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Matthew Ridgway and the Battle of the Bulge

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One of the richest collections at the Army Heritage and Education Center is that of Matthew B. Ridgway, who served with distinction in World War II as a division and corps commander, in Korea as an army and theater commander, and eventually as chief of staff of the Army. He was in the habit of writing a memorandum for his personal diary every day describing key events. Furnished here are excerpts from his war diary during the Battle of the Bulge, when he commanded the XVIIIth Airborne Corps. Events were moving so fast for him that he had to consolidate his entries for the first few days. But he still took time to create longer entries for key decisions. His account provides a rich picture of the decisions a senior leader may face in large-scale combat operations.

Ridgway rarely gets proper credit for his role in the Bulge. As described in his diary, his corps, in the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force strategic reserve in the United Kingdom, was alerted on December 17, 1944, for movement to the continent. He soon detached his 101st Airborne Division to VIIIth Corps to defend Bastogne, while retaining the 82nd Airborne Division, commanded by MG James M. Gavin, to bolster the defense of the north shoulder of the enemy penetration under control of First US Army. He was also eventually given command of all (or elements) of the 30th and 84th Infantry Divisions and three armored divisions, along with the shattered remnants of the 106th Infantry Division, a total force more the size of an army than a corps.

One of Ridgway’s key early decisions was to abandon, finally, the key town of St. Vith, heroically defended by the 7th Armored Division. That thorn in the German side had significantly slowed their advance and helped channel their drive west instead of north. Ridgway included in his diary letters from BG Robert “Bob” Hasbrouck, commander of the 7th, and records of conversations with MG William Kean, chief of staff of First Army. Ridgway wrestled with many problems. He had to quickly absorb the new units into his corps and create relationships with their commanders. He had to figure out what to do with MG Alan Jones, who had two of his regiments surrender and had only parts of his 106th division left, but technically outranked Hasbrouck in St. Vith. (Ridgway eventually moved Jones up to be his deputy.) As the battle over the town continued, there was a major reorganization of Allied forces, as Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery of the 21st Army Group took overall command of all forces on the north side of the Bulge, another new
personality for Ridgway to deal with. And German pressure on the key bottleneck increased. Hasbrouck’s letters describe his situation clearly, and Ridgway’s recounting of his conversation with Kean show how the corps commander viewed his options and responsibilities for the troops in the town. He also considered the ramifications of heavy bombing of Belgian towns through cloud cover to possibly support St. Vith, an option deemed unacceptable at the time. Ridgway had to balance the needs of the defense with the welfare of the soldiers involved. When withdrawal was finally authorized, it was a near-run thing, with many casualties, among retreating infantry of BG Bruce Clarke’s combat command especially. Hasbrouck and Clarke thought Ridgway should have authorized the withdrawal sooner. But most of the division was saved, and resistance against the German advance was maintained.
Notified to move early on December 18, 1944, Ridgway initially deployed to Bastogne along with his 101st Airborne. Ordered to reorganize his corps and report to First US Army Headquarters (FUSA HQ) for orders, he had to maneuver around German units to escape. By the time he arrived at FUSA HQ, he had already developed a plan of action for his new command.
Map by Peter McPhail
20 December 1944. At 1030, FUSA G-3, General THORSON, phoned to ask if I could report to Army Commander at Army CP right away. I informed him I would leave within five minutes and did so, arriving Army CP at 1130. General HODGES outlined the situation, informed me I would have the following additional forces – 30th Division, 84th Division, 7th Armored with remnants of 106th Infantry Division, attached CC 112, all with present attachments, and approved my plan of operations, which was generally as follows: to pivot on MALMEDY, advancing vigorously to the SE and E with three divisions abreast, in order from left to right, 30th, 82d AB, 3d Armored; destroy or drive back all enemy forces in zone; reestablish contact with isolated elements of 7th Armored and 106th Divisions; and be prepared for further offensive action. He also informed me of the contemplated change of boundary between 1st and 12th Army Groups, which would place Ninth and First US Armies under 1st Army Group operational control. I telephoned back to arrange a meeting of divisional commanders at 1430, and arrived back at my CP at 1400. Presented situation to CG’s, 30th Infantry, 82d AB and 3d Armored Divisions at between 1430 and 1500, giving them orally operations instructions for the next twenty-four hours. These were confirmed in writing later. At 1600, CG, 84th Division, reported in, informing me that CT 334 should close in the MARCHE area by daylight, CT 335 by 211600, and CT 333 by 212000. He recommended employment of these CT’s, if necessary, in the order 333, 335, 334. I informed him I preferred to employ his division as a whole, and would use his CT’s separately only as an emergency measure.

Called to FUSA HQ on the morning of December 20, 1944, Ridgway received new orders and new units. He arranged a face-to-face meeting with all his division commanders that afternoon, and issued oral instructions for the next 24 hours of operations.
CO’s Remarks:

30th Div will hold on present front line. 2d En 117 is to reach
the CCB 3d Armd. the 82d push rapidly to the SE, secure and
hold line VILLESAY, thence in a general line (pointing). 3d Armd
plus attached, general vicinity of BRANVILLE, first along road,
get reconnaissance out to phase line.
General Ridgway:

Operational Instructions No. 4, XVIII Corps (AB) have just been received. Attached is an overlay showing our dispositions at present. The bearer, Lt. Col. Hodgson, can explain them.

Yesterday (Wednesday, 20 Dec.) the enemy felt us out at GOUVY (720779) and CHERM (605775) where we have pitifully small forces. We held but he will be back stronger today. My reserve is small and comprises a tank battalion, less one medium company, two platoons of infantry, one TD company and a hodgepodge of remnants of the 14th Cav. Group which are perhaps more of a liability than an asset. My G-2, from PWs and captured documents, believes the 116th Pz and 117th Pz (a new one) will attack northwest across our right flank and rear. We captured the Finance Officer from the 58th Pz Corps last night who got lost. His records indicate strength of the 116th Pz to be 17,000 men. That is unbelievable but he corroborates it.

The town of SAMREE (505810) is in enemy hands and is reported by PWs as being held by two infantry battalions, and some tanks (we saw five there) supported by artillery. It is important that this town be recaptured immediately as there is a large quantity of gasoline there.

The town of ORTHO (483717) is being attacked. Company C, 129th Ordnance Company of my division plus odds and ends my Trains Commander has picked up is defending it so far successfully. I do not know the strength of the attack.

I do not believe one Combat Command, 3d Armored Division is strong enough to accomplish the mission which Operational Instructions No. 4, XVII Corps gives it and urgently recommend a stronger force. I also recommend that the 30th Division advance on RECHT (797947) at earliest practicable moment.

In order that you may know a little of what has gone on here, I submit the following sketchy narrative.

My division arrived during the late afternoon of Sunday, 17 December, and immediately took over defense of St. Vith absorbing two Engineer Companies, 106th Division which were about all the 106th had left at that point. Major General Jones, Commanding General, 106th, continued to command troops south of St. Vith which at that time consisted only of CO "B", 8th Armored Division and 484th Infantry, the latter in poor shape. On Tuesday, the 118th Infantry was discovered south of us. I informed General Jones who took it under his command and placed it on line southeast and adjacent to his 484th Infantry. The 118th and 484th have both been so roughly handled that I am backing them up with a provisional

On December 21, 1944, Ridgway was faced with the crisis at St. Vith, the key position restricting the German advance in the early part of the battle. BG Hasbrouck’s letter is clear describing the situation of his 7th Armored Division, as well as that of other units there. Particularly vexing is what to do with MG Alan Jones, of the shattered 106th Division.
force formed of remnants of the 14th Cavalry Group.

The 14th Cavalry Group was attached to me on Monday afternoon, 18 December and I have had it reorganized into a reduced strength
squadron and gave it twenty-four hours rest. It is now being used
in various Task Forces to protect my south flank but its combat
value is uncertain. I am supplying them. We have various attach-
ments of units, some legal and some we just found and appropriated.

The 106th Division, as nearly as I can find out, comprises
one RCT and some service troops. Two of its regiments were
surrounded southeast of SCHONBERG (952888) and we were not able to
rescue them. Some other elements are somewhere west of the
L'OURTHE River. However, Major General Allan Jones, the Commanding
General and his Division Headquarters are present in VIELESAIM
(703890) with my Tactical Headquarters. He is a Major General, I
am a Brigadier so it is probably not legal to attach him to me.
Possibly Army didn't realize he and his Headquarters are present.
I most definitely do not want to be attached to him and suggest he
be directed to cooperate with me in holding our present positions
which I know he will do. We have been getting along on that basis
alright.

/s/ R. W. HASBROUCK
Brigadier General, USA
Commanding

P.S. Please assist us in getting all the air support possible.
We have had none.

I have ordered a radio car to report to your Headquarters
in order that we may have communication.

The only maps we have are 1/100,000. Your overlays do not
fit them. Please supply us with 1/50,000 maps if possible.

We have no air photographs of this area. It would help
tremendously if any are available.

/s/s RWH
RECORD OF GEN. RIDGWAY'S SIDE OF CONVERSATION WITH GEN. KIAH.

210350 December 1944.

Here's my size-up of this thing. This threat in the south, which has not yet developed, will come on shortly after daylight, in conjunction with powerful thrusts such as succeeded in driving Bob out of St. VITH. I seriously doubt his ability and that of his teammates to hold. I have nothing to put out which can stop an attack of that strength, the 2d SS Panzer. I've got three suggestions. I have talked to my Air Officer, and I propose, if we can get the air support, to set mediums on that bivouac area, bombing through clouds if necessary, at 0700, and also on the road from GOMY to LEMAY, and finally the town of St. VITH. Certain destruction, certain delay, certain disorganization will be as much as can be done. That, plus a little long-range artillery fire, shooting from the . Maybe they have not the range in those areas, but it is all I can put out. I doubt if that's going to be sufficient to save the people from surrendering way out beyond. I would like to authorize their withdrawal back to the 82d area tonight. I think it can be made in orderly fashion. I would like to get air support on the division bivouac area reported by the prisoner-of-war in any event. What do you think of that proposal?

I don't feel the threat from the north has direct pressure on him. The dangerous threat is of the entire division in the south coming around the west flank. Even with his teammates, all he can put in are a few reconnaissance troops, if direct pressure is maintained from the north.

That hit him the day before yesterday. They pounded him and sid- slipped to the southwest, feeling for a soft spot which they found and went through the opening. They didn't waste any time fooling with him. What I propose to do is this. I've got my Deputy Chief who is to find out Bob's attitude, and authorize coordinated withdrawal with his teammates if, in his opinion, it is necessary. I was with him until about 1630 this afternoon. There was no in- formation at the time I left him. He told me everything was all right.

He loses that vital road net, but I don't see it does otherwise; I don't know the ground out there.

One other possibility, which likewise entails possible sacrifices, is that in connection with this bombing through the clouds, if we could get it, would be to have that force out and attack in a general southwesterly direction, so as to strike where the outfit ought to be at that time, southwest of the reported bivouac area. Follow in direct offensive action in connection with the air thing. Probably lose it.
After assessing the options in St. Vith, Ridgway called the chief of staff of FUSA. This memorandum presents Ridgway’s view of that conversation. His description of the critical situation and plea for air support included a discussion of the strategic implications of heavy bombing of Belgian towns. Ridgway eventually received permission to withdraw from St. Vith. The air attacks he desired were eventually executed a few days later in clear weather.
MEMORANDUM:

TO: Commanding General, XVIII Corps

Some sort of build up north of our present position is indicated as artillery fire is being received in VIELSALM from the north or northeast.

Unless assistance is promptly forthcoming I believe our present position may become very serious for several reasons, namely:

a. Our supplies must come in through a bottleneck over a bridge near VIELSALM.

b. We may become subjected to enemy artillery fire from practically any direction.

c. The road net within our position is totally inadequate to the troops and vehicles concentrated therein. The map shows many roads, but on the ground, the majority of these are mere tracks on which even a jeep bogs down if more than two or three travel on it.

d. If the 2d SS Pz Division attack should succeed in driving back the two RCT's of the 5th AB Division now between SALMCHAUTEAU and RENNVAUX even as little as 3000 yards we will be completely severed from any source of supplies.

Since the chances of assistance in the immediate future do not seem bright, I would like to suggest that consideration be given to withdrawal of the 7th Arm'd and 106th Divisions to a position on the right (west) of the 82d Airborne Division where they may be of assistance in halting a possible advance north by the 2nd SS Panzer.

The withdrawal of CC "E" last night from ST. VITH was expensive. So far we are missing at least one half the infantry of Clarke's force. Of course many of them will show up, but they will be minus weapons, ammunition, blankets and rations as well as at a low physical level. I don't think we can prevent a complete breakthrough if another all-out attack comes against CC "E" tonight due largely to the fact that our original three infantry battalions have at present melted to the equivalent of only two very tired battalions.

/s/ R. W. Hasbrouck
/t/ R. W. HASBROUCK
Brigadier General, U. S. A.
Commanding.

221118

P.S. A strong attack has just developed against Clarke again. He is being outflanked and is retiring west another 2000 yards refusing
Even after pulling out of St. Vith, Hasbrouck’s situation remained dire. Ridgway received this letter asking for permission to withdraw further at 1150 on December 22, 1944.
Within 35 minutes, Ridgway sent orders acceding to Hasbrouck’s request. They were submitted through MG Alan Jones, who was technically the senior officer on the scene. Eventually Ridgway would pull him back to serve as the corps deputy. Early in the afternoon, FUSA, with the approval of their new Army Group Commander, approved pulling the battered division off the line and into corps reserve. Montgomery was up at the front to see the situation for himself.