

Forrest C. Pogue

The Ardennes Campaign: The Impact of Intelligence

Last night I happened to pick up a copy of my *The Supreme Command*, which was published in 1954, and I noticed that I began the section on intelligence (or the lack of it) in the Ardennes by saying certain information which had been available earlier ceased to come in during the Ardennes period and had a negative effect on operations. That was a careful formula that I had worked out to handle certain information which I thought I knew and to handle certain other information which I knew I didn't know about but suspected so that it protected me in the period when people began to reveal things about Ultra. I had guessed wrong on the source of Ultra information. But it was that information that we did not have in the Ardennes.

I attended in 1978 conferences in Bad Godesberg and Stuttgart at which some of the great experts at Bletchley Park and some of their enemy counterparts gathered to discuss the things that were known and the things that were not known and their impact positively or negatively on the campaigns which followed. Since Ultra was not available in mass as it had been on certain occasions earlier, this talk, instead of being about how Ultra information aided the campaign, might well be called a study of how undue reliance on intercept material caused the people to forget how to use adequately current, conventional methods of intelligence.

Why did they have no Ultra? The Germans, to an extent that had not been true in earlier campaigns in Northwest Europe, entertained the most rigid silence prior to the last week before the attack. A good bit of the early planning, going back into September 1944, actually took place before von Rundstedt knew the broad outlines of the plan. Even after he knew those outlines and disapproved a part of them and urged a smaller solution, most of the high-ranking leaders of the counteroffensive, or the breakthrough if you want to call it that, were left in considerable ignorance of their objectives, of the number of troops, of the support, until in some cases a week before the attack. An amazing amount of silence on the wireless traffic

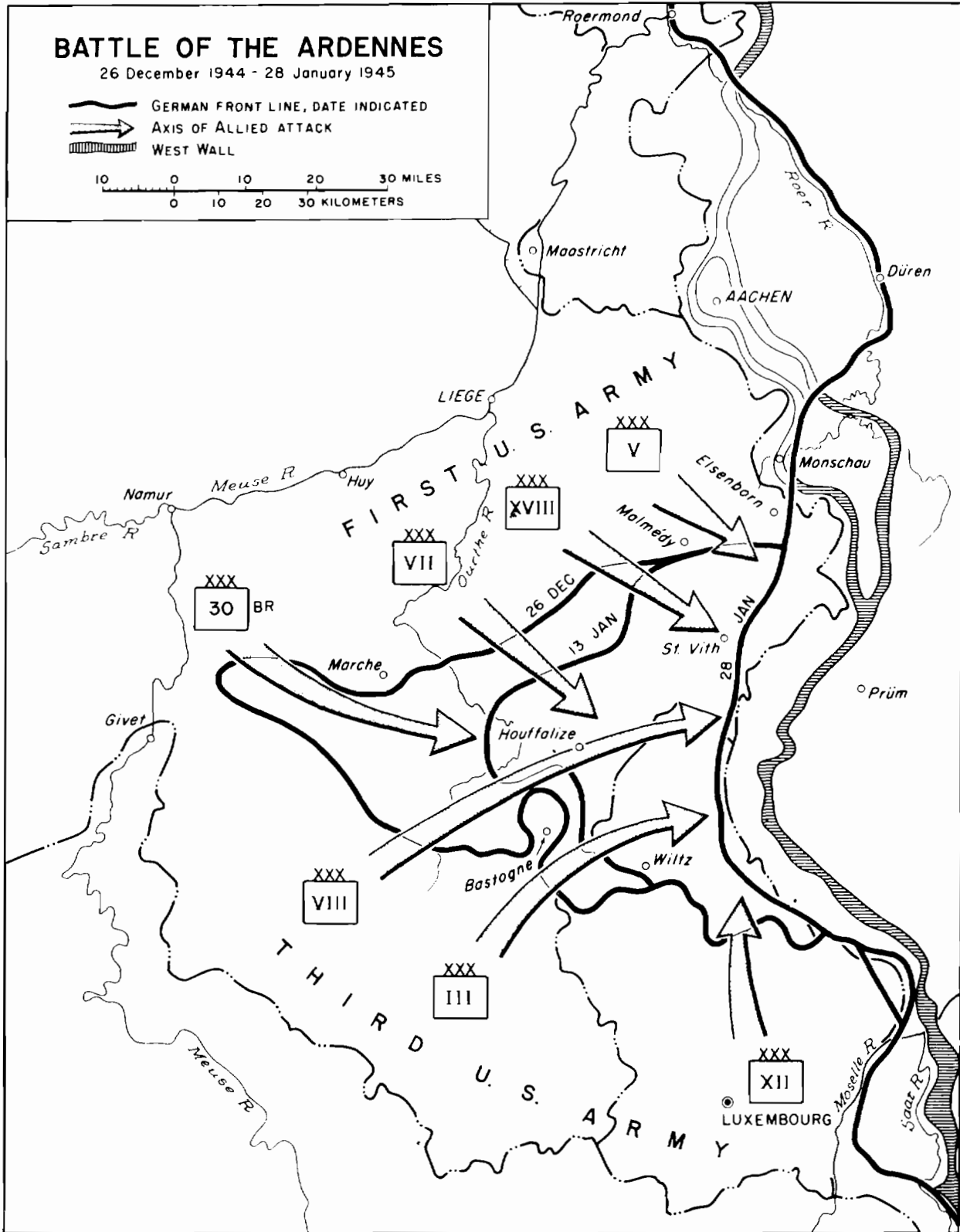
was imposed. The result was that in the days before the counterattack no one came to the commanding general of the First U. S. Army, whose Army was to be attacked, and said, "The Germans have this many people. They are going to attack on the morning of 16 December in this area." And without that, he went ahead with the plans for his own attack which was to take place on 19 December 1944.

Now unlike the later (31 December) Colmar attack in which some Ultra information was available and for which we were better prepared, this attack caught the American and the British commanders by surprise. Later on they said that they had taken a calculated risk and it did not matter. Later on several people, including the First Army Chief of Intelligence, Colonel B. A. Dickson, said that they expected the attack by the 17th at the outside. But this G-2 had to back down in the face of the question which I was prompted by the commander of the First Army (General Courtney H. Hodges) to put to him: "If you believed the attack would come not later than the 17th, where were you when the attack came?" The answer was Paris. The commander did not believe that his G-2 was very serious, if almost one day before the attack he took off. He took off so completely that it took them some hours to find him in order to direct him to return.

First Army might have been caught short even if Ultra had been available because the G-2 of that Army, for some reason, very early developed an antipathy to intelligence sources outside his own headquarters. He fought the idea of having OSS people attached to his headquarters. And when he was given an officer who was to bring him Ultra information, he promptly made him a regular member of this G-2 Staff and said, in much the same way that Patton said to Bradley when Bradley was sent to his headquarters as an observer, "I don't want any spies around here." So the young G-2 was put into the regular organization and often he was doing other things besides reporting his Ultra material. He has written quite freely about his frustrations since the recent revelations began to appear.

There was another problem in the case of the First Army and Bradley's 12th Army Group. Bradley's chief

This is an edited transcript of Dr. Pogue's remarks to the NSA Communications Analysis Association, 16 December 1980.



UNCLASSIFIED

of intelligence in North Africa, and in the early days in Normandy, was Colonel Dickson. He had hoped to go to the 12th Army Group when Bradley assumed that command, but Bradley left him instead with a new commander of First Army and picked a general, Brigadier General Edwin L. Sibert, as his G-2 in 12th Army Group. The two intelligence officers became, not mortal enemies, but competitive—each one insisting that his information was better than that of the other. Each one in retrospect claimed that he had been right and the other had been wrong about what was going to happen in the Ardennes. As a matter of fact, in the course of a number of months in 1946 through 1948, interviewing Eisenhower's G-2 (the British general, Major General Kenneth Strong), General Sibert, Colonel Dickson, and a number of others, I concluded that these chiefs of intelligence at various levels cooperated very little. When I tell you that Montgomery's G-2 intended to describe Eisenhower's chief of intelligence as the "Chinless Horror" and felt that he was the least informed of any intelligence chief, you get some notion of the disarray at that level at that time.

One of the big problems came because these people had been so accustomed for some months to having the intelligence story handed to them by a representative of the Ultra staff that they did not do the careful analysis of conventional gathering of intelligence. When I started to write in 1946-47 the history of the Ardennes, I was given a full-time assistant to read the intelligence reports that came out between the first day of September 1944 and the day of attack, 16 December. I indicated to him that I wanted him to take the G-2 report from every unit from special battalions up to the supreme commander—take them daily if they were issued daily—take them weekly if they were issued weekly, collate the material and show me what they knew at each week or each ten-day period up to the attack. It is astonishing how much prisoner interrogation, air reconnaissance, patrolling, reports from spies, and reports from individuals near the Ardennes told us, and how good a picture they afforded of what was occurring. But nothing was coming from Ultra. Nothing was coming through interceptions. So there was a tendency to feel that there was no great buildup. There was a tendency to explain what was occurring on other grounds.

For example, there was evidence from September on of units—German units—moving into the Ardennes area, but that was explained by the argument that these were replacing units being moved out. And so we decided that the Germans were doing exactly the same things that we were doing. This was a quiet area. So

you brought new units in to give them a chance to settle down, to get accustomed to a front before putting them into battle. The Germans played that game exceedingly well. Part of the people were not going out as we found out later. Part of them were staying there.

Then we found out the Germans were issuing very strict orders on saving gasoline. We interpreted that to mean that they were about to run out of gasoline. The point was that it was a part of a strict conservation program to make sure there was enough gasoline for the attack. But again we were standing these things on their head because the theory was that if an attack was imminent Ultra would have told us.

There was evidence in October that a new Panzer Army had been created. But again that didn't seem to upset anybody, because again the theory was that the Germans knew we were going to mount an attack somewhere around the middle of December in the area south of Cologne and that therefore they were setting up a reserve to meet that attack. Again and again that was our reaction, that the Germans didn't have enough to attack us but they were trying to make a last defensive action before the winter ended.

Later on, the First Army G-2 insisted that his report on 10 December indicated that there indeed was going to be an attack on our front. But when you read all of the possibilities, and all of the capabilities, you find that the area he continually identified was one at the point where Ninth U. S. Army and the British Army joined. It was farther north on Monty's front than it was down, almost to the point at which the Third U. S. and the First U. S. Army joined. I remember he came down once after he saw my chapter, bringing a great number of graphs and charts under his arm. And he said, "You see, here is where I identified all of the air targets which shows that there was a buildup of German supplies and so we were attacking it." But I said that he failed to note that the charts also showed that there were nearly as many first priority targets up here in the northern sector, and the attack didn't come there at all. But that's rather true of all things that go wrong—the tendency to find out that what you said was right and to leave out all the points at which you said exactly what should not have been said.

One of the appalling things is again and again the tendency to equate German reacting to American reaction—the tendency to say that we would not attack under these conditions, therefore they would not attack under these conditions. Later on we said we should have known their psychology. This was the last time that Hitler had the chance to choose, and

he chose to take advantage of a period when he assumed that the effete British and Americans would be tending to Christmas festivities rather than paying any attention to the war.

After I had written these particular pages [for *The Supreme Command*], I submitted them to the various G-2s involved and I got some almost unbelievable snorts of rage. Some of them came in particular from General Bradley's G-2, General Sibert. One day the Chief of Military History said to me, "That general's rather upset with you. I wonder if he could come and talk to you?" And I said "I'm not accustomed to having generals come to see me. I go to see them." So I went to his headquarters in Washington. His first question was, "How high is your clearance for access to secret material?" And I said I was "BIGOTed"* at the time of the Neptune phase of Overlord. I'd had cryptographic clearance, Top Secret, and all of that. General Sibert responded that this was not high enough and he'd be courtmartialed if he told me. I've been told in later years he was the main source for Anthony Cave Brown's books. But he didn't tell Brown everything, so you get some things skewed in Brown as you see when you get to Ultra revelations. And he said [that] if he could tell me, then I wouldn't hold him responsible for the intelligence failure. There was some information that they were no longer getting that they used to have. Well, that was that. It is very difficult to write history on the basis of "if you could just know what I know then you would know."

About two days after speaking to this general, his wartime deputy, then Deputy CIA, called me and said, "He's right. He can't tell you, and he's right that he didn't have certain information." That settled that, but a week later [General Walter] Bedell Smith, then head of CIA, called me and said, in effect, "I'm getting some flak from General Strong, Eisenhower's G-2, and he wants me to tell you that he informed me exactly what was going to happen, and I paid no attention to him." I don't think General Smith really intended for me to accept that fully, but he was being broadminded. General Smith then said, "But you know what he's talking about though?" I said, "Well it's something black." And he said, "Yes, how did you find out?" And I said, "You told me two or three years ago." I know now he hadn't in so many words. He told me a great deal probably that he shouldn't have, but I didn't know the effective part of the source of Ultra. And I had written for a long time in the belief that this was spy-oriented, spy-directed information, rather

than the type which Ultra was depending on in particular. But that didn't get the generals off the hook for what I had written. So I told General Smith that this did not let these generals off the hook. They had the information in their hands, and they did not give it to the commanders involved. And he said, "No, they were trying to outguess the Germans rather than depend upon German capability."

It so happened that I had recently read the manuscript of General Bradley's book in which he says just that—nobody gave him the kind of information that would cause him to take unusual preparations to meet a German attack. And I finally settled with his G-2 on the basis that I would say nothing worse about it than General Bradley had said. I doubt seriously if he enjoyed reading that part of Bradley's book.

Now the funny thing—not funny for the people involved—is that the last G-2 report written before the attack came from General Bradley's headquarters. And it began with a very flashy beginning: "The enemy has had it." You got the impression that within a few weeks the enemy would roll over and play dead. I asked why that was written? It was very interesting reading, very exciting, showing how the German Army had deteriorated to the point that it could no longer act. General Sibert told me that no one was reading his G-2 Reports, so they decided to put a little "umph" into them. And they got a well-known editorial writer named Major Ralph Ingersoll, who had written a beautiful book called *The Battle Is the Payoff*. And they asked if he couldn't make the reports a little more exciting. And so he made it exciting: "The enemy has had it." Even at that, he probably came off about as well as Monty's G-2, who almost had it but muffed it. Monty's G-2, looking over the whole situation, made a proper statement—if Hitler were still running the war, we could expect a surprise action before Christmas. But he went on: "We know that von Rundstedt is now running the war and he is a cautious man." Now he guessed the psychology absolutely correctly. It was a positive piece of analysis. Hitler, if he were running the war, would launch that type of thing. In fact, Hitler *was* running the war. Von Rundstedt, when given the benefit of Hitler's ideas, did not favor it. But Hitler was in charge.

I will say this in favor of the G-2 of the British Army or British Headquarters. His next G-2 report began "How wrong I was." That came because he was a history don at Oxford before he got into the G-2 business and returned there after the war and retired very recently as Warden of Rhodes House. One trouble, beyond the fact that everyone tended to approach what the Germans might do on the basis of what we

*A special clearance status for officers with access to plans for the invasion of Europe. —Ed.

might do under the same circumstance, was the fact that we thought that the war was about over; therefore we weren't worried about what the Germans could do to us. There was this fact that I've just mentioned: we assumed that von Rundstedt was running the war, when he was not. Von Rundstedt had believed for some time that the war was lost. He was not about to kill off a number of his troops just to have a last gamble before the end of the year. His view had been for some time to make the best peace possible. He was willing to have a small solution in the general area of Aachen to throw off the timetable, in the hope that the Allies, who were also getting weary of the war, might be willing to negotiate a better peace than the one that they would impose in case the war continued until Germany's collapse.

Now let us approach the point I was asked to mention today. What was the overall effect of the lack of Ultra? What happened on this badly stretched front of the VIII Corps, which ran from 70 to 90 miles, seemed astonishing to some Americans. It was assumed that the enemy would not come through that country. The road net was wrong. It runs north-south, instead of east-west. It was forested, it was mountainous, and the roads were narrow and winding. They were not right for tanks.

Of course the Germans had come through there in 1870. They'd come through there in 1940, but that was in better weather. Marshall had gone along that front in October and said it looked to him as if we were getting thin. And he was told the Germans were not coming through there. Later, people said they had hoped the Germans would attack there. But Marshall's comment was, "I don't believe they had in mind wanting what happened." As a matter of fact, that's what Bedell Smith replied to Bradley when the latter said that they were glad the Germans had come out where they could be destroyed. And Smith said that he did not think they expected exactly what happened.

So you had the enemy pouring through. It disrupted our timetable for ending the war from four to six weeks. We suffered something like 70,000 casualties, which was one of the largest for that period of fighting. This was not as important to us as it would have been to the Germans in that we were beginning to send over the last of our well-trained division, were able to divert from the Pacific units that were prepared to go there, and were able to find roughly 100,000 men in the rear echelons. Men that were quite able to fight. It was a serious inconvenience in that we didn't have the information that we wanted, rather than a great catastrophe. Those people who like to deal in might have been indicate, of course, that this delay meant

that we were still trying to cross the Roer in the spring when the Russians were approaching the Oder, and that we were still trying to push across the Elbe when the Russians had been within thirty or forty miles of Berlin and just sitting there.

This can be overdone, but at the same time when you are talking about the value of intelligence — if you get it or if you use that which you have, imperfect as it may be, in the best way possible — helps explain part of the story of the Ardennes. Above all, I think the lesson was then and may still be now, that if a new type of intelligence becomes available, you should not forget your skills with the old, conventional type and you should not disregard that conventional type. I think everyone who dealt with this matter concluded in retrospect that you must not violate one of the rules of intelligence analysis: you must not try to guess what the enemy may think, but you must think of what he is capable of doing at a particular time, and at a particular place.

Dr. Pogue, a noted military historian, is Director of the Dwight D. Eisenhower Institute for Historical Research, Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution. He holds an AB from Murray (Ky.) State University, an MA from the University of Kentucky, and a PhD from Clark University. Dr. Pogue has served on the faculty of Western Kentucky State College and Murray State University and has been a professional lecturer in the field of international relations and diplomatic history at George Washington University. He began his career as a military historian in 1943, serving as assistant historian with the Second Army (Memphis) and later as combat historian with the First Army in the European Theater of Operations. Since the war, he has served as a member of the Historical Section, U.S. Forces European Theater, an operations research analyst with the Operations Research Office at John Hopkins University, Director of the George C. Marshall Research Center and later of the Marshall Research Library. Dr. Pogue, author of a three-volume biography of General Marshall, has a number of other published works to his credit, including *The Supreme Command*—the Army's official account of General Eisenhower's decisions and operations in Northwest Europe, 1944-45. Dr. Pogue is the recipient of several honorary degrees and other awards for professional achievement.