. The 11,000 medium tank and assault guns, 16,000 tank destroyers and 5200 heavy tanks produced were sufficient to keep existing Panzer divisions in the field (despite their appalling losses in Normandy and White Russia) and to provide

the material for thirteen new Panzer brigades, nine of which were subsequently to be reconstituted as weak Panzer divisions.

Much self-delusion was necessary at Hitler's headquarters to represent this rebuilding and re-equipment as genuine reparation for the losses suffered in the catastrophic summer of 1944. Hitler, however, was a master of self-delusion and also of the art of clutching at straws. Although adamant in his refusal to allow any of his commanders to surrender ground for whatever reason, nevertheless he always reconciled himself to the loss of ground that inevitably occurred by asserting that the enemy had thereby overreached himself and exposed himself to a counter-strike which would repay all the damage done and recover the abandoned territory into the bargain. This self-defence mechanism had allowed him to justify denying permission to Paulus to break out of Stalingrad in November 1942, refusing Arnim leave to evacuate Army Group Africa from Tunisia while time allowed in March 1943, and driving the Fifth Panzer Army to destruction in the Mortain counter-attack of the August just past. In the aftermath of Normandy, indeed before the battle was fully over, the same pattern of deception began to surface in Hitler's strategic appreciation. On 19 August, while the Seventh and Fifth Panzer Armies were still struggling out of the neck of the Falaise pocket, he summoned Keitel, Jodl and Speer and told them to begin preparing the restoration of the *Westheer* because he planned to launch a major counter-offensive in the west in November; 'night, fog and snow', he predicted on 1 September, would ground the Allied air forces and thus inaugurate the conditions for a victory.

Hitler announced his decision to undertake the offensive to his operations staff at the Wolf's Lair on 16 September, having briefed Jodl some days previously to prepare an outline plan. It was then that he first revealed both the location and objective of *Wacht am Rhein*, as the attack was codenamed. 'I have made a momentous decision,' Hitler announced. 'I shall go over to the offensive . . . out of the Ardennes, with the objective, Antwerp.' His reasoning emerged in more detail as planning progressed: Antwerp, in mid-September still unavailable for use by the Allies, was potentially their major port of supply for an offensive into Germany. If taken by the Germans its loss would set that offensive back many months. Meanwhile his V-2 rockets, the main launching sites for which lay just beyond Antwerp, would be inflicting increasingly serious damage on London, with a demoralising effect on its population. Further, in the course of the drive on Antwerp, which lay only sixty miles from the *Westheer's* positions in the Ardennes, he would cut off the British Second and Canadian First Armies from the Americans positioned further to the south, encircle and destroy them. The balance of force on the Western Front would thus be equalised, if not actually reversed, and the growing power of his secret-weapons campaign would allow him to regain the strategic initiative. It would then be the *Ostheer's* turn to strike at the Russians on the eastern borders, so that Germany, profiting by its occupation of a central position between its enemies, could recoup its theoretically intrinsic advantage and strike for victory.

Hitler's belief in the fantasy he had constructed for himself was strengthened by the fact that the natural point of departure for his forthcoming offensive lay in the Ardennes. For it was on the German side of the Ardennes, the Eifel, that he had gathered the army which had broken the French front in 1940, and through the Ardennes that his Panzer divisions had then advanced to make their surprise attack. In 1944, as in 1940, the Eifel and the Ardennes offered his soldiers the protection of thick forest and narrow valleys almost impenetrable to air surveillance; inside that maze of broken ground and dense vegetation his new army of Panzer divisions could assemble and move forward to their attack positions with the minimum of anxiety at any premature discovery of their presence and intentions. Moreover, in a feckless repetition of the strategic errors made by the French high command four years earlier, Supreme Allied Headquarters had deemed the Ardennes a secondary front during the autumn of 1944 and, by keeping the bulk of their forces, British and American, concentrated to the north and south, had allowed it to become for the second time precisely the same sector of weakness that Kleist and Guderian had been able to exploit in May 1940.

For all that, the generals with whom Hitler had entrusted the execution of *Wacht am Rhein* did not share his confidence in the plan. Rundstedt and Model, Kluge's successor as commander of Army Group B, agreed between themselves in late October that the plan did not have 'a leg to stand on'. Together they devised an alternative, which they called the 'Small Solution' in distinction from Hitler's 'Big Solution', aimed at damaging the enemy forces opposite the Ardennes rather than trying to destroy them. Hitler would have none of it. First of all he sent Jodl to see Model on 3 November with word that the plan was 'unalterable', and on 2 December he called Model and Rundstedt to the Reich Chancellery in Berlin – now his main headquarters after he had left Rastenburg for good on 20 November – to impress the point on them in person. His only concessions to them were to set back the opening date of the offensive still further (it had already been postponed from 25 November) and to give it a new codename, Autumn Mist, originally chosen by Model for the 'Small Solution'.

'All Hitler wants me to do', complained Sepp Dietrich, commander of one of the two armies earmarked for the operation, 'is to cross a river, capture Brussels, and then go on and take Antwerp. And all this in 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 armoured 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.' This analysis by one of Hitler's most loyal supporters was closely exact. On paper the German order of battle for Autumn Mist appeared impressive. It consisted of two Panzer armies, the Fifth and Sixth, commanded by Manteuffel, one of the best of the younger German tank generals, and Dietrich; between them they deployed eight Panzer, one Panzergrenadier and two parachute divisions, most of which had fought the Normandy campaign, therefore enjoyed experienced leadership and had been brought up to strength

again since the retreat from Falaise. They included the 1st, 2nd, 9th and 12th SS Panzer and the 2nd, 9th, 116th and Lehr Panzer Divisions, the 3rd and 15th Panzergrenadier Divisions (the latter belonging to the supporting Seventh Army) and the 3rd and 5th Parachute Divisions. However, appearance and reality diverged. Although every effort had been made to find men and equipment for these divisions, so that the 1st and 12th SS Panzer, for example, were well up to strength, even such first-line formations as the 2nd and 116th Panzer deployed only a hundred tanks each, while the Volksgrenadier divisions which provided support for the armoured spearheads were ill equipped, under strength and filled out with 'ethnic' Germans who owed their nationality to frontier changes. The 62nd Volksgrenadier Division, for example, contained many Czech and Polish conscripts from regions annexed to the Reich who spoke no German at all and belonged in sympathy to the Allied armies they were committed to attack; the 352nd Volksgrenadier Division, rebuilt on the ruins of its predecessor which had fought so stoutly at Omaha beach, was filled with airmen and sailors; and the 79th Volksgrenadier Division had been formed out of soldiers 'combed out' of rear headquarters.

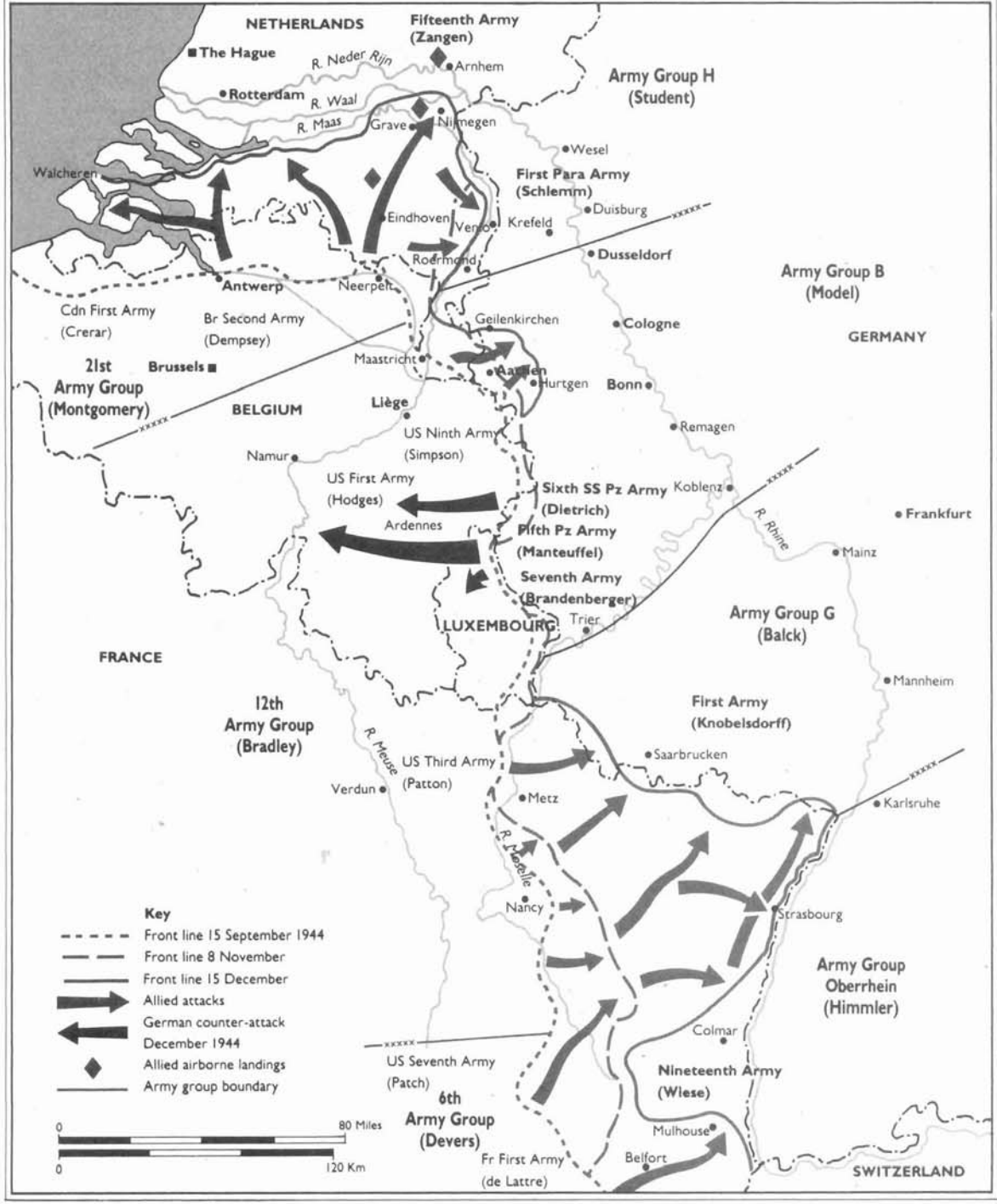
Another deficiency in the plan was lack of fuel. Only a quarter of the minimum requirement was on hand when the offensive opened, much of it held east of the Rhine, while the leading attack elements were expected to capture supplies from the Americans as they advanced. Hitler nevertheless clung to the conviction that 'Autumn Mist' would succeed. Speaking to the generals at Rundstedt's command post on 12 December, he painted a picture of an alliance of 'heterogeneous elements with divergent aims, ultra-capitalist states on the one hand, an ultra-Marxist state on the other . . . a dying empire, Britain . . . a colony bent on inheritance, the United States, . . . If now we can deliver a few more heavy blows, then at any moment this artificially bolstered common front may suddenly collapse with a gigantic clap of thunder.'

Thanks partly to the careful security measures observed by Army Group B during the preparations for Autumn Mist, and partly to Supreme Allied Headquarters' close attention on its own operations at Aachen, in the Saar and Alsace, such warning signs of the offensive as were emitted failed to alert Allied anxieties. On the morning of 16 December, D-Day for Autumn Mist, the front of attack was held by only four American divisions, the 4th, 28th and 106th Divisions supported by the inexperienced 9th Armoured Division, disposed across a space of nearly ninety miles. Two of the three infantry divisions had between them suffered 9000 casualties in the Hürtgen forest battle and had been sent to the Ardennes to rest; the third, 106th, was entirely new to battle.

On to these ill-fitted and unprepared American defenders of the Ardennes, the Sixth and Fifth Panzer Armies fell like a whirlwind on the morning of 16 December. In the centre the American 28th Division was quickly overrun and in the north the 106th

The situation in December 1944 as Hitler launched the Ardennes offensive, Autumn Mist, his last gambler's throw in the West.

THE WESTERN FRONT, AUTUMN 1944





*Advanced units of 1st SS Panzer Division at a critical road crossing, 17 December 1944.
Their vehicle is the amphibious Schwimmwagen.*

Division's forward elements were surrounded; only in the south, where the 4th Division was supported by the 9th Armoured Division, did the Germans make less progress than anticipated. During this troubled day, moreover, Bradley's 12th Army Group headquarters, in which the Ardennes sector lay, failed to appreciate the magnitude of the attack that was developing. Bereft of air reconnaissance because winter weather 'closed in' its airfields, and denied intercept intelligence because of strict German radio security, it formed the view that the attack was local and diversionary and did not react with urgency to the developing crisis.

Eisenhower, whom Bradley was by chance visiting during the day, fortunately took a more precautionary view. He decided to bring down two armoured divisions from the neighbouring formations, the 7th from the Ninth Army and the 10th from the Third, to stand on the flanks of the German attack lest it develop into a full-blown offensive. Patton,

battling into the Saar and still imbued with the belief that he was on the point of breakthrough, automatically protested; but Eisenhower's caution was to be justified by events. On the second day of the offensive, 17 December, the 1st SS Panzer Division arrived at the key road junction of Saint Vith, from which a valley route led to the Meuse and so into the plains of Belgium and the approaches to Antwerp. It was to be denied a breakthrough by the appearance of the US 7th Armoured Division's spearheads and thereafter found itself turned away from access to open country – and to the vast American fuel dumps near Stavelot on which it had counted for resupply – by one American blocking move after another.

While the Sixth Panzer Army was being diverted from the direct north-westward route to Antwerp, and forced progressively due east, the Fifth Panzer Army was making better progress in the southern sector towards Monthermé, where Kleist's Panzers had crossed the Meuse in 1940. The key to its breakthrough was the road centre of Bastogne, a junction for the sparse network of highways that runs from the Eifel into the Ardennes and onward. The capture of Bastogne was essential to the successful development of Autumn Mist. At dawn on 19 December Panzer Lehr Division was only two miles from the town; but during the night the US 101st Airborne Division had arrived by truck, having driven 100 miles from Reims at breakneck speed, and was positioned to deny the Germans possession. The parachutists were quite unequipped to combat tanks; but by their resolute defence of the small town's streets they prevented Panzer Lehr's infantry from gaining entry and so turned Bastogne into an even more effective road block than Saint Vith (which fell on 23 December) on the Sixth Panzer Army's axis of advance.

By Christmas Day Bastogne was completely surrounded by German troops and the Fifth Panzer Army had moved on; Panzer Lehr had worked around a flank to appear beyond Saint-Hubert, only twenty miles from the Meuse. On Christmas Day itself, however, the pace of the German advance across the whole front of attack began to slow and the nose of the salient which the Panzer armies had driven into Allied lines was attenuating. Allied counter-measures had begun to tell. On 20 December, in the face of Bradley's strident objections, Eisenhower had confided command of operations against Dietrich's Sixth Panzer Army, on the northern face of the 'bulge' closest to Antwerp, to Montgomery; while the intervention of divisions from Patton's Third Army against the southern face during 17–21 December matched the effect of the counter-attacks that the British commander set in train. Montgomery, who was copiously informed from 20 December by Ultra decrypts of both Sixth and Fifth Panzer Armies' intentions, took prompt steps to guard the bridges across the Meuse, towards which Dietrich's spearheads were advancing, with British troops brought down from northern Belgium. He thereafter took the view that the attackers, now opposed by nineteen American and British divisions, including such seasoned formations as the US 82nd Airborne and 2nd Armoured Divisions, would simply wear themselves out by their effort to make progress.

Montgomery's analysis proved exactly correct. Indeed, unrecognised though it was at

the time, the American divisions, particularly the 28th and 106th, which had stood in the path of the initial attack, had through the dedicated and self-sacrificing resistance of many of their rifle platoons and anti-tank teams done a great deal to wear down the impetus of the German Panzer divisions on the first day of attack. They had inflicted heavy casualties, damaged if not always destroyed equipment, and delayed the timetable on which the success of the offensive too narrowly depended.

On 26 December Eisenhower's headquarters received the first evidence that Autumn Mist had lost its vital impetus. The weather cleared, allowing the Allied air forces to intervene effectively for the first time. Patton's 4th Armoured Division broke through the southern face of the 'bulge' to bring relief to the 101st Airborne Division surrounded in Bastogne, and the 2nd Armoured Division, from Hodges's First Army, found the 2nd Panzer Division immobilised for lack of fuel near Celles, five miles from the Meuse at Dinant, and destroyed its leading tanks. Indeed, in the course of its one-sided encounter with the 2nd Armoured Division, the 2nd Panzer Division lost almost all the eighty-eight tanks and twenty-eight assault guns with which it had begun the offensive.

By 28 December Montgomery was sure that Autumn Mist had failed, though he expected the Germans to persist in the offensive and even to launch a further attack. That attack, when it came, fell outside the Ardennes 'bulge', in the Saar, where Blaskowitz's Army Group G struck against Patch's Seventh Army and managed to take and briefly hold a triangle of territory on the west bank of the Rhine. This brief success reinforced Hitler's view that his aggressive strategy had been correctly conceived, even though it had been launched at a moment when the Eastern even more than the Western Front cried out for defensive reinforcement. In fact, however, North Wind (as this second offensive was codenamed) caused mild political but little military alarm and contributed to Autumn Mist not at all. On 3 January 1945 Montgomery launched a convergent counter-attack against the northern and western faces of the 'bulge', which obliged Hitler on 8 January to order the withdrawal of the four leading Panzer divisions from their exposed situation. On 13 January the American 82nd and British 1st Airborne Divisions made contact in the centre of what had been the Ardennes salient, and by 16 January the front was restored.

Between 16 December and 16 January the Fifth and Sixth Panzer Armies had inflicted some 19,000 fatal casualties on the US 12th Army Group and taken 15,000 Americans prisoner. In the first days of their offensive they had spread panic throughout the civilian population of Belgium and caused alarm among the military as far away as Paris – where precautions were taken against sabotage raids it was feared would be mounted by the small clandestine units which Otto Skorzeny infiltrated (in practice with little success) behind the Allied lines. The German offensive had also shaken the optimism prevailing in Washington and London over the early conclusion of the war. Hitler spoke to his subordinates of 'a tremendous easing of the situation . . . the enemy had had to abandon all his plans for attack. He has been obliged to regroup his forces. He has had to throw in again units which were fatigued. He is severely criticised at home. . . . Already he has had

to admit that there is no chance of the war being ended before August, perhaps not before the end of next year. This means a transformation of the situation such as nobody would have believed possible a fortnight ago.'

Hitler exaggerated; he also grossly misinterpreted the true significance of the Ardennes campaign. It had, of course, inflicted losses on the enemy, but those losses could be borne and made good. The British army had come to the end of its manpower resources, but the American army had not. Since September it had shipped twenty-one divisions to France including six armoured; between January and February it was to land another seven, including three armoured, all fully equipped and up to strength. The *Westheer*, by contrast, had lost 100,000 men killed, wounded or captured in the Ardennes, 800 tanks and 1000 aircraft – many thrown away in the Luftwaffe's last offensive, *Bodenplatte*, launched against Allied airfields in Belgium on 1 January 1945. None of these losses, human or material, could be made good. The Wehrmacht's resources were exhausted, while German war industry's output could no longer keep pace with everyday attrition, let alone the surges of destruction caused by indulgence in heavy offensive activity. Steel production alone, fundamental to weapons manufacture, had been reduced from 700,000 to 400,000 tons monthly in the Ruhr by bombing between October and December, and it continued to decline; while the disruption of the transport system meant that it was increasingly difficult to move weapon components from point of production to point of assembly.

All that Autumn Mist achieved was to impose a brief delay on the Western Allied armies' preparations to break into Germany, at the expense of transferring from or denying to the Eastern Front men and equipment needed to stem the continued advance of the Red Army into southern Poland and the Baltic states. During November and December 2299 tanks and assault guns and eighteen new divisions had been committed to the Western Front but only 921 tanks and five divisions to the Eastern, where 225 Soviet infantry divisions, twenty-two tank corps and twenty-nine other armoured formations confronted 133 German divisions, thirty of which were already threatened with encirclement in the Baltic states. Hitler's 'last gamble', as the Ardennes came to be described, was extremely short-sighted. It bought a little time at great cost, failed in its object of destroying Montgomery's army and won back no ground at all.

Indeed, despite the intervention of Generals January and February, who fought in 1945 on the German side, the Western armies recovered quickly from the shock of Autumn Mist and succeeded in making advances as creditable, given the more defensible nature of the terrain west of the Rhine, as the Red Army was currently achieving in Poland, Hungary and Yugoslavia. In January the two German salients west of the West Wall, the Roermond triangle north of Aachen and the Colmar pocket south of Strasbourg, were reduced. In February and March Eisenhower's armies advanced along the whole front, to reach the Rhine between Wesel and Koblenz and to seize the north bank of the Moselle between Koblenz and Trier. By the end of the first week of March it was the Rhine alone which stood between the Allies and the German hinterland.