

THE BATTLE OF THE BULGE FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF THE 3RD US ARMY



Hitler's last attempt to regain the initiative on the Western front, began on 16 December 1944. Three German Armies attacked the American positions between Monschau in the North and Echternach in the South with the strategy of driving on towards Brussels and Antwerp.

The Headquarters of the 12th Army Group ordered Patton to stop the advance of his 10th Armoured Division in order to reinforce General Middleton's VIII Corps.

Although Patton protested, he felt that Bradley had serious reasons for such a decision.

On 9 December, he had indeed been alerted by the chief of his Intelligence Services about a possible German offensive.

The services had intercepted various radio messages which allowed concluding that German units were moving towards an unidentified destination.

Unlike the Intelligence of the 1st Army, Patton took these messages seriously.

Patton was convinced that the Germans were preparing an attack against the frontline held by the 1st Army and ordered his staff to prepare plans for a possible intervention of the 3rd Army.

On 18 December, Patton was called to a conference at the Headquarters of the 12th Army Group in Luxembourg. He was accompanied by three of his staff officers, Koch, Maddox and Muller.

When Patton arrived in Luxembourg, his staff had already identified 14 different German divisions pushing towards the River Meuse.

After completion of the situation briefing, Bradley asked Patton to prepare his troops for backing up the 1st Army.

Patton informed Bradley that he was in a position to move immediately three of his divisions towards the area of operations.

After being returned to his Headquarters in Nancy, he was informed by Bradley that a conference with Eisenhower was scheduled the next day at 11.00. in Verdun.

Before leaving for Verdun, he met his staff officers. He explained the overall situation and outlined his plans for an intervention in the Ardennes area.

In addition to Patton, Air Marshal Tedder, General Devers and General Strong attended the meeting convened by the Supreme Commander in Verdun.

After a short introduction, Eisenhower explained the envisaged measures and stated he wanted Patton to get to Luxembourg and take command of the operations and make a strong counter-attack with at least 6 divisions.

Patton replied that he would be able to counter-attack already on the 22 December, with three divisions; the 4th Armoured, the 26th and the 80th.)

Patton kept his promise.

On 21 December, he established his temporary headquarters in the Pescatore Foundation in Luxembourg.

The counterattack, he had promised to start on 22 December, was launched on time at 06.00. with 3 divisions, the 4th Armoured as well as the 26th and 80th Infantry.

The main direction of advance of the 4th Armoured division was the road leading towards Martelange and Bastogne, the 26th Infantry Division launched an attack in the direction of Wiltz and the 80th advanced towards Ettelbruck. One regiment of the 5th Infantry Division attacked in the vicinity of Echternach.

On 26 December, a combat group belonging to the 4th Armoured Division reached Bastogne and established contact with the 101st Airborne Division, besieged since several days.

General Patton visited his troops almost on a daily basis.

After extremely violent fights, elements of the 1st US Army commanded by General Hodges and the 3rd Army were able to link up in the area of Houffalize and thus re-established the contact between the Allied Forces.

The divisions having participated in the 22 December attack, were progressively reinforced by other units attached to the 3rd Army or by reserve forces.

On 29 January 1945, the 13 divisions belonging to the 3rd Army had taken up positions along the rivers Moselle, Sure and Our, ready to cross the Siegfried line between Saarlautern and St. Vith.

During the night of 6 - 7 February 1945, elements of the 3rd Army crossed the Our and Sure into German territory.

The flooded rivers made the crossing extremely difficult and called for many casualties.

On 13 February, visibility was greatly reduced by dense fog.

Patton crossed the river Sure on a floating bridge. When he suddenly appeared amidst his soldiers on the other riverside, rumours circulated that he had been swimming across.

On 1 March 1945, the 3rd Army took the city of Trier with elements of the 94th Infantry Division and the 10th Armoured Division.

The following morning, Patton received a message from SHAEF, the Supreme Headquarters of Allied Expeditionary Forces, with the order to bypass Trier, as he would need at least 4 divisions to conquer the town.

Patton reacted in sending a telegram with the following content:

I have conquered Trier with two divisions only. What shall I do now? Return the town to the Germans?

Patton pushed his units' forwards.

On 7 March, the 3rd Army reached the west bank of the Rhine north of Coblenz.

The 3rd Army had conquered the entire Palatinate with 4 armoured divisions, the 4th, 10th, 11th and 12th.

In 230 days, the 3rd army made 230.000 prisoners of war.

Patton hurried on toward the Rhine and conquered on April 4 the town of Fulda and then Coburg and Saalfeld.

At the end of April his Vth Corps crossed the Czechoslovakian border and arrived in Pilsen. During the progression across Germany, Patton's units discovered the atrocities committed in the concentration camps. His XXth Corps liberated the camp of Buchenwald.

Harry S. Truman, succeeding President Roosevelt after his death, promoted Patton to the rank of a 4-star General on 17 April 1945.

When the Germans signed their capitulation on 8 May 1945, four Army Corps composed of six armoured and seven infantry divisions were under Patton's command.

His IIIrd Corps occupied the entire territory of Bavaria, the V Corps was deployed 80 kilometres from Prague, the XIIth Corps in the area of Pisek and the XXth Corps had passed Linz in Austria.

The IIIrd Corps had conducted the junction with the Soviet Army in Armstetten.

Patton was designated military governor of Bavaria. He started reorganizing the 3rd Army and established his headquarters in Bad Tölz.

The end of the war went together with various victory celebrations. His meetings with Russian generals confirmed Patton's suspicion he had against the Soviet Army.

He was convinced that he would have to fight them one day.

In June Patton returned to the United States to join his family after having been separated from them since 1942.

He was received in triumph in many cities. Thousands of enthusiasts testified their appreciation to him.

At one occasion he pronounced a speech containing a tactless declaration related to soldiers killed in action: *"... a man was frequently a fool when he got killed"*.

Again, the declaration provoked an adverse reaction of the press and letters of indignant parents were sent to the Congress. Defence Secretary Stimson tried to defend Patton during a press conference noting that there had been a misinterpretation of his statement.

At that time, Patton had already a premonition he would die soon. At one occasion, when his wife was not present, he told his daughters:

Good bye children, we will not meet again. Take care of your brother George. I will meet again your mum, but I will not see you anymore.

On 4 July, Patton returned to Europe.

After another clash with Eisenhower related to the denazification policy, Patton was relieved of his command and replaced by General Truscott.

He was made commander of the 15th Army, a virtual army without any subordinated units, composed of a staff in charge of analysing World War II operations.

Perfectly aware that he had fallen into disgrace with his chain of command, Patton decided to resign from the Army at the end of the year.

End of October, he was received by General de Gaulle in Paris who conferred to him the "Cordon de Grand Officier de la Légion d'Honneur".

He also paid visits to Normandy and Brittany where he was made a Citizen of Honour of several towns liberated by the 3rd Army.

End of November 1945, he attended the first anniversary of the liberation of Metz and was made an honorary citizen of this town.

Patton was determined to return to the United States and to retire from service.

On 9 December 1945, he had set out to go hunting in the vicinity of Speyer. He was accompanied by his Chief of Staff, General Hobart R. Gay.

Their car, a Cadillac 75, model 1939, was driven by Private Horace L. Woodring.

In the suburbs of Mannheim, they stopped at a railroad crossing.

Their car began moving after the train had passed by when Woodring suddenly noticed a GMC truck ahead, approaching in their direction.

He was going too fast to react when the truck made a sudden move and the car smashed into the fuel tank of the truck.

Patton, sitting on the rear seat was projected forward, fell back and was thrown against General Gay.

He suffered from a laceration on his forehead, an injury caused when his head struck the car roof and the separation between front and back seats.

But the worst thing was that he could not move his fingers. He realized that this could be a symptom for paralysis.

He was taken to the 130th Station Hospital at Heidelberg. The diagnostic of the doctors was unanimous: Beside the head wound, a fracture of the third cervical vertebra caused a total paralysis from the third vertebra downward.

Learning of the accident, his spouse immediately flew to Europe, arriving in Heidelberg in the afternoon on 11 December.

Patton smiled when he welcomed her, but his words were disquieting:

« I'm afraid Béa, that's the last time we see us. »

The doctors tried in vain to keep the famous « Blood and Guts » alive.¹

The World War II hero died on December 21, 1945 at 05.45 pm.

For two days, his body rested in a villa in Heidelberg, where many of his soldiers paid him the last respects.

He was laid to rest on 24 December 1945 at the military cemetery in Hamm, close to Luxembourg City in presence of a great number of civilian and military authorities.

He rests among the soldiers of the 3rd Army who had fought with him.

General Patton did not belong to the top echelon of the Allied chain of command.

He was highly qualified for field commands and never had ambitions for the position of the Supreme Allied Commander.

He was a complex and controversial person.

His key concern had always been to lead his troops avoiding unnecessary casualties.

This was the reason why he always opted for a maximum of mobility and speed in operations.

He was convinced that rapid advances would reduce the enemy's striking capability.

He was certainly not a fearless superman, he had the same fears than anybody else and never tried to hide this.

He believed in reincarnation and was convinced that he had been living in the past, spanning several centuries.

Sometimes, he had the impression that he remembered incidents that happened hundreds of years ago.

¹ *In a speech at the beginning of the war, Patton emphasized that a war would be won only by blood and courage. "*Our blood and his courage*" was the comment of his soldiers. From this episode was born the expression "*Blood and Guts*".

There is certainly an explanation to this.

He had become a product of his readings and his own imagination. He swallowed all military works.

After a while he identified himself with the events and adopted them as his own recollections.

Patton was delighted when general Alexander told him one day:

“You know, George, you should have lived during the XVIIIth century, you would have made a splendid Marshal under Napoleon.”

Patton smiled and responded: *“I was there.”*

His death made him more popular than he had ever been during his whole life.