THE BATTLE OF HÜRTGEN FOREST

DATE: SEPTEMBER 19 – DECEMBER 16 1944

Although it is little remembered today, the battle for the Hürtgen Forest was one of the worst defeats ever suffered by the US Army. In three months of combat operations, the Americans sustained almost 33,000 casualties but accomplished almost nothing tactically or operationally in the process.

By late August 1944, the apparently defeated German army had been pushed out of France and back to the borders of the Reich. Many GIs began to believe that the war would be over by Christmas. But the situation changed as the Allies reached German territory and the defenses of the German West Wall (called the Siegfried Line by the Americans but never by the Germans). In the central sector of the West Wall defensive line lay the dark and almost impenetrable Hürtgen Forest.
At this point in the war, the Allied logistics system was stretched to breaking point, and the advancing armies were on the verge of running out of ammunition and fuel. Allied military planners were faced with two strategic options of attacking Germany - on a broad front or on a narrow front. Lieutenant General George S. Patton Jr. and Field Marshal Sir Bernard Montgomery were the two leading advocates of the narrow-front approach, but each general thought his forces should execute the "dagger thrust" into the heart of the Reich.

Pressed hard by Montgomery, Supreme Allied Commander General Dwight D. Eisenhower agreed in September 1944 to support the British plan for a combined ground and airborne thrust into Holland and then across the Rhine River at Arnhem. Launched on 17 September, Operation MARKET GARDEN soon failed. With supplies starting to dwindle to a trickle, the Allies had no real choice other than to revert to the broad-front strategy of applying even pressure against the Germans all along the line.

Just prior to the start of MARKET GARDEN, the US First Army, commanded by Lieutenant General Courtney H. Hodges, breached the West Wall in two places and attacked the city of Aachen immediately north of the Hürtgen Forest. Hodges' 250,000-man force consisted of eight veteran divisions in the US VII, V, and VIII Corps. After taking Aachen, Hodges planned to attack around the north end of the Hürtgen Forest across the flat open Rhine plain toward the city of Köln (Cologne). But Hodges also believed that he had to first secure the Hürtgen Forest to avoid dangerously exposing his southern flank.
The Hürtgen Forest is a classic piece of defender’s terrain. It is an interlaced network of bald, exposed ridgelines and deeply wooded ravines, and the Roer River runs through the middle of the forest and then out across the Rhine plain. The small river itself was not a significant military obstacle, but a series of dams high in the forest had created a huge artificial lake holding millions of gallons of water. By releasing that water at the right moment, the Germans could flood the Rhine plain, which would slow, disrupt, and channelize Allied military movement for weeks. Those dams, in the vicinity of the town of Schmidt, were the one significant military operational objective in the Hürtgen Forest; but ironically, neither side appeared to recognize that significance until the battle was almost over.

Although the German army had a reputation as the master of mobile, offensive warfare, it also was tenacious and resourceful in the defense. The German army group commander in that sector, Field Marshal Walter Model, was a master defensive tactician.

The Hürtgen Forest campaign started on 12 September when the veteran 9th Infantry Division attacked the southern end of the forest in an attempt to move through a passage known as the Monschau Corridor. The 9th Infantry Division took the town of Lammersdorf in the south, but it was stopped just short of Germeter in the center of the forest. In late October, the 9th Infantry Division was withdrawn from the line after suffering 4,500 casualties. The 28th Infantry Division replaced it.

The US First Army planned another attack, this time with VII Corps, commanded by Major General J. Lawton Collins. It was to move through the northern passage called the Stolberg Corridor. As a diversionary effort to draw off German forces, Major Leonard Gerow’s V Corps to the south would attack with one division against Schmidt on the far side of the Kall River gorge. The supporting attack was scheduled for 2 November, and the main attack was to follow on 5 November. However, VII Corps could not get ready in time, and the main attack was postponed - first until 10 November and then until 16 November. For some reason, the timing for the supporting attack never changed.
The 28th Infantry Division launched the attack toward Schmidt with all three of its infantry regiments attacking in diverging directions, which dissipated rather than concentrated its combat power. The most notable feature of that battle was the near-epic struggle to get a handful of M-4 tanks and M-10 tank destroyers down the steep and narrow forest trail into the Kall River gorge and back up the other side to the open ground near the towns of Kommerscheidt and Schmidt. The 112th Infantry Regiment took Schmidt on 3 November. The Germans counterattacked immediately, supported by Panther tanks.

The Americans were still trying to punch their way through the Hürtgen Forest and making almost no progress when, on 16 December, the Germans launched their Ardennes Offensive to the south. The almost complete tactical and operational surprise the Germans achieved brought the Hürtgen Forest campaign to a halt, as all Allied forces focused on containing the Germans in the Battle of the Bulge. Even after the major German offensive was turned back, the Americans did not take Schmidt and the Roer River dams until early February 1945. Just before the Germans withdrew, they managed to blow up the valves controlling the spillway of the Schwammenauel Dam, the major dam in the system.

The Hürtgen Forest campaign was a brilliantly executed economy-of-force operation by the Germans. Most of the German records from this period did not survive, but Germany probably suffered more casualties than did the United States. Nonetheless, the Germans held the vastly better supplied and better equipped attackers to a dead standstill for three months, while just a few miles to the south, three German field armies assembled in almost complete secrecy for the Ardennes Offensive.

The Hürtgen Forest area today is little different than it was in late 1944 before the battle started. The forest has returned, and the tree lines are much as they were. The towns and villages have been reestablished and are today only slightly more built up than they were at the time of the battle. Very few markers or memorials exist to indicate the prolonged and savage fighting. Yet, hardly a year goes by without another discovery of human remains in the forest known as the "dark and bloody ground."
M’44 SCENARIOS FOR THE BATTLE OF HÜRTGEN FOREST

The Battle of Hurtgen Forest includes 15 scenarios, including 1 Overlord (OL) map. These scenarios chronicle the major engagements of the battle, and include only the best available in the Scenarios from the Front (SFTF) files section on the DoW website.

No campaign rules are included; not all M’44 players have access to the Campaign books. Instead, simply tally up the number of medals won in each scenario after playing both sides. A medal tally table is included below.

Although optional, it is suggested that you use the unofficial Battle of Nations rules when playing this campaign.

THE BATTLE OF HÜRTGEN FOREST

1. SEPT 12: Breach of the Siegfried Line **
2. SEPT 16 – SEPT 18: Siegfried
3. SEPT 17: Battle of Stolberg
4. SEPT 19: The Battle of Hurtgen Forest **
5. SEPT 19: Attack on Schmidt **
6. SEPT 19 – OCT 02: Battle of the Hurtgen Forest
7. NOV 02 – NOV 07: Hurtgen Forest Francisco
8. NOV 02: Hurtgen Forest Dawson **
9. NOV 02: Hurtgen Forest Oliver
10. NOV 02: Hurtgen Forest Skyler
11. NOV 02 – NOV 20: Hurtgenwald
12. Raffelsbrand **
13. NOV 16 – DEC 12: Push to the Roer OL
14. NOV 16 – DEC 16: The Push to the Ruhr
15. NOV 28: Hurtgen Forest **

**Scenario notes:
1. Breach of the Siegfried Line: both the Axis and Allied players begin with 6 cards. Allied player moves first.
2. The Battle of Hurtgen Forest: the 4 town medals are permanent medal objectives. Hill 400 is a temporary medal objective. You must hold all 5 to win.
3. Attack on Schmidt: both the Axis and Allied players begin with 5 cards. The Axis player moves first.
5. Raffelsbrand: Allied player: if you win by taking Raffelsbrand + 3 other medals, score the full 5 campaign medals.
6. Hurtgen Forest: BCF rules are in force for the British engineer units.
There are a total of 216 medals for the Battle of Hurtgen Forest if all scenarios are played, and 181 medals without the Overlord map.

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**Total Medal Tally** / /

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This Battle of Hurtgen Forest campaign booklet was compiled by Semba