

The Battle at Bütgenbach

Background

The entire Battle of the Bulge was a massive encounter between German and Allied forces. A microcosm study of the heroics and strategy of the Allies in defending against these massive attacks can be explored through the events around the Belgian town of Bütgenbach. At this town, exhausted 1st Infantry Division troops held off the German advance.

Leadership

Major General Clarence Huebner had been commanding the 1st Division since D-Day, and was promoted to command V Corps on 10 December 1944. General Clifton Andrus became the commander of the 1st Division on 10 December 1944, just six days before the German assault and the Battle of the Bulge. At this date, the 1st Division had been in action for 182 days, and only five days of that total were spent out of contact with the enemy.

The 26th Infantry

When the Battle of the Bulge began, the 26th Infantry Regiment of the 1st Division had been in almost continuous action since 6 June 1944. The last six months of fighting had taken its toll of this veteran group. The bloody encounters at Aachen and the Hürtgen Forest left the 26th Infantry in need of reorganization, re-equipment, and rest.

In December 1944, the 26th Infantry was sent to Aubel for one month of rest. This was to give the regiment time to train fresh troops coming to replace the many casualties of the past months. The plan was to give the 26th a chance to regroup, get new weapons to replace the damaged ones, restock ammunition, and get fresh clothes for the winter. Unfortunately, on 16 December 1944 that plan changed.

The German Forces

Towards the end of November 1944, 1st Division commander Clarence Huebner noted that the enemy infantry he was fighting against had become a very “odd group”. Allied intelligence saw that the Germans were getting so low on manpower that service troops, engineers, and even veterinarians were reinforcing the depleted German ranks (*Blue Spaders*, 90). This caused the Allies to think the war was nearly won and to fall into a false sense of security. In reality, the Germans still had their elite army and SS reserves hidden deep in Eifel region of Germany. These troops were being gathered for a German counterattack.

The German Plan for Deitrich’s Sixth Army

The plans for and reasons behind the German offensive are all discussed in the section outlining the overall Battle of the Bulge. The specific plans for the part of the battle related to Bütgenbach involve *Rollbahn’s C and D*. Deitrich’s Sixth Army was tasked to clear *Rollbahn C* through the town of Bullingen to Bütgenbach. The Sixth was made up of “elite SS armored divisions - 1st Liebstandarte, 2nd Das Reich, 9th Hohenstaufen, and 12th SS Hitlerjugened (Hitler Youth) - plus the 3rd Panzer Grenadier Division, the 3rd Parachute Division, and four Volks Grenadier divisions (VGDs),” (*Blue Spaders*, 95).

The Sixth was under the command of Josef “Sepp” Dietrich, whom Adolf Hitler had personally chosen to lead this highly trained and highly motivated army. Hitler had high hopes for the achievements of the Sixth Army, he was counting on this SS group to surpass the achievements of the regular army and thus provide a clear political victory for the Nazi Party. To this end, he made available all of the best men and equipment for the Sixth SS Panzer Army. They had about 500 tanks and armored assault guns, including PzKwVI Tiger tanks, and extraordinarily heavy grouping of artillery (*Blue Spaders*, 95). See a German JagdPz IV (in English it is a “hunter tank” or “tank hunter”) in photograph #1.

Dietrich’s plan was for his troops to quickly punch through the thin American line in the Ardennes to

the paved roads that the German armor could advance over more quickly. The path they wanted to take was Rollbahn C, which went through the towns of Büllingen and Bütgenbach. Time table for success was very narrow. The Sixth SS Panzer Army had only three days to get their infantry and armored vehicles nearly forty miles.

The German operation was broken down into daily objectives

Day 1: Break through American defenses.

Day 2: Pass the armor through the mountains.

Day 3: Reach the Meuse River, which was 40 miles away from the start.

Day 4: Cross the Meuse and advance on Antwerp.

16 December 1944: Day One

The Beginning

The Sixth SS Panzer Army's attack began at 0530 on 16 December. It fell mainly on the 393rd and 394th Infantry Regiments, which were holding the center and south of the 99th's front (*Blue Spaders*, 96). General Dietrich's goal for the German army was to gain control of *Rollbahn's C* and *D* on this day.

While in the past the Sixth SS Army had excelled, on this drive the SS Division failed to meet expectations. The German infantry on that day has been described as "sluggish" and their tactics "clumsy" (*Blue Spaders*, 96). By dusk the Germans were only able to gain access to *Rollbahn D*.

The 26th Infantry on the Move

As early as 1100 the 26th Infantry Regiment of the 1st Division was alerted to the abrupt end of their long awaited break. They were put on six-hour alert, and transferred from VII Corps to V Corps to help the 99th hold the line against the German onslaught. The U.S. Army reports that: "The transfer of this regimental combat team to the V Corps would have a most important effect on the ensuing American defense," (Cole, *The Ardennes*).

Photos: 2,3,4

Quotations: 1,2

17 December 1944: Day Two

1st SS Panzer Division (KG Peiper)

The only *Rollbahn* the Germans were able to gain was *Rollbahn D* to the south of *Rollbahn C*. At 0500 the 1st SS *Panzer* Division, under Commander Obersturmbannführer Joachim Peiper, took *Rollbahn D* into the town of Honsfeld. The town was easily taken from panicked anti-aircraft units, cavalry, and administrative assistants.

Peiper soon learned that his planned route on *Rollbahn D* between Honsfeld and Moderscheid would take him over heavily damaged roads. In order to bypass these roads, Peiper turned north to the town of Büllingen to use part of *Rollbahn C* (since the 12th SS Panzer Division had been unable to reach far down the road). American troops noticed this abrupt move and began to dig in between the town of Büllingen and Bütgenbach. The Americans were confused when Peiper once again turned abruptly, and led his troops back down to his assigned *Rollbahn D*. Evidently, once Peiper had passed the bad patch of road, he decided to end his brief detour and return to his assigned route.

The Plan of the 26th Infantry

The regimental commander of the 26th Infantry was Colonel John Seitz. The 26th CT's battalion commanders: Major J.K. Rippert of the 1st, Lt. Col. Derrill M. Daniels of the 2nd, Lt. Col. John T. Corley of the 3rd, and Lt. Col. Hugh Brown of the 33rd Field Artillery met at Aubel to discuss the plan to defend Bütgenbach (*Blue Spaders*, 99). They came up with a strategy for a wedge-shaped defense centered on the crossroads at Dom (Domäne) Bütgenbach (a large manor area with a central stone residence and many additional buildings)(*Blue Spaders*, 99). The purpose of this defense was to guard the Büllingen-Malmédy road, and the road running north from Moderscheid, the German's *Rollbahn C*.

18 - 22 December 1944: The Battle

Dietrich wants to maneuver between Rollbahns, too

Dietrich learned that moving between *Rollbahns* worked well for Peiper, and wanted to try a similar plan. Instead of bypassing damaged roads, Dietrich wanted to bypass American troops by swinging south towards *Rollbahn D* and then back to *C* somewhere to the west. This plan would have taken him around the Büllingen to Bütgenbach road.

Late on 18 December Dietrich's advisors convinced him that he should stick to the original route and move through Büllingen to Bütgenbach on *Rollbahn C*. This caused yet another major delay for the 12th SS Division. They had already begun the trek south towards *Rollbahn D*. The entire division had to turn around and go back to Büllingen and then on to the road toward Bütgenbach.

At Bütgenbach

Lieutenant Colonel Darrill M. Daniels set up the defensive strategy at Bütgenbach. The essence of the plan was a wide perimeter defense by the infantry. In an unorthodox move, Daniels put the 57 mm anti-tank guns on the perimeter with the infantry. Normally these heavy guns would be placed further back from the main line of resistance. Daniels thought that the heavy fog would hide the guns from German view, and moving the guns up would make them more accurate against the enemy.

Mobile tank and antitank weapons were placed in the center of the perimeter. The Germans assaulted the town four times, gaining strength each time. The worst situations would occur when Lt. Col. Daniels' command post was overrun. The men in the command post scraped together all the weapons, ammunition, and courage they could in order to push back the Germans.

Through each dire situation the men of the 26th found a way to repel the enemy. When the position was overrun by German tanks, the American troops stayed in their foxholes, and let the Allied artillery from outside the town pound the enemy. Acts of outstanding courage helped save the 26th Infantry from disaster. Henry Warner earned the Medal of Honor at Butgenbach for heroically taking out three enemy tanks single-handedly. (There are details about Warner and other Medal of Honor recipients in this packet.)

Quotations: 3, 4, 5

The Important Role of Artillery

The importance of the 26th holding their ground was known to the commanding general of the 1st Infantry Division. Clift Andrus had been in command of the division for less than a week. He had been commander of the Division artillery, and his mastery of artillery placement saved the 1st Division from disaster during the Battle of the Bulge. General Andrus coordinated not only the 1st Division artillery, but also the 99th Division's and V Corps reenforcing artillery. From a position across the lake from Dom Butgenbach, the artillery decimated the German tanks and infantry. When Lt. Col. Daniels' command post was overrun the artillery fired inside to drive out enemy tanks.

Photos: 5,8

Quotations: 6

Victory at Bütgenbach

By 1430, 22 December 1944 the Battle for Bütgenbach was over. The soldiers of the First Division were able to repel the German assault. It was not an easy battle. The 26th Infantry's command post was overrun three times by German tanks. Each time heroic individuals used the limited materials at their disposal to push the Germans back.

In the end, brilliantly executed artillery fire decimated German infantry and held up German armor. The 1st and 99th US Infantry Divisions held onto the village and the surrounding area for two weeks. The blocking of German *Rollbahn C* at Butgenbach, along with stopping them at *Rollbahns A* and *B*, forced a large backup of German infantry and equipment on the remaining two *Rollbahns*. Since the entire German plan was based on speed, the congestion on *Rollbahns D* and *E* prevented the Germans from reaching their objectives. On 31

December 1944, the weather cleared and the Allied air force spotted and destroyed the Germans held up along *Rollbahns D* and *E*.

Photos: 6,8,9

15 January 1945: Counter-thrust

Winter Warriors

The Germans were not the only enemy that the 26th Infantry had to face. On 31 December 1944, the temperature dropped to zero. The weather was a great foe that acted against both the Germans and the Americans. The victor would be the one who could best adapt to the elements.

Photos: 10,11,12,13,14

Quotations: 7, 8, 9

The Drive Back to Germany

Preventing the Germans from gaining access to *Rollbahn C* through Bütgenbach, and stopping them from reaching their ultimate goal of Antwerp and Brussels was only the beginning. The battle had been won, but the war was still raging. Now the Blue Spaders (26th Infantry, 1st Division) had to retake the ground that was lost during the initial German assault in December, 1944.

Quotations: 10, 11, 12

Lessons Learned

Soldiering in harsh climates- Weather played a roll in the German offensive and the Allied Counter-Offensive. Whether it is fog, extreme cold, or waist deep snow, soldiers must be ready to adapt to changing conditions. Battle outcomes can be decided based on which side can take advantage of environmental surroundings.

The enemy- always lethal, never invincible- Even though it looked bad for the Americans as the initial wave of German infantry and tanks plowed through the lines, eventually the Americans were able to rally and stop the Germans in there tracks.

Innovation within a general doctrinal framework- LTC Derrill M. Daniels put the 57 mm's in the foxhole line on the Main Line of Defense. This was not a doctrinal move, but it paid off. He knew that the thick fog would shield the guns from sight and he could use that to his advantage.

Combined arms- The combination of heavy artillery fire and infantry saved the day for the Americans. The American artillery decimated the enemy infantry. This left enemy tanks unprotected and open to attack from the American infantry.

Small unit engagements can have strategic results- The entire Battle of the Bulge was won for the Americans by small units standing there ground and denying the German forces access to the critical Rollbahns. These heroic stands took place in areas like Butgenbach, St. Vith, and Bastogne.

There is no substitute for skilled, tenacious soldiers- When the enemy attacks with the advantage of superior numbers and surprise, a battle can be won or lost based on selfless and inspiring actions of heroic individuals.