

BATTLE OF THE ARDENNES

Interview with Lieutenant Colonel OTTO SKORZENY, Commanding Officer
for Operation "Greif"

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Interrogator : Lieutenant R. E. Merriam
Interpreter : Captain Samuel J. McGune
Place of Interview : USFET Interrogation Center, Oberusel, Germany.
Circumstances : Inasmuch as Lieutenant Colonel SKORZENY's remarks were given largely in narrative form, and questioning was only to amplify on his account as he progressed this report is presented as a narrative paraphrasing his remarks.



PLANNING FOR THE ATTACK

About the end of October 1944 Hitler called me to his headquarters in East Prussia and told me of the plans for a Winter Offensive. Hitler said this was the decisive offensive for us and that the first step would be to reach the MEUSE River between LIEGE and NAMUR. If this succeeded we were to continue on to ANTWERP to cut off the Northern front. He told me about the tremendous quantity of material which had been accumulated and I recall that he mentioned that we would have 6,000 artillery pieces in the ARDENNES, and in addition the Luftwaffe would have about 2,000 planes including numerous of the new Strahl (ME 262) planes. He then told me that I would lead a panzer brigade which would be trained to reach the MEUSE River bridges and capture them intact. I told him that if I were to do this in the short time I was allotted I would have to give up all my other work. Hitler agreed to this and told me that the Army would send some of its best officers for my unit. Hitler then sent me to see Jodl. He gave me more details about the plan and the role of the Brigade. I then spoke to General Keitel and a Colonel, and they com-

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pleted the details of my role.

About the end of November or first of December, I was again called to Hitler's Hq, this time in BERLIN, to discuss further plans for the attack. Hitler was not present at this conference. We were told that we would initially have three days' supply of rations and munitions and that there was a sufficient supply of trucks burning wood gasoline to bring up additional supplies. We were told not to worry, but it readily became apparent to me that there were too many promises being made. I was privately told that there would only be about 140 planes in the West instead of the 2,000 that Hitler had mentioned.

The offensive was postponed several times and I only knew on 14 December that it would finally begin on 16 December.

Immediately after my first meeting with Hitler my troops began to arrive, and training was begun. At this time I was the only one of our Brigade who knew of the plans for the attack. In the middle of November, I called together my three group commanders and told them that we were expecting an American offensive somewhere in the AACHEN sector and that our plan was to let the Americans penetrate our lines and then cut them off. At this time our Brigade was to create considerable disturbance in the rear lines, and to help in the annihilation of these forces. Around the first of December all of the officers of the Brigade learned this same sketch of our plans, and it was not until 10 December that even the group commanders knew about the actual plans for the attack.

ORGANIZATION OF SKORZENY'S UNITS



My organization was composed of two main groups: the Commando Unit and the 150th Panzer Brigade.

The Commando unit was composed of English-speaking men who had been withdrawn from various units in the armed forces. I received about 600 men initially and from these I picked 150 of the best. All were equipped with American uniforms and jeeps. They were divided into three groups:

(1) Explosive Groups. These were composed of from five to six men in each group whose job was to blow bridges, munition dumps and gasoline dumps;

(2) Reconnaissance Groups. These units with from three to four men were to reconnoiter in depth east and west of the MEUSE River to recognize enemy tank, artillery, and other unit movements. Some of these groups were equipped with radios with which they were to send back information of these movements. These groups were also instructed to give false commands to units they met, to reverse road signs, to remove minefield signs, and to put white strips in streets with no mines so that the enemy force would believe the roads blocked;

(3) "Lead" Commandos. These groups of from three to four men were principally to disturb enemy leadership by cutting telephone wires, wrecking radio stations, and give false commands. They were to work closely with the attacking divisions.

The 150 Panzer Brigade was composed of two tank and one infantry combat group, each with its own small combat staff. The total forces of

the 150 Panzer Brigade was as follows:



- (1) My staff and a signal company
- (2) Three small combat staffs
- (3) Two signal companies—from the army (200 men)
- (4) Two battalions of Kampfgruppe 200—a parachutist unit from the GAF (800 men)
- (5) One company of Jagd Verband Mittle Battalion a special infantry battalion (175 men)
- (6) Two companies of Fsch Jager—battalion 600—a special infantry battalion (380 men)
- (7) Two tank companies—from the army (240 men)
- (8) Two panzer grenadier companies (350 men)
- (9) Two companies of heavy mortars—from the Army (200 men)
- (10) Two anti-tank companies—from the army (200 men)
- (11) One pioneer company (100 men)
- (12) Three vehicle repair companies (75 men).

All of these companies were somewhat weaker than an ordinary equivalent unit in the army. The two tank companies had 12 tanks each, half of which were either Sherman or Mark Twain tanks and the other half Panther (Mk V). In the panzer grenadier companies from two to three of the halftracks were American and the other ten to twelve were German.

The following is a sample organization of one of the tank combat groups:

- (1) A small staff
- (2) A platoon of signalmen



- (3) One company of tanks
 - (4) Three companies of infantry (120-150 men each)
 - a. Two companies of KC-200 parachutists
 - b. One company of Jagd Verband Mitte or Fsch JG Btl
- 600

- (5) Two platoons of heavy (12 cm) mortars
- (6) Two antitank platoons
- (7) Two platoons of panzer grenadiers
- (8) A platoon of pioneers
- (9) One vehicle repair group.

The two tank groups were both based on this organization while the infantry group was the same with the exception that it had no tanks.

PLAN FOR 150 PANZER BRIGADE

The mission of the brigade was to seize undamaged at least two MEUSE River bridges from among the following possibilities: AMAY, HUY, or ANDENNE. This was to be initiated when the attack of the panzer units of the Panzer Divisions reached the HOHE VENN, roughly on a line running northeast and southwest from SPA. At that time my troops were to move forward in the night and reach our objective six hours later. It was originally planned that the attack would reach the HOHE VENN on the first day and that we would move out that night. The plan could only be carried out when the area of the HOHE VENN had been reached because it was necessary to move forward with complete surprise and without having to fight. The three groups were then to move on parallel routes towards these three bridges with radio communication between the groups in order that they might shift around if resistance was encountered.



EMPLOYMENT OF THE COMMANDOS

We actually sent out during the first several days of the attack four groups of reconnaissance commandos and two groups of explosive commandos. In addition one group of leading commandos went with each of the following divisions: 1 SS Panzer, 12 SS Panzer, and one Volksgrenadier Division (I believe it was the 12 VG). Finally one unit went with each of the groups of the 150 Panzer Brigade. A total of 44 men were actually sent through your lines. Of these all but eight returned.

In the first two or three days when your positions were extremely disorganized we were able to get some information from these commando groups. The following are some of the facts which these units brought back to me:

(1) A jeep drove through MALMEDY and discovered that the town was very lightly held;

(2) Enemy movements were spotted south of LIEGE, but not on a heavy scale;

(3) We discovered that all airports east of the MEUSE River had been withdrawn. This was very important to us because we then knew that the enemy Air Force would not be immediately employed (SKORZENY did not enlarge upon this point, but it is believed that he was thinking of the time which would be required to establish the fighter-bombers on new fields west of the MEUSE. Actually, there were very few, if any, airports in the ARDENNES area east of the MEUSE River--REM);

(4) We located munition depots at LIEGE and HUY, and one group reported that they had destroyed a small munitions dump;



(5) We located one gasoline dump which I think was in the neighborhood of VAUX CHAUVENNE. This location was reported to I SS Panzer Corps;

(6) One group claimed to have misdirected an entire American regiment, but of course we cannot be sure that this is so. However, we did monitor some American broadcasts which mentioned the fact that a regiment was being sought for two or three days. (A regiment of the 84th Infantry Division was directed down the wrong road by an MP as the unit moved into the ARDENNES sector. It is very possible that this was the unit referred to because no trace could be found of an American MP who had been at this particular intersection--REM).

We were not able to receive radio reports from the reconnaissance commandos because of the bad weather, fog, and wind, and because of the high hills between my headquarters in SCHMIDTHEIM and these units.

These jeep units got through the enemy lines by the following means:

(1) The jeeps would follow at the rear of an attacking panzer column and when the column got into a fire fight the jeeps would then move off the main road and travel around the battle area on side roads until they were behind the withdrawing American troops. This was very easy in the first several days of the confused fighting.

(2) Some of the jeeps moved through small trails in wooded areas until they were behind the enemy lines.

(3) Some of the units moved through at night.

Some of the units which came back through the lines were able to come back with their jeeps, while others came back on foot. During the first



several days the jeep units had no difficulty coming back with their vehicles.

The last men of the commando units were sent through the lines on 19 December. After this the element of surprise had been lost and it was already apparent that the attack of the Sixth Panzer Army was not going to reach its objective. After 19 December these commando units made only normal trips through the lines to locate artillery and tank positions. These trips were made as ordinary reconnaissance, and the men were once again equipped with German uniforms.

USE OF 150 PANZER BRIGADE

The 150 Panzer Brigade moved into the area of the ARDENNES on 14 December in the neighborhood of MUNSTEREIFEL. We had moved into the area mainly by night and the tanks were always kept deep in the woods during the day. Our soldiers were not allowed to go into towns in the area, nor did we send any men to the front lines prior to the attack. I considered it much more important to conceal our movements than to risk betraying the offensive by conducting reconnaissance. On the afternoon of 16 December the Brigade moved out, and from there the combat groups moved in behind the attacking divisions. The units were placed at therear of the leading elements of the divisions to which they were assigned, and the plan was that they were to move around the divisions on side roads once the objective HOHE VENN was reached.

The three combat groups of the 150 Panzer Brigade were split between the 1 and 12 SS Panzer Divisions and a Volksgrenadier Division with I SS Panzer Corps. The only chance that these units had to successfully complete their mission was during the first two days, inasmuch as it was necessary

that they go through to the MEUSE River without fighting. They were not strong combat forces and were to be used mainly to hold the bridges for a short time once they had been seized.



When the Sixth Panzer Army did not reach the projected starting point for their maneuver in the first two days, I realized that the whole plan would not succeed, and that we would never be able to get our small combat groups through to the MEUSE bridges. I therefore went to the Commanding General, Sixth Panzer Army and recommended to him that we pull my three combat groups together and use them as a normal army unit.

My recommendation was accepted, and the three combat groups were brought together and assembled south of MALMEDY. At that time I took personal command of the Brigade because the Brigade commander, HARDICK had been killed on the first day. At that time we were working directly under I SS Panzer Corps, and although this was the I SS Panzer Division sector the division commander could not give me any commands.

I was given the mission by Corps to attack MALMEDY on 21 December, and early on that day I attacked with two combat groups, one moving on the town from the east and the other from the south. The third group was held in reserve. The attack from the east was immediately stopped and the attack from the south was halted at about 1500.

In the time between our initial reconnaissance in MALMEDY and this attack, strong enemy forces had been moved into the town and taken up defensive positions. I had no artillery whatsoever with my Brigade, and when I realized the strength of the enemy positions I ordered a withdrawal to defensive positions south of MALMEDY. We remained in these positions until 29

December when we withdrew because of continuous losses to enemy artillery fire. Our lack of artillery was a great handicap.



SUMMARY

Losses to the Brigade amounted to 15% of the strength. About 450 men were either killed, wounded, or missing of a strength of 3,000. These losses were mostly due to artillery fire and some airplane attacks. A number of the men had been lost around HOLZHEIM on the first and second days. These losses were also from enemy artillery fire.

After we withdrew from the line south of MALMEDY we went to SCHLIERBACH and on 2 January we withdrew completely to the area south of KOHNWAHU and from there we went by train to GRAFENWOEHR. There we disbanded, and the men returned to their original units.

COMMENTS ON PLOT TO CAPTURE GENERAL EISENHOWER.

We did not plan to capture high American officials. This was never part of the scheme.

About the beginning of November when the unit was organized the soldiers began to spread rumors about the employment of this special unit. Naturally we censored all the mail, and at first we tried to suppress these rumors. By the middle of November I began to realize that it would be impossible to try to stop the rumors, many of which were spread by officers in the units. I had a meeting with FOLKERSAM, who was my chief of staff, and HARDICK and we finally decided that we would let the rumors go but direct them so that they didn't come too close to the truth. Inasmuch as the three of us were the only ones who knew of the plans for our employment, this was

not a difficult task. I specifically recall that some of the men were claiming that our unit was to single-handedly capture ANTWERP, and other reports that we were to use our Brigade to drive to DUNKIRK and free the German troops encircled in that town. I am quite certain that the rumor about capturing General EISENHOWER was started in this way. Naturally we finally began to encourage these rumors on the theory that it would conceal the true purpose of the Brigade.

NOTE:

The highest American rank that we used was that of a colonel. We had no Brigadier Generals in our commandos.

