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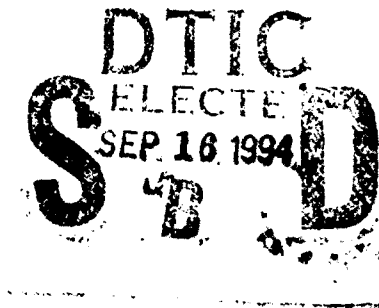
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German Special Operations in the 1944
Ardennes Offensive

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This study is a historical analysis of the German special operations conducted in support of their overall Ardennes offensive. It focuses on the two major special operations of the German offensive, Operations "Greif" and "Stoesser." Operation Greif was the German attempt to infiltrate a commando unit behind American lines disguised as American soldiers. Operation Stoesser, the last German airborne operation of the war, was designed to secure a key cross-roads behind American lines. These special operations failed because of faulty planning, inadequate preparation, and a lack of coordination between the special and conventional forces. These problems, exacerbated by a lack of preparation time, resulted in a pair of ad-hoc units that were unable to accomplish their primary missions, although the operations were characterized by boldness, initiative, and improvisation. This study also examines the strategic setting, planning, preparations, and conduct of these operations, as well as their impact on the overall campaign. This study also examines the key lessons-learned that can be derived from both operations. Lastly, the study explores the implications of these lessons for the U.S. military of today.

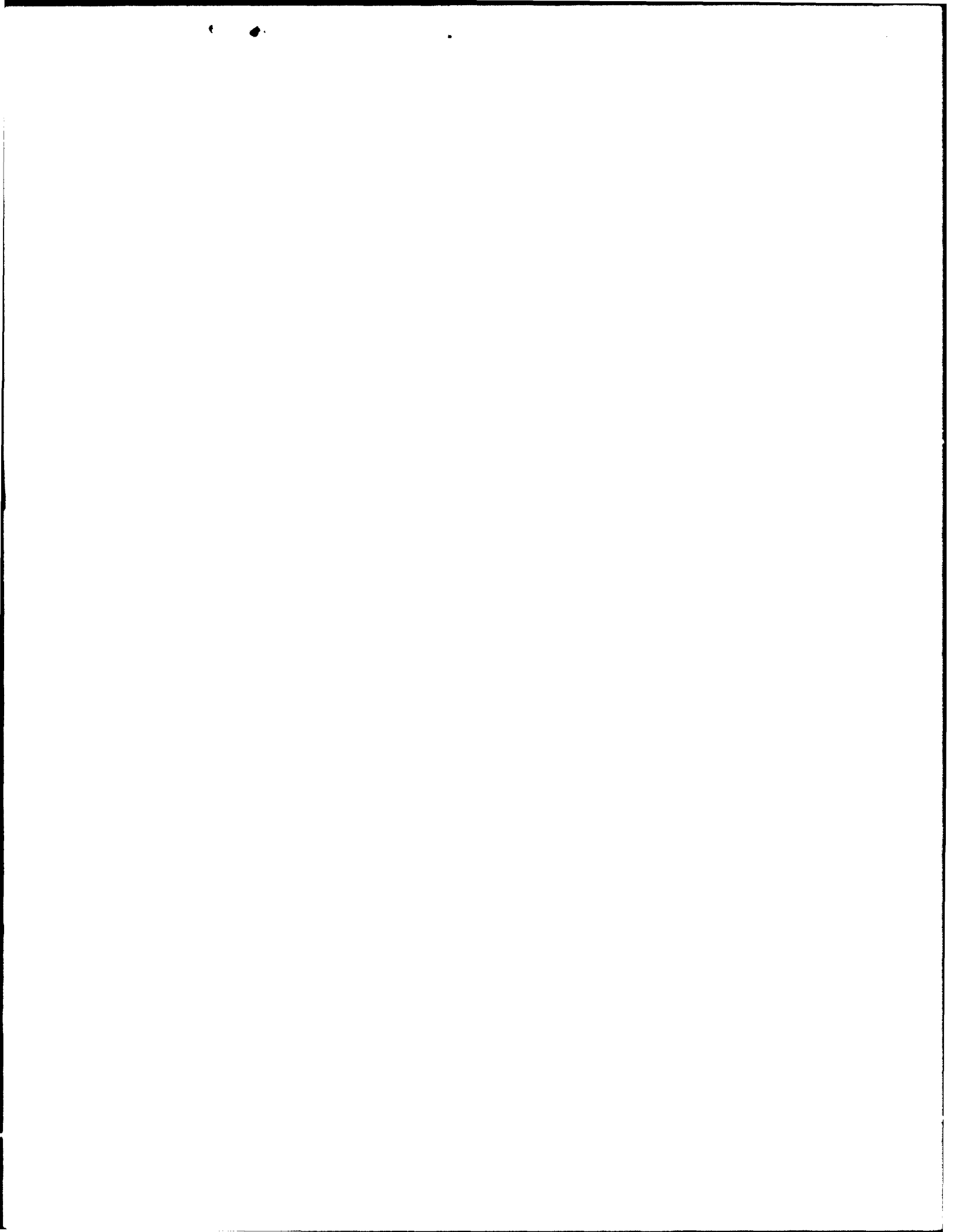
Special Operations, Ardennes Offensive, Battle of
the Bulge, WWII German Military, Greif, Stoesser

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GERMAN SPECIAL OPERATIONS
IN THE 1944 ARDENNES OFFENSIVE

A thesis presented to the faculty of the U. S. Army
Command and General Staff College in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree

MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE

by

JEFFREY JARKOWSKY, MAJ, USA
B.A., St. Peter's College, Jersey City, New Jersey, 1981

Fort Leavenworth, Kansas
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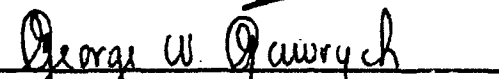
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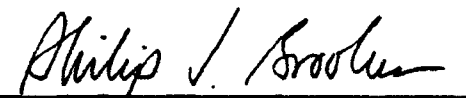

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The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the student author and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College or any other governmental agency. (References to this study should include the foregoing statement.)

ABSTRACT

GERMAN SPECIAL OPERATIONS IN THE 1944 ARDENNES OFFENSIVE by MAJ Jeffrey Jarkowsky, USA, 145 pages.

This study is a historical analysis of the German special operations conducted in support of their overall Ardennes offensive. It focuses on the two major special operations of the German offensive, Operations "*Greif*" and "*Stoesser*." Operation *Greif* was the German attempt to infiltrate a commando unit behind American lines disguised as American soldiers. Operation *Stoesser*, the last German airborne operation of the war, was designed to secure a key cross-roads behind American lines.

These special operations failed because of faulty planning, inadequate preparation, and a lack of coordination between the special and conventional forces. These problems, exacerbated by a lack of preparation time, resulted in a pair of ad-hoc units that were improperly manned, trained and equipped. As a result, the special operations units were unable to accomplish their primary missions, although the operations were characterized by boldness, initiative, and improvisation.

This study examines the strategic setting, planning, preparations, and conduct of these operations, as well as their impact on the overall campaign. This study also examines the key lessons-learned that can be derived from both operations. Lastly, the study explores the implications of these lessons for the U.S. military of today.

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

It was December 16th, 1944. The German offensive had just exploded along the entire Ardennes front. American vehicles clogged the Belgian roads as they streamed westward. A jeep, one many, crawled down the hill leading to Huy, Belgium, its gears straining to maintain its slow pace behind the column of American trucks. The four soldiers in the jeep strained to see the bridge that spanned the Meuse River. They also looked for a spot where they could pull out of the long, retreating, convoy. Soon, they found it.

Sergeant Rhode directed the driver to pull into a stretch of grassland right along the river, near the bridge. The radio operator contacted their base and relayed their vital message. They had reached the Meuse. Sergeant Rhode and his team had reached their assigned target. Their mission was to conduct a reconnaissance of the Meuse River bridge at Huy, Belgium for the advancing Sixth Panzer Army. Far from being GI's, the four soldiers were members of a German special operations unit, the Stielau Commando Company. They had successfully infiltrated almost 75 miles behind American lines to reach their target, which was a linch-pin in the German operational attack plans. They were conducting what U.S. Army special operations doctrine today calls "special reconnaissance." This team, however, was only a small part of a large and complex series of operations conducted by the German military during the Second World War's "Battle of the Bulge."¹

Along the Ardennes front and in its depths, German special operations units infiltrated American lines, maneuvered combat vehicles, and parachuted into the rear areas.

Their goal was to support and to assist the offensive and help achieve its success.

Ultimately, the German offensive failed. But what of these unique and special missions, did they fail too? What was their impact on the campaign? Who were these special units, what were their missions, and what did they really do? What can we learn from them?

A shroud of myth, confusion, and distortion still surrounds these units and their operations. Valuable insights and lessons remain hidden under this cloak. The goal of this study is to lift the fog and to bring forth the important lessons of these operations.

Successful special operations require detailed planning, thorough preparation of units, and mutual coordination among the organizations involved.

My thesis is that the German special operations conducted during the WW II Ardennes Offensive, "*Wacht Am Rhein*," were a failure because of faulty planning, inadequate preparation, and a lack of coordination between special and conventional forces. These problems, exacerbated by a lack of preparation time, resulted in a pair of ad-hoc units that were improperly manned, equipped, and trained, and that suffered from confused command and control. However, despite these handicaps, the special operations forces still achieved a positive impact on the campaign resulting from a combination of the use of boldness, initiative, and improvisation.

This study is a historical analysis of the German special operations conducted during the German offensive code-named "*Wacht Am Rhein*" (Watch on the Rhein). The intent of the thesis is to illuminate this specific subject and to provide a consolidated, focused source outlining these operations. Unfortunately, this topic is not adequately addressed in full detail in any one single source. Although there are numerous works concerning the Battle of the Bulge, as it became known to the American side, they do not address this specific subject in great detail. Also no source analyzes these operations in order to determine pertinent, historical lessons. Most importantly, no source links the

wealth of valuable experience from these operations to the current U.S. Army and its special operations forces and doctrine.

This thesis will analyze the planning, conduct, and impact of these special operations in relation to the larger overall campaign they supported. The analysis will describe the specifics of the operations and their outcomes. It will focus on identifying "lessons-learned" from these operations and applying them to the U.S. Army of today.

This thesis will seek to answer the primary question: "What are the lessons-learned from the German special operations conducted in support of *Wacht Am Rhein*? The thesis will provide an organized and analytical account of the German special operations from the perspective of a special operator. It will describe the missions, the units, and the leaders. It will present a mission analysis of their assigned tasks.

Additionally, it will show the interface between these operations and the overall campaign, and where they stood in the "big picture." It will trace the conduct of the operations and their impact on the larger campaign, and highlight their successes and failures, and their aftermaths. Finally, and most importantly, the thesis will derive and present the key lessons-learned of these operations. It will link them to current U.S. Army special operations doctrine with a view to providing a "tool" to aid planning and conducting, and perhaps combatting, future special operations.

My analysis will show that adequate resources must be available for planning, organizing, equipping, and training special operations forces properly and for coordinating with the other units or services involved. Also, I will show that special operations must not be conducted in a vacuum, but rather must be integrated into the overall campaign in order to successfully achieve the campaign objectives.

This thesis is limited to the German special operations conducted during their Ardennes Offensive, specifically Operations "*Greif*" and "*Stoesser*," as the campaign's commando and airborne operations were respectively called. It will cover the larger

Ardennes campaign only to put the special operations into perspective and to show their contributions to, and integration into, the offensive. Likewise, the American reactions to the operations will be addressed only to illustrate the degree of success of these missions. The thesis will introduce and explain current U.S. Army special operations doctrine only in the amount necessary to fully understand the lessons-learned, and give the reader an appreciation on how to apply these lessons in the future for both special or conventional operations.

The thesis is broken down into seven chapters, with each chapter building upon the previous one. This chapter will outline the thesis and its goals and will briefly describe special operations. Chapter 2, *Setting the Stage*, will show the reader where and how the special operations conducted fit into the "big picture" of the German campaign. This chapter will trace the genesis of the special operations missions. It will give the reader an idea of the time-line involved, the nature of the German military crisis, and the status of the opposing forces at the time of the battle. Chapter 3, *Special Operations Planning*, will focus on the specific planning for the German special operations missions. It will provide a mission analysis of the special tasks and describe how the operations supported the overall campaign plan.

Chapter 4, *Special Operation Preparation*, will outline how the special operations units were organized, trained, and equipped in preparation for their special missions. Chapter 5, *Conduct of Operations*, will focus on the actual execution of the operations. It will describe the sequence of activities and analyze the overall success or failure of the missions, and their impact on the campaign. Chapter 6, *Lessons-Learned*, will identify and analyze the lessons-learned that can be derived from these operations. Chapter 7, *Conclusion*, will discuss the significance of the operations and the lessons-learned, and apply them to current U.S. Army special operations. Finally, bibliographical notes will

address the utility of the sources used for the preparation of the thesis. A chronology and a glossary are provided to assist the reader.

Special operations are unique, high-risk, high-payoff missions conducted in an unconventional and often covert manner by specially selected, trained, and equipped units, usually behind enemy lines. They require accurate, timely, and precise intelligence, and thorough, detailed planning for success. They may be conducted unilaterally, or in support of a larger, conventional campaign, but their success or failure can often have significant strategic and operational impact. When conducted in conjunction with or as a part of an overall campaign, the special operations must be closely integrated and coordinated with the actions of the conventional operations in order to achieve the campaign objectives.

U.S. Army doctrine defines Special Operations (SO) as follows:

Special Operations are actions conducted by specially organized, trained, and equipped military and paramilitary forces to achieve military, political, economic, or psychological objectives by non-conventional means in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive areas. Special operations usually differ from conventional operations in their degree of risk, operational techniques, mode of employment, independence from friendly support, and dependence upon operational intelligence and indigenous assets.²

Like most elements of the art of war, successful special operations are founded upon several underlying and time-tested fundamentals. Current U.S. Army doctrine codifies these concepts as the "Special Operations Imperatives," which "special operations forces (SOF) operators must incorporate into their mission planning and execution if they are to use their forces effectively."³ Briefly, these imperatives are:

1. Understand the operational environment.
2. Recognize political implications.
3. Facilitate interagency activities.
4. Engage the threat discriminate.
5. Consider long-term effects.

6. Ensure legitimacy and credibility of SO activities.
7. Anticipate and control psychological effects.
8. Apply capabilities indirectly.
9. Develop multiple options.
10. Ensure long-term sustainment.
11. Provide sufficient intelligence.
12. Balance security and synchronization.⁴

Additionally, the U.S. Military special operations forces recognize several tenants that underlay successful special operations forces. These are known as the "SOF Truths" and are widely adopted within the current U.S. special operations community.⁵ The following "SOF Truths" provide the framework upon which effective SOF units are built:

1. Humans are more important than hardware.
2. Quality is better than quantity.
3. Special Operations Forces cannot be mass produced.
4. Competent Special Operations Forces cannot be created after emergencies occur.

These "truths," in conjunction with the Special Operations Imperatives, and the commonly accepted Principles of War, form the foundation of U.S. Army special operations doctrine. An understanding of the basic elements of this doctrine will serve to highlight the German special operation's successes and failures in a manner that has relevance for the military profession of today. The German special operations failures can be directly linked to the violation or disregard of several of the SO Imperatives and "Truths" listed previously.

This study is of importance for the special operator and the conventional warrior alike. Special operations, like air or naval operations, are a fundamental element of the

U.S. Military's joint warfighting philosophy. All members of our military must understand how to plan, integrate, and conduct these types of operations. Hopefully, an appreciation of the lessons-learned presented in this study will prevent them from being re-learned the hard way on some distant battlefield of the future.

ENDNOTES

¹Charles Whiting, Ardennes. The Secret War (New York: Stein and Day, 1985), pp. 123-125.

²Department of the Army, FM 100-25. Doctrine for Army Special Operations (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1991), p. 2-15.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵John Collins, SOE Truths (Congressional Research Service).

CHAPTER 2 SETTING THE STAGE

"I have just made a momentous decision. I shall go over to the counter-attack, that is to say - here, out of the Ardennes, with the objective - Antwerp!"¹ With a sweep of his hand, Adolf Hitler had just laid the foundation for the German counter-offensive that would become more familiarly known as the "Battle of the Bulge." The German generals and field marshals surrounding the large situation map in the *Fuehrer* Headquarters (FHQ) "war-room" were momentarily stunned, and with good reason. Assembled at Hitler's military headquarters, the "Wolf's lair," they had only moments before heard the all too familiar litany of reverses and losses briefed by *Generaloberst* Alfred Jodl, the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* (OKW) Chief of Staff. The fortunes of war were not looking favorable for Germany on that 16th day of September 1944.

Strategically, the Germans were on the run. The Allied advance across western Europe following the breakout from Normandy had carried right to the vaunted "West Wall" defenses of Germany's border. American units had already penetrated on to German soil near Aachen. On the Russian front, the Soviet summer offensive had crossed into East Prussia. Allied strategic bombing was crippling German industry and devastating her cities. The once mighty Axis alliance was falling apart, as one by one Germany's allies, save an isolated Japan, defected, surrendered, or were over-run. German losses in men and material were tremendous, and worse, non-recoverable. Combined German military losses during June, July, and August totaled at least 1,200,00 dead, wounded, and missing.² Everywhere the German military was on the defensive. It was a period of crisis, and of desperation, for Germany.

With this back-drop in mind, Hitler would try one last gamble: a surprise attack upon the unexpecting Allies on the Western Front. Hitler was betting that a successful operational-level offensive in the west would have strategic results. The stakes were: staving off defeat just long enough for the German secret weapons to turn the tide of the war, or the destruction of the last remnants of German combat power and the hastening of her defeat.

The operational situation of the Allies in the west actually presented the conditions that would favor a large-scale enemy counter-offensive. Although advancing ceaselessly throughout August and into September, the Allied armies were on the verge of outrunning their supply lines. The "Broad Front" strategy of the Allies already had the advancing army groups competing for supplies. Strains within the alliance, though personality driven, were emerging. The German West Wall defense, the infamous Siegfried Line, would serve to fix and hold the Allies as they gathered their strength over the winter months.

By November of 1944, the Allies had reached their operational culminating point. The beginning of December, the originally planned start-time for the German offensive, saw the Allied armies settled into a static front, positioned along or astride the West Wall. Although limited offensive operations were continuing, by and large, the Allies were gathering their strength for a full scale resumption of their offensive in the coming months. They expected the Germans to attempt a defense of the West Wall coupled with the usual local counterattacks. They did not anticipate a full scale counter-offensive, especially in the Ardennes area.

The German operational situation, though bleak, offered the glimmer of a brief respite by November 1944. German Army units had been in full retreat across the occupied countries since late July. However, now they were on German soil, and fighting for German survival. Throughout the battered ranks this was well understood, as German

fighting spirit began to stiffen. Furthermore, the recent German success in Holland, where they defeated the Market Garden attacks, and the American repulse in the bloody Hurtgen Forest fighting, reduced the sense of shock from the great German rout of August. Perhaps most importantly, the German Army had fallen back on its lines of communication, and had occupied excellent defensive terrain along the German border. Additionally, there was the "West Wall." Although the much vaunted Siegfried Line was a mere shell of its former self by November of 1944, it did present a formidable obstacle to the advancing Allies.

As German Army units settled into their aging bunkers, just a step ahead of the Allies, their High Command steeled themselves for a defense of the West Wall. They would defend for as long as possible, attempt to rebuild their depleted strength, and delay what was now considered the inevitable -- defeat. Coupled with the Allied over-extension and pause at the border, the German defensive activity brought a quiet along the line of opposing Armies. By December, the area of the Ardennes could be called a "Ghost Front", as both sides settled in for a long, cold winter. Both German and American Armies alike viewed the Ardennes as a quiet, nonvital sector, where troops could be rotated in for a stretch of rest in the Wehrmacht's case, or for seasoning of green units in the case of the Americans.

The prevailing weather and terrain of the Ardennes both aided this mutual impasse. The winter Ardennes weather could be expected to be unfavorable for large-scale operations. Extremely cold weather and wet conditions would make life miserable for soldiers. Snow, sleet, or freezing rain could be anticipated almost every other day. Overcast skies were normal, and fog was not uncommon. If the ground was not frozen solid and covered with snow, then it was a quagmire of mud. The winter of 1944 would be one of the coldest Europe was to see for years, and secret German weather stations forecast a period of cold, fog, and low clouds for December.

The terrain was equally challenging. The Ardennes is an area of dense, coniferous forests traversed by several ranges of low mountains and hills. Although hills and trees predominate, the terrain is interspersed with the fields of local farmers. Several water courses crisscross the region. Most are characterized by steep gorges and banks, and deep, swift waters. An extremely limited and restrictive road network serves to link the numerous towns and villages that dot the area. In essence, the Ardennes is rugged campaigning country. The prevailing weather and terrain would serve to negate the tremendous American advantages of overwhelming air power and masses of material. Conditions in the Ardennes, at once, would offer the Germans the conditions for a stubborn defense, and the possibility of a surprise attack.

They had done it before. The German Army had swept through the Ardennes unexpectedly in June of 1940 during the invasion of France. Perhaps it was this that put the idea in Adolf Hitler's head. Hitler obviously saw the inevitable defeat of Germany, given its current situation. His strategic concept: a bold, unexpected offensive that would split the advancing American and British Army Groups on the ground, and also split what Hitler saw as a strained Anglo-American political alliance. The goal was to delay the Allied advance and enable Germany to apply the power of her "Wonder Weapons" against the enemy. It was reasoned that this might result in a negotiated peace in the west, allowing Germany to turn her full might eastward for the ensuing defeat of Russia.

The sleepy Ardennes front offered the ideal spot. The American sector was very lightly held as green units were stretched thin defending over-extended frontages. The Allies would never expect a major attack in the Ardennes as the sector was not considered favorable for a large-scale offensive. Besides, most intelligence reports indicated that the German Army was beaten, and not capable of an attack. The Americans were thinking "Home by Christmas."

The plan conceived by Hitler and his staff was deceptively simple. Under the cover of darkness and poor weather, the Germans would launch a massive surprise attack at the weakest point in the Allied lines -- the center of the Ardennes. The main effort would penetrate the center of the line and reach for operational objectives, while supporting attacks were made on the flanks to hold the shoulders of the breakthrough, fix allied forces, and protect the flanks. Within the main effort, attacking infantry divisions would first create the penetration of American lines. Then, operational-level "forward detachments" would race forward through the gaps to secure deep objectives to ensure the unhindered advance of the main attack.

These critical objectives took the form of the Meuse river bridges. The main body panzer formations would pass through these detachments and then continue the attack to the decisive objective -- Antwerp.³ One key problem existed; the Meuse bridges were almost seventy-five miles behind American lines. Surely, the Americans would react and deny use of the bridges through destruction or defense before the forward detachments might get to them, or counterattack the exposed flanks of the penetration.

The solution was unconventional and equally as bold as the offensive itself: a pair of operations to snatch the bridges right from under the American's noses, and block American reinforcements. German special operation forces would operate ahead of the army forward detachments to seize the critical crossings intact, before the stunned defenders could react. They would hold the bridges long enough to hand them over to the forward detachments. Airborne troops would parachute in at night behind the lines to seize key crossroads to block the expected American counterattacks.

The entire plan was constructed on a delicate time-line. Speed was all important to the success of each part of the operation. The offensive had to reach its initial objectives before the Allies could react. Likewise, achieving initial surprise was equally critical. Although many senior German leaders had their doubts about the entire operation, this

offensive could presumably change the course of the war.⁴ The idea of employing special operations to support *Wacht Am Rhein* also sprang from Adolf Hitler.

Several issues motivated Hitler to consider the special operations that were to support the offensive. Most important was that of operational necessity. The Meuse River was the most formidable water obstacle between the offensives's jumping off points and the decisive operational objective. A major, and unfordable watercourse, it posed a natural line of defense that a withdrawing army could rally upon and renew its strength, and use to delay an advancing opponent. In the summer of 1940, the assault crossing of this river was a major event for the Germans in their first offensive through this area. It would take time to cross this river, which was over seventy miles behind the front-lines.

Despite the most rapid German advance, the Americans would have adequate time to defend, and very likely, destroy the bridges over the Meuse before the armored spearheads could hope to reach them. The tempo of the offensive was fast paced, and the operational objectives would have to be seized within a week so that the Allies could not effectively react. It was vital to capture the Meuse crossings intact in order to maintain the momentum of the attack. A delay at the river could spell disaster for the offensive. Additionally, the strong American forces pushing eastward in the Aachen sector posed the threat of immediate counterattack from the north. Delaying this counterattack would allow the spearheads to reach the Meuse unimpeded.

Another reason for considering the employment of special operations were the precedents established by the Germans earlier in the war. Special operations forces had been used several times to conduct deep operations in pursuit of operational campaign objectives. The seizure of the Belgian fortress of Eben Emael is an excellent example of this technique. In May of 1940, a glider-borne commando detachment swooped down on the "impregnable" fortress in a surprise air assault operation ahead of the main German

forces. The commandos, members of an elite special military unit, the Brandenburgers, paved the way for the conventional spearhead to continue its attack unimpeded.

The small force of 86 men had accomplished a task which had significant operational-level impact. Likewise, Hitler and the German military witnessed the Allies employ just this sort of tactic successfully against them in almost every campaign of the war. The month previous to the formulation of the offensive plans, September 1944, saw the concept carried to the extreme as the Allies attempted to seize the multiple bridges that lay in the path of the British XXX Corps' advance during the airborne phase of Operation Market-Garden.

Additionally, up through October of 1944, elements of the German military had displayed a certain flair for conducting unorthodox, unilateral, strategic-level special operations as well. Of the most notable German special operations, it is of no small coincidence that a certain Otto Skorzeny was involved in them. The successful and dramatic rescue of Benito Mussolini from atop the Gran Sasso in Italy, the daring, but costly, airborne raid to capture Marshall Tito in Bosnia, and the abduction of Admiral Horthy's son in order to keep Hungary in the war on Germany's side, all serve to illustrate Germany's ability to conduct unique special operations when the situation warranted such an approach. Countless other smaller and less significant special operations were conducted by the Germans against both the Allies and the Soviets. Bold and daring, often conducted against the odds, the reports of these operations never failed to thrill Hitler and capture his imagination. So did the apparent American use of special operations teams in the recent successful operations to seize Aachen, Germany, just that October.

German intelligence had reported to Hitler that operatives of the American Office of Strategic Services (OSS) had conducted operations during the advance to that city clothed and posing as German soldiers.⁵ This and similar operations of the American OSS and the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) did not go unnoticed by German

intelligence services nor Hitler. Hitler, always enamored with secret weapons and daring operations, and always willing to go "tit-for-tat" with the enemy, grasped the potential utility that such covert forces offered.

A force operating behind enemy lines in the guise of the enemy presented numerous opportunities to have an impact on the defenders out of all proportion to their size. This coupled with more orthodox paratroop operations might also be a useful economy of force measure against the numerically and materially superior Allies. Although the ultimate success or failure of the offensive would not hinge upon the special operations, they would offer the potential for greatly increasing its probability of success.

Finally, one last reason for attempting the special operations existed. For Germany, this was a time of desperation. *Wacht Am Rhein* was a military gamble with very high stakes. The survival of Germany was at risk, and every resource that could be marshalled and thrown at the Allies was required in order to ensure a winning hand. It was hoped by Hitler that the unfolding German special operations would be one of the needed wild-cards.

ENDNOTES

¹Hugh Marshall Cole, The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1983), p. 2.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., pp. 19-32.

⁴European Historical Division, European Theater Historical Interrogation (ETHINT) 47. The Ardennes Offensive. an Interview With Genfldm Gerd von Rundstedt (England: USFET, August, 1945), pp. 1-13.

⁵Otto Skorzeny, Special Missions (Aylesbury, England: First Futura Publications, 1974), p. 144.

CHAPTER 3 SPECIAL OPERATIONS PLANNING

"Well done Skorzeny! I've promoted you to *Obersturmbannfuhrer* [Lieutenant-Colonel] and awarded you the German Cross in Gold,"¹ a jubilant Adolf Hitler proclaimed. LTC Otto Skorzeny, commander of the *Waffen SS's* elite commandos, had just returned from his latest triumph, Operation "*Panzerfaust*," the successful kidnapping of the son of Hungary's leader, Admiral Horthy, and the storming of his residence on "Castle Hill." He met with Hitler in the "*Fuehrer Bunker*" at Rastenburg, the site of the *Fuehrer* Headquarters (FHQ) and thrilled him with the exciting details of the mission, for by then Otto Skorzeny had become one of the *Fuehrer's* trusted favorites as a result of his daring exploits throughout the war. But on this 21st day of October in 1944, Hitler had summoned Otto Skorzeny to his headquarters for an additional purpose. Hitler turned serious as he spoke next: "I have perhaps the most important job in your life for you. So far very few people know of the preparation for a secret plan in which you have a great part to play. In December, Germany will start a great offensive, which may well decide her fate".²

A startled Otto Skorzeny attentively listened as Hitler continued speaking and presented the following mission guidance:

One of the most important tasks in this offensive will be entrusted to you and the units under your command, which will have to go ahead and seize one or more of the bridges over the Meuse between Liege and Namur. You will have to wear British and American uniforms. The enemy has already done us a great deal of damage by the use of our uniforms in various commando operations. Only a few days ago I received a report that the use of our uniforms by an American force had played no inconsiderable part when they captured Aachen, the first German town in the west to fall into their hands. Moreover, small detachments in enemy

uniforms can cause the greatest confusion among the Allies by giving false orders and upsetting their communications with a view to sending bodies of troops in the wrong direction. Your preparations must be complete by the 2d of December, and you can settle all the details with Colonel-General Jodl. I know that the time is very, very short, but you must do all that is humanly possible.³

Such was an example of the type of initial planning guidance given to Otto Skorzeny for his upcoming role in the great offensive. With this, the special operations planning to support *Wacht Am Rhein* began. Eventually, two operations would be planned to help the offensive reach its objectives. The guidance given in terms of specific missions and intent would be fairly clear, and planning would begin immediately.

The planning conducted for the operations would suffer from problems. Inadequate intelligence, faulty assumptions, and poor coordination would result in plans that were to become unexecutable on the ground. The primary reasons for these planning deficiencies were the incredibly short amount of available planning time and the unusually strict operational security blanket thrown over the entire offensive. These problems would plague what were to become the two special missions of the offensive, Operations *Greif* and *Stoesser*. Although these problems would not be immediately apparent during the initial planning for both operations, they would soon manifest themselves during the extensive preparations required for both missions that would soon follow.

Operation *Greif*, or "Griffin," named after the mythological winged lion, was to be the primary special operation of the offensive. It was to offer the greatest potential positive impact to the success of the overall campaign. Consisting of forces masquerading as American soldiers, the men of Operation *Greif* were to infiltrate into the American rear areas in order to seize the critical crossings over the Meuse River, and cause confusion throughout the enemy's defense.

Operation *Stoesser*, or "Auk," was planned as a parachute operation in which an airborne battle group would drop behind American lines in order to secure vital crossroads

along the flank of the German line of advance and block the movement of Allied reinforcements.

The commander of *Greif* was to be Otto Skorzeny. *SS Obersturmbannfuhrer* Otto Skorzeny at that time had become Germany's number one "special operator." As commander of his group of specially trained SS commandos, the *Jagdverbände*, Skorzeny had successfully conducted numerous strategic and operational level special operations. His dramatic rescue of Benito Mussolini from atop the Grand Sasso in Italy typified his style and manner of operating – with surprise, boldness, and daring, which often defied the odds. Allied intelligence by 1944 had proclaimed Otto Skorzeny as "the most dangerous man in Europe."

The commander of Operation *Stoesser* was Colonel Baron Freiderich August von der Heydte. One of the premier paratroop commanders still alive in the German Army, he was among the best of the remaining airborne commanders to choose from. He had commanded an airborne regiment into the jump on Crete and led it through the bitter fighting that followed. He led the regiment through campaigns in North Africa and in Normandy, where he had the opportunity to come face to face with American paratroopers of the 101st Airborne Division. Perhaps in contrast to Skorzeny, the Baron was noted for his calm and steady approach to fighting. His personal bravery and coolness under fire were beyond reproach. Like Skorzeny for *Greif*, von der Heydte was the right man for the job of leading *Stoesser*.

Newly promoted *Obersturmbannfuhrer* Skorzeny coordinated the details of his new mission with Gen Jodl, the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* (OKW) Chief of Staff. Hitler had explained to Skorzeny why he let him "in" on the plan so relatively early: "I am telling you all this so that you can consider your part in it and realize that nothing has been forgotten".⁴

Given the mission guidance received from Hitler, Otto Skorzeny was left to plan the specifics of the operation. Skorzeny's mission analysis, if conducted in accordance with current U.S. Army Doctrine, would have started off with Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield (IPB) followed by an assessment of his own forces and higher HQs missions. Additionally, the guidance given, and tasks assigned to him by Hitler, would have been broken down into specified tasks, implied tasks, mission essential tasks, and limitations. An analysis of all this would lead to a mission statement for the operation, an intent and a concept of operation. Skorzeny would find out that he was not only fighting the Americans, but also fighting against time, terrain, and amazingly, the German military system.

Skorzeny's area of operations was in the zone of attack of Sixth Panzer Army, which initially was the offensive's main effort, (see figure 1). The area consisted of typical Ardennes countryside. Rugged ground in the eastern half of the zone was bisected by a handful of east-west running roads twisting through the hills. The dominant Hohen Venn Ridge formed a north-south running spine that lay half-way to the Meuse. Closer to the river, the terrain gradually opened up some and consisted of less severe elevations. Numerous towns dotted the area, while several rivers crisscrossed through the valleys. The terrain in the area favored the defenders.

The American defenders in the area consisted of elements of U.S. VIII Corps. The defense consisted of a crust of infantry divisions and cavalry forces holding an extended frontage, with some armored formations positioned in depth as a reserve. Reconnaissance conducted by the German units in the line, and signals intelligence from specialized units were able to paint a fairly clear picture of the front line defenses. The situation in the American rear areas, as well as information regarding the important bridges over the Meuse River, was not so clear.

Skorzeny requested all available intelligence concerning them, and even asked that air reconnaissance photos be taken of the bridges. These were eventually received by Skorzeny for only the bridges at Huy and Amoy in late November. Although they showed anti-aircraft positions near the bridges, they did not indicate any other special defensive measures.⁵ Skorzeny was forced to assume that some type of local defenses would be established at the Meuse crossings, even if only initially by rear area troops. He also fully realized that the bridges would be more heavily defended, if not out-right destroyed, if he did not reach them within the first critical days of the offensive.

One key planning assumption was that the initial conventional attacks would achieve a clean breakthrough on the first day of the offensive. It was assumed that the defenders in the area would be in disorderly flight on the first day, thereby allowing the *Greif* force to infiltrate to the bridges unhindered.⁶ This critical assumption upon which the nature and concept of the operation were founded was ultimately to prove faulty, and would eventually spell doom for the success of the mission.

Skorzeny anticipated that if he was successful in seizing the bridges, it was very likely that his forces might be cut-off and isolated for a short period by Allied counterattacks until the main body of the German advance could reach him. Very importantly, Skorzeny's assessment of the terrain and forward defenses led him to believe that his special units would not be able to break-through the Americans on their own, but would have to exploit a penetration achieved to some significant depth by the conventional forces making the initial attacks.

Skorzeny knew that the available preparation time was short; he had less than five weeks to prepare for this new mission. In fact, he had voiced his concern over the lack of adequate planning and preparation time to the *Fuehrer* personally.⁷ The unique nature of the mission would require special equipment and soldiers in the form of captured American equipment, and English speaking troops with a knowledge of American slang

and idioms. His own SS commando unit, of less than battalion strength, could provide some expertise, manpower, and leadership, but the force would have to essentially be established and trained from scratch. His original designs for the force proposed a unit of over 3,300 men, all dressed and equipped to pose as an American outfit. His initial task organization for the unit proposed a full sized, robust, brigade. The creation of such a force, with such a unique and unorthodox mission, would take some time to do properly.

Additionally, Skorzeny was keenly aware of the operational time-line for the offensive, and knew that once committed, his forces would have only one day to reach and capture the bridges. Skorzeny also realized the limitations imposed upon his forces by the terrain. He identified the critical importance of the defensive advantage offered by the Hohen Venn Ridge along the enemy's forward defenses. The restricted nature of the Ardennes provided little maneuver space, and confined his force to the few good roads that ran directly to the bridge targets on the Meuse. His freedom of maneuver and action with any sizable combat force was dictated by the available road network behind the American lines as much as by any possible enemy counter-action.

The specified tasks assigned to Skorzeny were to seize a minimum of two bridges over the Meuse River between Liege and Namur; to infiltrate enemy lines covertly, posing as American soldiers; and to cause confusion among the enemy by disrupting his communications and rear areas.⁸ The implied tasks that Skorzeny derived for his mission were: conduct coordination with the conventional forces of Sixth Panzer Army; conduct a forward passage of lines through the attacking divisions west of the Hohen Venn Ridge; exploit the confusion and disorganization within the enemy's ranks; conduct deep reconnaissance of the bridge targets on the Meuse River for the commando force; seize the bridges at Andenne, Amay, or Huy through a surprise "coups de main" attack; defend and hold two or more of the bridges until relieved by 1st SS Panzer Division; conduct a link-up with 1st SS Panzer Regiment at the bridges; increase confusion and panic behind

the lines among the defenders by circulating false reports, removing sign posts, cutting telephone lines, and blowing up ammunition dumps; conduct tactical reconnaissance forward of the Skorzeny force and the conventional armored spearheads.⁹

Two key limitations that Skorzeny was operating under were the requirement for strict secrecy and operational security (OPSEC) and the accepted laws of war. Hitler's desire for utmost secrecy prevented Skorzeny from briefing his forces on their real mission or coordinating with the associated conventional units until only days before the offensive. Also, by wearing American uniforms his force would give up their protected status as prisoners of war (POWs) and if captured, would face execution as spies. Hitler directed that Skorzeny's commandos were to wear their German uniforms under the American clothing, and were not to fight in American uniforms, i.e. they were to take off the American clothing before fighting.¹⁰

Although no record of a formal mission statement exists, if presented in current U.S. Army fashion, Skorzeny's probably would have looked something like this: On order, Battle Group Skorzeny infiltrates in zone to seize bridges over the Meuse River at Andenne, Amay, and Huy, in order to ensure the uninterrupted advance of Sixth Panzer Army across the Meuse, and conducts unconventional warfare operations to disrupt enemy defenses in the area of operations. Skorzeny after the war, presented a less formalized description of his mission: "The mission of the Brigade was to seize undamaged at least two Meuse River bridges from among the following possibilities: Amay, Huy, or Andenne."¹¹

The concept of the operation was not particularly complex, but it was not necessarily easy to execute either. Skorzeny's forces would follow immediately behind the lead spearheads of I SS Panzer Corps attacking divisions as they pushed through the initial penetration created by the infantry divisions. Once west of the Hohen Venn Ridge, Skorzeny's battle group would side-slip or pass through the lead panzer regiments and

advance to the Meuse. Special reconnaissance teams would race ahead of the main body by jeep once a penetration was achieved, conduct reconnaissance of the routes, and place the bridge targets under surveillance. The main body of Skorzeny's force, split into three smaller battle groups, would advance west along three separate directions of attack directly to the bridges, now called Objectives X, Y, and Z.¹² One of the battle groups would each move behind the lead elements of the 1st SS Panzer, 12th SS Panzer, and 12th *Volks Grenadier* Divisions. This was to have occurred by the end of the first day of the offensive.

Tactical reconnaissance teams would advance immediately forward of the attacking divisions and these groups to report on local enemy defenses. Independent teams of commandos would conduct small scale acts of sabotage ahead of and behind the main body to disrupt enemy communications and create disorganization within the defenders. Resistance would be bypassed and reported, as speed was essential and the limited combat power of the battle groups was to be preserved for seizing and defending the bridges. Once captured, the bridges were to be defended, then turned over to I SS Panzer Corps. Skorzeny's force would then be prepared to continue acts of sabotage, and deep reconnaissance in support of the main attack. This was all to have occurred not later than the second day of the offensive.¹³ However, Skorzeny's force would not be operating behind American lines completely on its own.

Concerned over the threat of reinforcement posed by the large American forces to the north of Sixth Panzer Army, Field Marshal Model, the commander of Army Group B, the operational headquarters for the offensive, on 4 December proposed to Hitler another special operation. It would consist of an airborne force dropped behind American lines in the area of Krinkelt, Belgium to block enemy moves south against the northern flank of Sixth Panzer Army. Although dismayed of airborne operations after the heavy casualties sustained during the invasion of Crete, Hitler seized upon the idea and approved

it. However, he changed the drop location to an area north of Malmedy, Belgium, deeper behind the American front lines than Model's original concept. This would put the paratroopers beyond the immediate reach of their panzer counterparts until a penetration was made of the American lines. The plans for this new operation were hastily drawn up on 8 December by Army Group B Headquarters. Although getting the paratroop force would eventually pose a problem, getting the commander for this operation did not.¹⁴

Oberst der Fallschirmtruppe Baron von der Heydte in December of 1944 was the commandant of the German Army parachute school in Aalten, Holland. Summoned to the headquarters of General Student on 8 December, COL von der Heydte learned of his role in what was to be the second special operation conducted to support Operation *Wacht Am Rhein*. It was to be known as Operation "Stoesser." Von der Heydte was to be the commander of the operation. In the effort to maintain secrecy, von der Heydte was initially misled about the actual location of his mission.

General Student briefed von der Heydte on the plan. The *Fuehrer* had decided to undertake a major offensive in which a parachute detachment would be employed. Von der Heydte was to form and command this force. The Colonel learned that he was expected to "jump behind the Soviet troops surrounding the German bridgehead on the River Vistula in Poland."¹⁵ Von der Heydte learned that General Student wanted his force ready by 13 December, the initial planning date for the start of the offensive. Like his counterpart Skorzeny, von der Heydte was at first stunned, and then thrilled, by the prospects of this new mission.¹⁶ It was not until 14 December, after a fortuitous mission postponement caused by the failure to assemble the attacking divisions in time, that the airborne Colonel was to learn the details of his real mission.

The unit that von der Heydte would support, the Sixth Panzer Army, received notification of the airborne operation on 10 December from Army Group B. In turn, von der Heydte reported to Sixth Army Headquarters on 11 December and received detailed

mission guidance concerning the real objective of his operation. The Army Chief of Staff, *SS-Brigadefuehrer Kraemer* issued the orders to von der Heydte for Operation *Stoesser*:

On the first day of the attack 6. Panzer-Army will take possession of Liege or the bridges across the Meuse south of the city. At dawn on the first day of the attack, *Kampfgruppe* von der Heydte will drop into the Baraque Michel area, eleven kilometers north of Malmedy, and secure the multiple road junction at Baraque Michel for use by the armored point of the 6. Panzer Army, probably elements of 12. SS Panzer-Division. If for technical reasons this mission is impracticable on the morning of the first day of the attack, *Kampfgruppe* von der Heydte will drop early on the following morning into the Ambleve river or Amay areas to secure the bridges there for the advance of 6. Panzer-Army's armored points.¹⁷

The drop was scheduled to commence at 0300 hours on 16 December. It would be a night jump.

Col von der Heydte also met with the Army commander, General Dietrich. This meeting did not go well, as according to von der Heydte, Dietrich was intoxicated. Von der Heydte attempted to work out the details of his mission, and although Dietrich appeared unconcerned over the operation, he was able to get the Army commander's intent for the mission. *Stoesser* was to secure the crossroads in the Baraque Michel area and block American reinforcements until elements of the Army linked up with him. Dietrich assured von der Heydte that the link-up would occur within twenty-four hours of his drop. Von der Heydte managed to coordinate a few details then departed to set about his own preparations.

The area of operations for Operation *Stoesser* was in the Sixth Panzer Army's zone of attack. The designated drop zone and objective area was astride the Hohen Venn Ridge. Here the steep hills, dense woods, and marshy valleys limited the available avenues of approach. One good north-south running road connected the town of Malmedy with the city of Eupen. This formed the best avenue of approach into the flank of the Sixth Panzer Army. North of Malmedy, a road junction linked the town of Verviers with this highway. The terrain did not favor the employment of massed airborne troops.

Very little was known of the enemy situation that Operation *Stoesser* would face. Von der Heydte's request for an estimate of the enemy situation brought the following reply from Dietrich during their meeting: "I am not a prophet. You will learn earlier than I what forces the Americans will employ against you."¹⁸

From Sixth Panzer Army Headquarters, von der Heydte attempted to get additional information from the staff. He did not get much. Von der Heydte observed:

We had thoroughly reconnoitered the American front lines and the enemy chain of command was well known. However, we were completely without knowledge of the enemy's strategic reserves. The distribution of his forces within the American communications zone was unknown.¹⁹

Von der Heydte's request for a personal aerial reconnoissance of the drop zone and target area was later rejected for fear of compromising the offensive.²⁰ At drop time several days later, little would still be known of the enemy situation.

The specified tasks given to von der Heydte were fairly clear: conduct an airborne assault; secure the road junction at Baraque Michel; block enemy reinforcements moving south along the Eupen-Malmedy road; link-up with elements of 12th SS Panzer division; and be prepared to jump into the Ambleve river or Amay areas to secure bridges for the advance elements of Sixth Panzer Army. The implied tasks for the operation were to assemble rapidly after the drop, establish defensive positions around the Baraque Michel road junction, and be prepared to block enemy forces for up to twenty-four hours.

The key limitation von der Heydte was working under was the incredibly short amount of time available for planning and preparing for the operation. Less than five days were available. The other limitation was that of available trained forces.

Fighting as conventional infantry for the past three years, by December of 1944, no parachute regiments were on active jump status. Additionally, no large scale airborne drops had been conducted by the German military, save for the costly airborne raid on Marshal Tito's headquarters in Drvar, Bosnia in May of 1944. Ironically, the SS Parachute Battalion that conducted this drop would be unable to conduct *Stoesser* as it was operating

on the Eastern Front and had suffered heavy casualties.²¹ The solution would be to form an ad hoc *Kampfgruppe*, or battle group consisting of elements from various parachute regiments in the *Luftwaffe*. Although this battle group concept was standard procedure for the German military, the results would be far from anyone's standards.

Based upon the specified and implied tasks, the restated mission for Operation *Stoesser* might have read: On order, Battle Group *Stoesser* conducts an airborne assault to secure objective A, (crossroads at Baraque Michel), and establish defensive positions in order to block enemy counterattacks into the northern flank of Sixth Panzer Army.

The intent of Operation *Stoesser* was to block Allied advances against the flank of the Sixth Panzer Army, thereby allowing them to continue their advance across the Meuse unhindered. The restrictive nature of the terrain would make this possible at certain key points on the battlefield, like the road junction atop the Mont Rigi.²² This is what was desired by Model, and eventually understood by von der Heydte. However, the original guidance to von der Heydte from the Sixth Panzer Army's Chief of Staff indicated securing the road junction for use by armored points, although this was not what the originators of the plan intended. This "disconnect" in guidance would serve to give von der Heydte some latitude on how he would conduct the mission. This issue would resurface later in the operation.

The concept of the operation was very simple. The paratroopers would conduct a mass night parachute assault into a drop zone in the immediate vicinity of their objective. They were to assemble rapidly, then secure the road junction and immediate surrounding area. At the road junction, they were to establish a blocking position astride the Eupen - Malmedy road to cut the American lines of communications to their forward defenses. The defensive position astride the road junction would then block combat units attempting to move south and reinforce the southern American defenses, or engage the flank of Sixth Panzer Army. Link-up with elements of the north flank division of Sixth Panzer Army, the

12th SS Panzer Division would occur by the end of 16 December. The battle group was expected to hold their positions for two days, if necessary, until German forces from Sixth Panzer Army could swing north and relieve them. Two days would be pushing the limits of the small battle group's capabilities, but it was not a completely unreasonable demand.

The *Stoesser* force was to be an airborne battle group of approximately 1,200 men, or of a reinforced-battalion size. It would contain only the airdroppable mortars, light anti-tank weapons, and machine guns of the airborne heavy weapons companies of the time. The battle group would be inserted by conventional *Luftwaffe* transport aircraft.

Both Operations *Greif* and *Stoesser* appeared in concept as viable missions. As events were to show during the limited preparation, and ultimately during the execution of Operations *Greif* and *Stoesser*, the problems caused by the limited amount of time that hampered the planning effort would carry over throughout the missions. Although conceptually both *Greif* and *Stoesser* fit well into the overall campaign plan for the offensive, realistically they were to be prepared in isolation and almost considered as after thoughts by the conventional commanders of the campaign.

Based upon the concept of operations for each mission, Skorzeny and von der Heydte began their preparations immediately. From the start, the problems that would plague Operations *Greif* and *Stoesser* throughout their existence began to appear.

ENDNOTES

¹Skorzeny, Otto, Special Missions, (Aylesbury, England: First Futura Publications, 1974), p. 144.

²Skorzeny, pp. 144-147.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., p.146.

⁵Ibid., pp. 161-162.

⁶Ibid., p. 153.

⁷Ibid., p.148.

⁸Ibid., pp. 148-149.

⁹European Command, European Theater Historical Interrogation. (ETHINT) 12 Ardennes Offensive Otto Skorzeny (Oberursel, Germany: USFET, August, 1945), p.5.

¹⁰Skorzeny, p.149.

¹¹ETHINT #12, p.5.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Skorzeny, pp. 147-159.

¹⁴Hugh Marshall Cole, The Ardennes: The Battle Of The Bulge (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983), p. 270.

¹⁵Whiting, Charles, Ardennes the Secret War (New York, NY: Stein and Day Publishers, 1985), pp.43-44.

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 93-94.

¹⁷Jean Paul Pallud, Battle Of The Bulge. Then and Now (London, England: Battle of Britain Prints Int. Ltd., 1984), pp. 67-68.

¹⁸Gerald Astor, A Blood-Dimmed Tide (USA: Donald I. Fine, Inc., 1992), pp.70-71.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 70.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 71.

²¹Antonio J. Munoz, Forgotten Legions (Boulder, Colorado: Palidin Press, 1991), pp. 21-62.

²²European Historical Division, European Theater Historical Interrogation (ETHINT) 50. Planning the Ardennes Offensive. Genobst Jodl, (Luxembourg: USFET, July 1945), pp. 17-18.

CHAPTER 4 SPECIAL OPERATIONS PREPARATION

The tasks of assembling and preparing the men and machines of Operations *Greif* and *Stoesser* began immediately after their inception:

The *Fuehrer* has ordered the formation of a special unit of a strength of about two battalions for employment on reconnaissance and special duties on the Western Front. The personnel will be assembled from volunteers of all arms the Army and *Waffen SS* who must fulfill the following requirements:

- a) Physically A-1, suitable for special tasks, mentally keen, strong personality.
- b) Fully trained in single combat.
- c) Knowledge of the English language and also the American dialect. Especially important is a knowledge of military technical terms.

This order is to be made know immediately to all units and headquarters. Volunteers may not be retained on military grounds but are to be sent immediately to Friedenthal near Oranienburg (Headquarters *Skorzeny*) for a test of suitability.

The Volunteers that do not pass these tests satisfactorily will be returned to their headquarters and units. The volunteers are to report to Friedenthal by November 10 latest.¹

So read the order sent on 25 October 1944 from OKW to all units on the Western Front calling for volunteers for Operation *Greif*. It sums up in a nutshell the process for assembling the special operator "trainees", that in this case, would be the heart of Operation *Greif*. It also serves as an example of just one part of the many and varied mission preparations that were undertaken for Operations *Greif* and *Stoesser*. Special operations units require select personnel, unique equipment, and thorough training in order to successfully accomplish their high risk special missions. The German special operations forces participating in *Wacht Am Rhein* were no exception. The unorthodox, unique and

diversified nature of their tasks would place a premium on cohesive, well-trained, and properly equipped forces. Unfortunately for the Germans, neither of the forces conducting Operations *Greif* and *Stoesser* would be well-manned, well-trained, or well-equipped.

The lack of available time, coupled with the ad hoc nature of the organizations, would serve to prevent the formation of units truly capable of accomplishing their assigned missions with a reasonable probability of success. Thus despite tremendous organizational efforts, and a large dose of improvisation, the special operations forces of *Greif* and *Stoesser* would not be the highly mission capable units that were envisioned during the initial planning of the higher command headquarters. Rather than task organizing forces to accomplish their assigned missions, the commanders of Operations *Greif* and *Stoesser* were both forced to do it backwards. They tailored their organizations, and missions, to what forces were ultimately made available to them. Both the lack of time, and the depleted state of the German Army, were working against them.

Operation *Greif* suffered from a lack of qualified soldiers and from insufficient amounts of equipment. The force, by nature of its mission, required a large number of English speaking personnel. It also required a broad range of combat skills from among the soldiers of the unit. Everything and everyone from tankers to signalers would be needed. American uniforms, arms, and vehicles of all types would be required for the unit's cover. No one German unit existed that could meet all of the requirements of the *Greif* force. Even Skorzeny's own *SS Jagdverbände*, less than a full battalion in strength, could not fit the bill. It lacked the English speakers needed, and it was a special mission unit that had focused on primarily strategic level special operations in the past. The creation of such a large unit with the requirement to use the ruse of posing as an enemy unit was something new to the special operations planners and the conventional staffers alike. From the start, it did not go well.

Otto Skorzeny forwarded his plans and requirements for Operation *Greif* to the OKW Chief of Staff, *Generaloberst* Jodl, within five days of receiving his mission tasking at the *Fuehrer* Headquarters (FHQ).² Although his request for personnel and equipment might have been considered somewhat optimistic, (a 3,300 man full panzer brigade in addition to the commando unit), he was promised unlimited support for his mission by the OKW Chief of Staff.³ German forces had undoubtedly captured American equipment and uniforms, and numbers of Germans had traveled to or even lived in America, and were thus familiar with the language. Although seemingly possible, the reality of assembling the force turned out to be a different matter. It started with material problems.

Despite the pledge from the OKW Chief of Staff, Skorzeny was obviously aware that the collection of a large quantity of captured American equipment would be no simple task, if for no other reason than the front-line units holding and using the needed tanks or jeeps would be unwilling to freely give them up.⁴ As a result he wrote to the Chief of Staff of *Oberbefehlshaber West* (OB West) *Generalleutnant* Westphal on 2 November 1944 and requested assistance in gathering the required equipment for the operation.⁵ Thus was born "*Rabenhugel*".⁶

Rabenhugel was the code name for the requisition and collection of the American equipment and uniforms for Operation *Greif* conducted on the Western front during November of 1944. As part of *Rabenhugel*, the *Oberquartiermeister* of OB West, *Oberst* John, was tasked to locate 15 tanks, 20 armored cars, 20 self-propelled guns, 100 jeeps, 120 trucks, 40 motorcycles, and thousands of uniforms.⁷ These would be used by the *Greif* forces to replicate both small and large size American forces in order to conduct their infiltrations to their targets. *Rabenhugel*, however, did not meet with much success.

Despite the promises of support, and Hitler's "outbursts of fury against various gentlemen in the quartermaster's department",⁸ Skorzeny came no where near to obtaining the equipment needed for *Greif*. On 21 November 1944 Skorzeny sent a message to OB

West personally complaining about the lack of necessary equipment for *Greif*. At that time Skorzeny had at his disposal fewer than 34 jeeps, 15 trucks, one armored car, and two armored half-tracks.⁹ An official, full report was sent to OB West on 24 November 1944 by *SS-Obersturmbannfuehrer* Stromer, one of Skorzeny's staff officers. It outlined the problems encountered in fitting the unit with equipment, and stated that the planned target date for completing the organization of the *Greif* force, 25 November, could not be met.¹⁰

Counting both American equipment, and substituted German vehicles for example, only 57 of 150 jeeps/utility vehicles, and 74 of 198 trucks were on hand at the *Greif* training site at Grafenwoehr. Five tanks, all German, in addition to the armored vehicles mentioned in Skorzeny's earlier message, were the only combat vehicles for the entire Panzer Brigade 150. Two American M4 Sherman tanks were turned over to Skorzeny. But, like most of the captured vehicles at Grafenwoehr, they were in poor running shape, and both had soon broken down and proved unserviceable.¹¹

Skorzeny was forced to improvise in order to overcome the lack of vehicles. Several German tanks, assault guns, armored cars, and armored personnel carriers were received in lieu of the anticipated American vehicles. Substitute German Panther Mark V tanks were visually modified to resemble American M10 tank destroyers by cutting down their barrels and welding steel plates to their turrets and hulls. The remaining German assault guns, armored personnel carriers, and trucks were painted olive drab and adorned with painted white stars. Later Skorzeny would state, "All I can say is that they could only deceive very young American troops, seeing them at night, from very far away."¹²

Ultimately, Panzer Brigade 150 would consist of five German Panther tanks, five *Sturmgeschutz* assault guns, six armored scout cars, and six armored personnel carriers. Added to this were four American scout cars and five armored half-tracks. The Stielau Commando Company fared much better, and had almost two dozen jeeps at its disposal.

Only fifty percent of the required American small arms were ever assembled, and owing to the destruction of a munitions train, they were without any quantity of ammunition. German weapons again filled the void. There were only enough American arms and ammunition to equip the commando company.¹³

The situation in regards to uniforms was no better. Skorzeny stated the case very clearly himself:

But the most fantastic position of all was in respect of clothing, to which, of course, we had to attach the utmost importance. We started off by receiving a consignment of miscellaneous articles, which upon closer examination turned out to be parts of British uniforms. Then we were sent lots of overcoats, which were practically useless, because we knew that the Americans only wore so-called "field-jackets" in the line. When the head of the prisoner of war section sent us a supply of these jackets, it was observed that they were adorned with the triangle peculiar to prisoners and the consignment had to be returned. It was an eloquent comment on the way business was handled that the commander of the brigade - myself - got nothing but an American army pullover in my size.¹⁴

It was all far from ideal, and much less than what was hoped for in the initial planning. The shortage of equipment was paralleled by shortages of personnel.

The original table of organization for Operation *Greif* proposed a force of 3,300 men, (see figure 2). By O-Day, closer to 2,500 men filled the ranks of Panzer Brigade 150 and its commando company. Similarly to the problem of procuring sufficient quantities of American equipment for the force, finding adequate numbers of capable American speakers was also quite a challenge.

Skorzeny realized early in his planning that he could never hope to get sufficient numbers of English speakers to man his entire force. More importantly perhaps, he also realized that with only four weeks of preparation time, he could not mold them into a cohesive, and "self-contained and compact formation", but rather would require "a few regular units to give them stiffening". Upon his request to OKW, Skorzeny's original force of his SS commando company, and the *SS Fallschirmjaeger* 600 Battalion, was increased with two *Luftwaffe* parachute battalions, one Army tank company, and one

communications company.¹⁵ Additionally, Skorzeny knew that to lead his ad hoc formations he would need battalion commanders with front-line experience. He requested, and was granted, three such officers, *Obersturmbannfuhrer* Hardieck, *Obersleutnant* Wolf, and *Hauptman* Scherff. Skorzeny was to say of his three battle group commanders:

Of the three allocated, Hardieck was a splendid officer, but never led this sort of operation before. The same could be said of Wolf and Scherff, but the enthusiasm with which they entered into their new duties made me certain that somehow, everything would be all right. I did not forget that I myself had no previous experience of leading an attack in borrowed plumage.¹⁶

The situation with the English speaking volunteers for the mission paralleled that of the *Rabenhugel* failure with material. For a force originally envisioned to masquerade as the equivalent of an American regiment numbering in the thousands, fewer than 150 competent English speakers were ultimately obtained. While it was probably unrealistic to expect such a large number of English speakers, the results still fell short of expectations. Skorzeny described the situation with these volunteers as follows:

When the first hundred volunteers reported at Friedenthal a week later, the future of 'Greif' looked blacker than ever. We employed a number of language experts who divided them into categories, according to their knowledge of English. After a couple of weeks, the result was terrifying. Category one, comprising men speaking perfectly and with some notion of American slang, was ten strong and most of them were sailors, who also figured largely in category two. The latter comprised men speaking perfectly, but with no knowledge of American slang. There were thirty to forty of them. The third category consisted of between 120 and 150 men who spoke English fairly well, and the fourth, about 200 strong, of those who had learned a little English at school. The rest could just about say 'yes'. In practice it meant that we might just as well mingle with the fleeing Americans and pretend to be too flurried and overcome to speak.¹⁷

Of the 600 volunteers who arrived at Friedenthal, Skorzeny picked 150 of the best for the commando company.¹⁸ Some of the remainder were to go directly to the panzer brigade, while the many of the poorer speakers who possessed no critical or special combat skills were destined to remain at Grafenwoehr during the operation both for security considerations and for use as some type of last ditch reserve.. Most of the selectees were sailors that had served in the American merchant marine prior to the war,

while some were German-Americans who had lived in the United States. Most lacked any real combat training, and none had anything approaching special operations experience.

The total force ultimately available to Skorzeny for Panzer Brigade 150 was as follows:¹⁹

1. Brigade HQ consisting of the Brigade staff and a signal company, (based upon Panzer Brigade 108 elements).
2. Three small combat staffs, one per battle group, (drawn from Panzer Brigades 10 and 113).
3. Two Army signal companies.
4. Two *Luftwaffe* parachute battalions.
5. One company of *Jagdverbände Mitte*.
6. Two companies from *SS Fallschirmjaeger 600* Battalion.
7. Two tank companies, (crewed by elements from the 11th Panzer Regiment and the 655th Tank Destroyer Battalion).
8. Two panzer grenadier companies.
9. Two companies of heavy mortars.
10. Two anti-tank companies.
11. One engineer company.
12. Three vehicle repair companies.
13. One special commando company

The overall capability of this force was something much less than originally envisioned prior to *Rabenhugel*. It consisted of the equivalent of an infantry regiment augmented with some tanks, rather than a full-blown panzer brigade. However, it might still be of sufficient strength to seize a lightly defended target in a surprise attack, and hold it until link-up with heavier forces. If employed on a conventional mission as a whole force, it might be counted on to put up one credible fight, despite the lack of tactical unity

and cohesion. This could be adequate enough to defeat a defending force of several companies in strength, but would not be sufficient to exploit such success. Lacking artillery, anti-tank, anti-aircraft, and support units, and limited in supplies, the brigade could not be counted on for any sustained combat. It would need to avoid fighting until it reached its objectives on the Meuse. Skorzeny was to say this regarding the force's capability: "my detachments could not allow themselves to be involved in even a minor scuffle".²⁰

The shortages in personnel and equipment forced Skorzeny to modify his original proposed task organization for Operation *Greif*. The English speakers were concentrated into one special unit and isolated from the rest of the force. The headquarters for the force was small, with no liaison teams or extra personnel. The three battle groups of Panzer Brigade 150 remained, but rather than being full reinforced battalions, they eventually were tasked organized as follows (see figure 3)²¹

Kampfgruppe X

Commanded by *Obersturmbannfuehrer* Hardieck

A small battalion staff section

One tank company, (five Panther Mark V tanks and five assault guns)

Three companies of infantry, (two from the *Luftwaffe* Parachute Bns, and one from *Jagdverbände Mitte*)

Two panzer grenadier platoons

Two anti-tank platoons

Two heavy mortar platoons

An engineer platoon

A signal platoon

A vehicle repair group

Kampfgruppe Y

Commanded by *Hauptman* Scherff

Identical to *Kampfgruppe X*, except the tank company was equipped with five *Sturmgeschutz* assault guns instead of tanks

Kampfgruppe Z

Commanded by *Oberstleutnant* Wolf

Similar to *Kampfgruppen X* and *Y* except that it did not have a tank company

Commando Company

The forces of Panzer Brigade 150, with the exception of the modified tanks and olive drab vehicles and the soldiers of the commando company, were eventually equipped with German material and weapons. The overall result was far from what was expected.

Skorzeny reported these shortages and difficulties to his higher headquarters. During several situation conferences at the FHQ, Skorzeny stated his "perpetual complaints" about the failure to procure the needed personnel and equipment. At the last situation conference, he summed up the overall situation of the Operation *Greif* force: "We are having to improvise from A to Z, but we will do all that is possible."²²

The capability of the brigade was now split three ways. Each battle group was the size of an understrength infantry battalion with armor attached. Clearly, each battle group lacked the combat power for any type of determined fighting prior to reaching their targets. They would have barely enough to seize and hold their objectives. Lacking artillery and anti-tank weapons, the battle groups could not be expected to realistically hold the bridges against determined American counterattacks for any long period of time. The battle groups would have to get to their targets quickly, and without fighting, and then be promptly relieved.

This task organization reflected the units that each battle group would eventually support and follow. Battle Group X, the most capable, would work with the 1st SS Panzer Division, the I SS Panzer Corps main effort. Battle Group Y would operate with the 12th

SS Panzer Division. Battle Group Z, the least capable of the groups was destined to operate with the 12th *Volks Grenadier* Division, an infantry organization lacking much armor, and given a supporting role in the attack.

The commando company, the "*Einheit Stielau*", named after their commander, *SS Hauptsturmfuehrer Stielau*,²³ was task organized into three groups based upon their assigned missions. These commandos were equipped with American jeeps and arms, and wore American uniforms. Comprised of the best of the English speakers, most commandos were credible doubles of their American counterparts.

The first group within the commandos was the Reconnaissance Group which was comprised of three to four man teams mounted in jeeps. These teams were to conduct the deep reconnaissance of the bridge targets and the routes to them, as well as conduct limited acts of sabotage such as removing road signs and issuing false commands. The next group was the Demolition Group which comprised several five to six man teams. These teams were to locate and destroy bridges and munition and fuel dumps in order to spread confusion in the enemy rear. The last group was known as the "Lead" commandos. This group also consisted of three to four man teams who worked in direct support of the lead regiments of the attacking divisions. In addition to conducting local reconnaissance forward of the attacking forces, these teams would also disrupt enemy command and control by cutting telephone wires and issuing false commands.²⁴

Eventually a total of eleven complete operational teams were formed within the commando company. These teams were split among each of the three groups of the commando company. Each team consisted of three to five men based upon an American jeep equipped with radio gear. The individual team members performed the roles of team commander, driver, saboteur or radio operator, and interpreter. This last team member was the only one on the team who could speak perfect English, including the use of American slang. The team members replicated various types of units and ranks, the

highest rank used that of an American colonel. Each was given an American identity to role play, and all were from the U.S. 5th Armored Division. Actual German rank not did figure in assignment of American rank, but language skills did. Thus, "from being *Obergefreiter* Rolf Meyer the lance-corporal found himself promoted to Second-lieutenant Charlie Holtzman; *Leutnant* Gunther Schiltz ended up as Corporal John Weller, and so on."²⁵

Training for the *Greif* force began at once at Grafenwoehr under SS-*Obersturmbannfuhrer* Willi Hardiek, who became Skorzeny's deputy. The battle groups of Panzer Brigade 150 settled into their new task organization, began familiarization training with their equipment, and conducted battle drills. Most of the training was generic in nature. Although they trained hard, the brigade was never fully prepared. As a result of difficulties experienced simply moving from Grafenwoehr to their forward assembly area in the Blankenheim Forest on 13 December shortly before the offensive, Skorzeny was to note: "we were already made aware that in some respects the men's training had not been all that it should have been".²⁶

Although the men of the battle groups understood that they were to be employed in some type of special role, none, to include the battle group commanders knew of their actual mission until just days before the offensive started. For security reasons Skorzeny was not permitted to divulge any information about the actual offensive until authorized by FHQ. Skorzeny described the following cover story :

In the middle of November I called my three group commanders together 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. I told them that it was at this time that our brigade was to create considerable disturbances in the rear lines, and to help in the annihilation of these forces. Around December 1 all of the officers of the brigade were given this outline of their plans. It was not until the 10th that even the group commanders were aware of the actual plans for the attack.²⁷

This strict requirement for secrecy, with violations punishable by death, was to severely hinder the training and rehearsing of the brigade. Execution of their missions would suffer accordingly. By the time that all elements were finally briefed on their actual missions and plans of attack, the *Greif* force was departing its Grafenwoehr training site and moving to assembly areas for the offensive. There was no time to conduct full scale rehearsals with the units. There was no time for personal reconnaissance. Perhaps most importantly, there was no opportunity to conduct the detailed coordination required of such an operation with the conventional panzer units of I SS Panzer Corps that they would be supporting and moving behind. For an operation requiring close coordination with the attacking forces, this situation was to cause several problems later in the offensive.

The training of the commando company was a different matter. Although also misled about the actual nature of their mission in the name of containing security leaks, the commandos began training in earnest at Grafenwoehr in preparation for their tasks. Skorzeny naturally devoted special attention to the commando company's training because they were charged with the second part of the *Greif* mission, and because of his concerns over the capability of this force. He expressed this view: "None of the volunteers selected for this unit had ever had any experience in that line. There were no trained spies or saboteurs among them. In the few weeks at our disposal we could hardly hope to teach them their job properly."²⁸

But they tried. Initial training focused on becoming realistic American GIs. The commandos of the Stielau unit refreshed and reviewed their English speaking ability, with particular emphasis on learning the idioms and slang of the American GI. They worked with their American weapons and gear. The commandos read American literature, viewed American films, and even visited POW camps at Kustrin and Limburg²⁹ to mix with real American soldiers and observe them first hand. The team members rehearsed their assumed American identities, and learned how to drive and operate the American jeeps.

Radio operators received special training in the operation of their radio sets. For those lacking, basic combat skills were hurriedly taught. The volunteers were trained in close combat, sabotage and reconnaissance skills, the use of plastic explosive, and in employing their new silenced machine pistols.³⁰

The training received was far from complete, but the commando unit would have to make do with the few weeks of training time available. While training in isolation at Grafenwoehr, numerous rumors concerning the probable missions for the unit ran wild among the men. Rather than squelch these, Skorzeny actually fueled some of them in an attempt to maintain an cover for the unit and mission.³¹ This was to have amazing repercussions once the operation commenced.

Skorzeny attempted to coordinate Operation *Greif* with the various players involved. However, this coordination was at the highest command levels, and not with the actual commanders of the lead units his men would be working with. This would prove to have serious repercussions later.

In an attempt to get better support and coordinate some tactical details, Skorzeny met with Field Marshal von

Rundstedt at his headquarters in November. The Field Marshal's support for the Operation *Greif* was apparently lacking, as after briefing him on Operation *Greif*, Skorzeny noted his reactions as "disappointing".³² He appeared to be luke-warm to the special operation, and was particularly concerned over the use of enemy uniforms. A similar meeting with Field-Marshal Model's Chief of Staff, General Krebs, was slightly better. Skorzeny's plans for *Greif* were approved and he received the promise of full support, though this would prove to be long in coming.³³

Prior to the offensive, Skorzeny attended one last high level meeting at Model's headquarters on 12 December, where the final orders were issued to the corps and division commanders. Model asked Skorzeny to brief the assembled commander's on Operation

Greif. At this meeting the detailed measures to avoid fratricide between Skorzeny's "Americans" and real regular German soldiers was discussed as the danger of inadvertently shooting *Greif* forces was high.

As aids to identifying the *Greif* forces as friendly Germans, several special recognition signals were employed. In order to identify themselves as disguised German soldiers, the *Greif* members would remove or tap their helmets when approaching German lines or forces. Additionally, the second button of their shirts would be unbuttoned, and they would wear pink or blue scarves. At night, a blue flashlight held up in the left hand would serve as a challenge, while a red flashlight held aloft in the right hand would serve as the reply. All of the brigade's vehicles were to display a small yellow triangle painted on their rear. Jeeps bore the letters C, D, X, Y, or Z in white letters on their hoods, while tanks were to keep their gun tubes pointed in the nine o'clock position when near German forces. These procedures seemed to work as no incidents of friendly fire casualties to the *Greif* forces were reported, despite the high probability of them occurring.³⁴

These recognition signals did produce one significant drawback. Despite the counter-productive wall of secrecy surrounding the offensive, the details were distributed in writing to front line units after the meeting with Skorzeny. Although by their nature, all units would need to know the recognition signals, and hence the existence of *Greif*, details about the mission were not essential, and should never have been carried forward of the line. Nevertheless, despite orders to the contrary, this is exactly what occurred, and inevitability as always seems to happen in these cases, the instructions were captured on the first day of the offensive.

A note distributed within the 62d *Volks Grenadier* Division was captured near Heckhusheid on 16 December, and compromised Operation *Greif* soon after the first commando teams had infiltrated the lines. The note outlined the recognition signals, described the use of American vehicles, equipment, and uniforms, and even outlined the

three routes the *Greif* forces would travel along. After months of painstaking security efforts, the cat was out of the bag on the first day.

Although the training and equipping of the *Greif* force fell far short of what Skorzeny and the other leaders may have felt was required, the men of Panzer Brigade 150 and the Stielau unit were motivated to fight. Skorzeny described his men as "clearly animated by the most glowing patriotism".³⁵ Skorzeny would rely on this motivation, and the audacity and initiative of these men to overcome the deficiencies in training, equipment and organization that confronted the *Greif* force. Midway through the preparations for *Greif*, just as these deficiencies caused Skorzeny to alter his task organization, it likewise forced him to modify his "commander's intent". He explained it in his own words:

When we realized in the middle of November, that the camouflage outfit of the brigade would be very far from complete, we were forced to consider certain changes to our plans. In the absence of camouflage for everybody we must try to obtain the same results by expedients, cunning, and above all, bluff.... My colleagues and I fully appreciated that we should have to rely on improvisation.³⁶

Likewise, lacking precise and detailed intelligence about the enemy, Skorzeny was unable to assign exact missions other than the bridge and route reconnaissance to the commando company. Rather, in typical German military fashion, he relied on giving the Stielau teams "mission-type" orders to conduct reconnaissance and learn about enemy dispositions, create confusion amongst the enemy, disrupt communications, and delay or disrupt reinforcements. "We must leave them as much as possible to their own initiative" stressed Skorzeny.³⁷ Thus improvisation, boldness, and initiative were to be the hallmarks of Operation *Greif*. In comparison to their comrades of Operation *Stoesser*, the men of *Greif* were well prepared.

Operation *Stoesser* would have far less time compared to Operation *Greif* to organize, equip, and train itself in preparation for its part in the offensive. Like *Greif*, the necessary coordination for the mission would also be lacking.

Colonel von der Heydte would have less than one week to organize, train, and prepare his airborne battle group for action in Operation *Stoesser* and accomplish his mission of blocking the Eupen - Malmedy road. Like the *Greif* commanders, he too was misled about the actual location and nature of his mission until only days before the offensive. Denied his immediate request to employ his former command, the 6th *Fallschirmjaeger* Regiment, as an intact force, the baron would have to create a unit from scratch in just a matter of days. His request was disapproved by *Heersgruppe* H because it was felt that the secrecy of the offensive might be compromised by the movement of an entire parachute regiment out of the line. The 1,200 man battle group would be created by each regiment in II *Fallschirmkorps* giving up one hundred of its "best" and most experienced parachutists to von der Heydte. However, he would be able to choose his own company commanders and officers.³⁸

Von der Heydte organized his scratch force into a simple battle group consisting of four light infantry companies, a heavy weapons company, and a signal and supply platoon, in addition to a small group headquarters and staff,³⁹ (see figure 4). The promised personnel were to assemble at von der Heydte's headquarters at Aalten on 9 December 1944. As perhaps as is the case in all armies, von der Heydte did not expect to receive the best men that the parachute regiments had to offer. Rather he received the "usual deadbeats and trouble makers that battalion commanders normally manage to transfer to other commanders on such occasions".⁴⁰ von der Heydte was to say of them, "Never during my entire fighting career had I been in command of a unit with less fighting spirit. But then who gives up his best soldiers to another unit?"⁴¹ Out of all the men that arrived at Aalten, fewer than 300 were veterans with combat jump experience.

The baron was buoyed by the fact that out of those with combat experience, approximately 150 of them were veterans from his old 6th *Fallschirmjaeger* Regiment, that had managed to "sneak" their way into the battle group.⁴² The soldiers who lacked

even a minimum of fighting spirit were replaced with dependable volunteers that were picked from the jump school at Aalten. Some of these men, however, had yet to make their first parachute jump. Although there were adequate numbers on paper for the mission, the battle group was far from an experienced and cohesive combat force.

During his previous meeting with the Sixth Panzer Army commander, von der Heydte had attempted to coordinate several issues. The lack of concern or support for Operation *Stoesser*, and Dietrich's drunken state, had prevented all of the issues from being raised, but von der Heydte was able to get two items resolved.

Upon inadvertently learning of Skorzeny and Operation *Greif*, von der Heydte requested a boundary between Skorzeny's forces and his own men to de-conflict the two operations and avoid any fratricide. Part of his rationale seems to also stem from a distaste for the nature of the operation, the SS, and Skorzeny himself, and perhaps a desire to avoid being caught up in potential war crimes. The request was approved and a boundary was drawn separating the two units, keeping the *Greif* forces away from *Stoesser*.

Additionally, von der Heydte requested and received a forward observer team from the 12th SS Panzer Division with long range radios. This team would be able to call for much needed fire support from the division's long range artillery battery when it got within range, as well as coordinate the link-up of forces. This request was likewise approved.⁴³

One that was not was von der Heydte's request for back-up communications. Having observed American paratroopers employ carrier pigeons in Normandy, the baron requested that these be obtained for his *Kampfgruppe* in the event the radios were lost or damaged. Dietrich's reply was typical of the tone of the entire coordination meeting: "I am not running a zoo. I am leading my panzer army without pigeons; you should be able to lead your *Kampfgruppe* without pigeons."⁴⁴ Much to his later regret, von der Heydte never got the pigeons.

The required weapons, clothing, and equipment became available, and were issued to the companies by the 13th of December. Long-range radio sets were issued to communicate with Sixth Panzer Army headquarters and with the firing batteries of the 12th SS Panzer Division artillery. Parachutes for the jump were being assembled at a camp near the departure airfields for the mission. Other than being denied pigeons for back up communications, and being an inherently light force, the *Stoesser* units did not have significant equipment problems.

On 13th December, the *Stoesser* battle group was ordered to move to their holding area at Sennelager. As a result of security precautions, the parachutists were apparently unexpected at the camp; there was no room for them. Amazingly, von der Heydte was forced to contact an old civilian friend and arrange for billeting in houses in the nearby village of Oerlinghausen.⁴⁵ To add to the confusion, von der Heydte was told he would be flying out of two airfields, Senne I and Senne II. However, these airfields were only a dream in some staff planners head, as they had yet to be built.⁴⁶

The *Stoesser* battle group was not able to conduct any type of training or rehearsals for its mission in the few days available before the offensive. There was barely enough time to organize the companies and issue equipment. Many of the soldiers were recent transfers from the *Luftwaffe's* ground elements, and lacked even basic infantry skills. von der Heydte described the training status of his battle group:

In the last five days before the operation began, many men had to be taught the most rudimentary elements of infantry combat and behavior under fire. My company commanders were constantly amazed at the lack of knowledge of the troops.⁴⁷

The men of the battle group finally learned of their real mission just over 24 hours before H-Hour, after they had been assembled for the jump at the departure airfields, now at Paderborn and Lippe Springs.

Despite von der Heydte's problems, his supporting *Luftwaffe* transport squadrons were in far worse shape. The Ju-52 transport aircraft of the *Luftwaffe* unit assigned on 13th December to support von der Heydte, *Transportgeschwader 3*, were available in sufficient numbers to transport and drop almost the entire battle group in one lift. However trained pilots were not.⁴⁸ Most of the pilots were fresh from flight school. Seventy percent of them were not even qualified on the JU-52 aircraft. There had been almost no training on formation flying or conducting airborne operations for the air units, not to mention night flying and navigation.

As a result of security considerations, the commanders of the hastily formed air group were told they would be supporting a training jump, and not a combat operation over enemy lines. They did not discover the truth until their first coordination meeting with von der Heydte on 13 December. There was no time to conduct joint training or rehearsals for this critical part of the Operation. However, several measures were coordinated to aid the *Luftwaffe* pilots in navigating to the drop zone.

First, the route from Paderborn airfield to the front would be lit by ground searchlights to guide the transports on the first leg of their flight. Near the front, tracer fire from anti-aircraft batteries along the flanks would substitute for the searchlights. Additionally, the transports themselves would drop flares to illuminate their own positions and allow the pilots to form into column. A special JU-88 bomber from a night-flying squadron would precede the transports by 15 minutes and mark the drop zone with incendiary bombs. The transports would travel the last leg with their navigation lights on, and would continue to drop flares over the drop zone itself once the drop commenced. It was hoped that the measures would overcome the handicaps of the air units and permit an accurate drop.⁴⁹

As an added touch to assist Operation *Stoesser*, and cause confusion as to the size and nature of the operation, over 300 dummies would be dropped after the paratroop

jump, as a deception effort over the areas around Camp Elsenborn, Spa, and Stavelot. It was anticipated that these dummy paratroopers would initially draw some attention away from the real *Stoesser* force.⁵⁰

Despite these measures, *Kampfgruppe* von der Heydte and the supporting *Luftwaffe* units were not prepared to execute Operation *Stoesser* with any degree of success. Similar to Operation *Greif*, a concept that sounded great at the planning map had turned into a potential disaster.

The commanders of Operations *Greif* and *Stoesser* both attempted to abort their planned missions prior to the start of the offensive. Both perceived a very low probability of success for accomplishing their missions. As a result, Skorzeny and von der Heydte both approached their higher headquarters and requested cancellation of the missions.

Skorzeny was infuriated when he learned that the 25 October OKW message requesting English speaking volunteers for special duty under his command had been distributed to all front-line units in the Western Front.⁵¹ He correctly assumed that the message would inevitably fall into enemy hands and thus compromise and doom his mission, (the First Canadian Army learned of the request on 30 November 1944, but surprisingly, the Allied intelligence apparatus did not react to it). He dictated a "violent protest" to FHQ and recommended "calling the whole thing off". His request never made it directly to Hitler. Some time later Skorzeny got the opportunity to mention the incident to Hitler. He claims to have been told by Hitler: "It's idiotic, but it has been done. We cannot hold up your operation now".⁵²

During the preparation for *Greif*, after the personnel and equipment deficiencies had all but rendered the original Panzer Brigade 150 mission moot, and the possibility of mission compromise was high, Skorzeny summed up his attitude when he stated that, "We realized we were being asked the impossible, but we had stressed the point

to the *Fuehrer* when the plan was first mooted and so our consciences were clear".⁵³
Operation *Greif* would go onward.

Likewise, upon learning of his real mission, and assessing the combat effectiveness of his force and that of his Luftwaffe support, Colonel von der Heydte decided to request the cancellation of Operation *Stoesser*. After getting no where through Luftwaffe channels, he went directly to Army Group B headquarters at Munstereifel to speak to Field Marshal Model, his operational commander. Von der Heydte described his visit as follows:

The field-marshal was still asleep after having worked throughout the night. Meanwhile, his Chief-of-Staff, General Krebs, acquainted me with the plans and objectives of the attack. When I told him that the commander of my transport groups as well as myself had serious doubts about the success of a parachute drop, he woke up the field-marshal. After listening to my report, Generalfeldmarschall Model asked me whether I gave the parachute drop a ten percent chance of success. When I answered in the affirmative, he stated that the entire offensive had not more than a ten percent chance of success. However, it was necessary to make the attempt since it was the last remaining chance to conclude the war favorably. The field-marshal concluded that if the most were not made of this ten percent chance, Germany would be faced with certain defeat.⁵⁴

Operation *Stoesser*, like *Greif*, would be conducted. Both lacked cohesive, well-prepared combat teams, thanks to the lack of time and the ad hoc nature of their organizations. Rather than the elite, top-notch special operations units envisioned, and required, for the demanding and high-risk missions that were to follow, the forces involved in both operations were generally under-manned, ill-equipped, and poorly trained. Likewise, the special operations were not properly coordinated with their conventional counterparts. All of the problems encountered during the planning and preparation for Operations *Greif* and *Stoesser* would come to a head once the offensive was to begin.

ENDNOTES

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66.

³⁵Ibid., p.157.

³⁶Ibid , pp. 153-157.

³⁷Ibid., p.157.

³⁸Pallud, Battle of the Bulge, p.67.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Whiting, p.90.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²ibid., pp.90-91.

⁴³Astor, pp. 70-71.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 71.

⁴⁵Ibid., pp. 91-92.

⁴⁶Pallud, Battle of the Bulge, p. 68.

⁴⁷Astor, p. 69.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Janice Holt Giles, The Damned Engineers (Boston, Mass: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1970) pp. 106-107.

⁵⁰Hugh Marshall Cole, The Ardennes: The Battle Of The Bulge (Washington, D.C: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983), p. 271.

⁵¹Skorzeny, pp. 149-150.

⁵²Ibid., p.150.

⁵³Ibid., p.153.

54 Whiting, pp. 93-95.

CHAPTER 5 CONDUCT OF OPERATIONS

On the morning of 16th December, 1944, the great offensive commenced:

A thunderous roar from thousands of guns announced the opening of the preliminary bombardment of the enemy positions, at 5 a.m., Saturday, 16th December. It was short, the range was lengthened and the German infantry leapt to the attack... The earliest reports arrived just before seven and they were not too favorable, although they could obviously take a turn for the better at any moment... Up to midday, the only news was of violent fighting, without any considerable gain of ground. The intended collapse of the whole front had not been achieved.¹

So began the opening of *Wacht Am Rhein*. In Skorzeny's own words this opening stage was described as something less than desirable. The problems and difficulties encountered on the first day of the offensive were to have significant impact on the conduct of the German special operations. Handicapped by faulty preparation and planning, Operations *Greif* and *Stoesser* were soon to be doomed by the events of the first day of the offensive. By 18 December 1944, D+3 of the offensive, both Operations *Greif* and *Stoesser* had failed to accomplish their primary missions. Both operations, in light of the specific campaign plans, were failures. Although the special operations did have some favorable impact on the campaign, they were unable to assist the conventional forces in realizing any of the key campaign objectives.

In coordination with Sixth Panzer Army, Otto Skorzeny had co-located his command post with that of the I SS Panzer Corps headquarters at Schmittheim, Germany, on the day before the offensive, 15 December 1944.² Skorzeny, barred from taking front-line command of the operation by Hitler months ago, settled for a location where he could monitor the progress of the offensive and gauge the right moment to launch Panzer

Brigade 150's three battle groups towards their objectives.³ Skorzeny would never get the chance to issue that order. Although the commando company was to prove successful in infiltrating American lines and gaining valuable intelligence, the other part of Operation *Greif*, Panzer Brigade 150, a captive of the opening day's events, would never see its objectives.

The actions of the Stielau Commando Company were to prove the most successful of the German special operations conducted during *Wacht Am Rhein*. Tasked to conduct deep reconnaissance of the Meuse River bridges and spread confusion behind the lines through acts of sabotage, most of the disguised commando teams accomplished their objectives with a high degree of success and according to the plan.

A total of nine Stielau Commando teams were actually sent through the American lines on D-Day, 16 December 1944 as the opening phase of Operation *Greif*. These consisted of four teams of Reconnaissance Commandos, two teams of Demolition Commandos, and three teams of Lead Commandos, totalling 44 men. Per their plans, the Reconnaissance Commandos drove deep to the Meuse along multiple routes and began gathering intelligence about the Meuse River bridges for Panzer Brigade 150, and the Sixth Panzer Army. The Demolition Commando teams set about conducting acts of sabotage behind the lines, and providing intelligence concerning the local enemy situation. One team each of Lead Commandos traveled with the 1st SS Panzer Division, the 12th SS Panzer Division, and the 12th *Volks Grenadier* Division, all part of I SS Panzer Corps, and started paving the way for the German spearheads.⁴

The American forces defending their extended fronts were taken by surprise by the German attack. Capitalizing on the confusion, shock, and somewhat expedient withdrawals of some of the American forward units, at least seven teams initially infiltrated through the American front lines during the initial 24 hours of the offensive. Skorzeny

estimated that six to eight teams "really got behind the enemy lines".⁵ He stated his rationale for this quite candidly in his autobiography:

It may sound odd that, even to this day I cannot give the exact figure, but I was honest enough to have my doubts about the reports I received. One can well understand that some of these young soldiers were too ashamed to admit that when faced with their *real* trial--the penetration of enemy-held territory--their courage and resolution had left them. The actual facts are that two teams were certainly captured and five others put in reports so clear and unambiguous that there could not be the slightest doubt that they had done what they said they had done. In the two remaining cases their reports seemed to me exaggerated.⁶

The teams infiltrated the American lines both day and at night mounted in jeeps and wearing American garb. Two simple methods were used to infiltrate behind the lines. In the first technique, the jeep team would follow closely behind an attacking armored unit. When that unit engaged the Americans or penetrated their lines, the jeep team would swing off the main road and move around the battle using side roads and trails until they were behind the withdrawing or defending American troops. The other technique was quite simply to travel along small trails in the heavily wooded areas through gaps in the American defenses until the jeep team got behind the lines. They would then move onto the improved roads and proceed with their missions.⁷

The infiltration attempts were not without risk; nor were the commando teams ignored by the Americans. Almost every team was confronted by Americans as they traveled to their objectives. *Feldwebel* Heinz Rohde, alias Sergeant Morris Woodahl, a member of one of the Reconnaissance Commando teams infiltrating behind the 12th SS Panzer Division, eloquently described his penetration of the lines in a post war interview:

After moving barely fifty meters the panzer which we had been closely following in our jeep came to a stand still. The leading panzers made it known that we were now in no man's land. High time to discard our para-suits. For the driver this was a real feat of acrobatics as it was impossible for us to stop and he had to carry out his undressing act while we were on the move. Our jeep jumped around like a young deer, and while the driver kicked frantically at the accelerator pedal, the co-driver tried to steer the vehicle around the obstacles with desperate wrenches of the wheel. The first burning American truck suddenly ap-

panying panzer behind us. It was now that we first ran up against the strong defences of the Yankees; none to soon, as directly in front of us a group of American infantry was trying to place an anti-tank gun in position. How relieved we were to find that apart from being splattered with mud nothing else hit us.

A sergeant tried with shouts and signals to bring us into action; which was a quite unreasonable demand, as we had strict contrary orders and certainly didn't come under his unit. So we swept past him, only to catch sight of a military police post on the road in front of us a few minutes later. An "Ami" as tall as a tree was standing there. The white stripes on his helmet, with the MP legend, left no doubt as to his genuineness. With a motorcycle carelessly thrown down beside him, he pulled us on to a side road and the artillery fire falling on the main road ahead left us in no doubt that his efforts were directed towards protecting us from it. I don't know how we managed to negotiate the bend in that situation, but somehow or other we succeeded in getting away.⁸

A commando summed up the situation during the infiltration:

Naturally we thought at first that every *Ami* could spot us as Germans from a thousand meters away; but the shelling, the poor light, and the confusion of the opposition helped us through those first tense hours...gradually our nerves started to settle down.⁹

The five teams that successfully infiltrated the lines are credited with having accomplished a great deal within the first two days of the offensive, (see figure 5).

Teams from each of the commando groups gathered valuable intelligence, spread confusion, and disrupted command and control. Two teams were eventually compromised and captured, but in their own way, they were to add to the sense of panic and confusion behind the American lines.

One Reconnaissance Commando team succeeded in reaching their objective over 100 miles behind the lines. Following the tail of a withdrawing American convoy and passing through numerous checkpoints, this team entered Huy, Belgium, on the evening of 16 December. There they conducted a successful reconnaissance of the bridge over the Meuse River, which was one of the primary *Greif* objectives for Panzer Brigade 150, as well as the I SS Panzer Corps. The team conducted both mounted and dismounted reconnaissance of its target. Discovering the bridge guarded only by a sentry detachment, they radioed their reports back to the Stielau command post, now near Losheim, Belgium.

This team maintained surveillance of the bridge throughout the night and into the 17th of December. Fearing compromise as American searchlights had begun to sweep the banks of the river, the team requested permission to exfiltrate.

Granted permission to withdraw on the 17th of December by the Stielau headquarters, the team successfully weaved their way through the columns of withdrawing American vehicles and re-entered German lines in the Fifth Panzer Army area. Along the way back they tore up telephone cables and removed unit signposts. After briefing Fifth Army personnel about their trip, the team members returned to the Commando Company and rendered a full report, which included in addition to information about the general enemy situation, convoy movements and artillery positions, and the location of a munitions depot near Huy.¹⁰

While in Huy, this Reconnaissance Commando team claims to have mis-directed an American armored column moving to the front. The team leader, Fritz Bussinger, while conducting a foot reconnaissance in the town of Huy, stated that the leader of the American column asked him for directions to the town of Marche. Advising them that the Germans had captured several roads in that area, Bussinger claims to have directed the convoy on a wide detour in the wrong direction.¹¹ Skorzeny states in his autobiography that German signal intercept units monitored American transmissions indicating that this unit was misrouted out of the battle area for a period of time.¹²

Another of the Reconnaissance Commando teams is claimed by Skorzeny to have infiltrated to the vicinity of Liege, Belgium, site of another principle bridge target over the Meuse River. According to Skorzeny this team reached the Meuse and discovered "that the Allies had taken no special security measures at the Meuse bridges."¹³ Additionally, it reported on the general situation around Liege. Here the team observed movement of American forces south from Liege into the battle area. Additionally they confirmed that the Americans appeared to have evacuated their airfields east of the Meuse

River. Also, it is this team that, according to Skorzeny, located a large munitions depot near Liege.¹⁴

It was quite likely this team that also mis-routed a regiment of the 84th Infantry division as it moved southward to reinforce the front. Wearing Military Police insignia, Wilhelm Giel, the team leader, directed one American infantry regiment down the wrong road, thereby delaying its arrival to the battle area.¹⁵ American accounts reinforce this claim.¹⁶ On its way back to German lines, in addition to gaining information about enemy movements and defenses, this team slowed down long enough to lay mines, drop trees across roads, and emplace dummy minefield markings in order to slow the movement of American reinforcements.¹⁷

The Lead Commando teams were equally active. On December 16th one team is reputed to have encountered an American force of two companies defending the cross-roads town of Poteaux, Belgium. Accosted by an American officer wanting to information about the situation forward, the team leader presented a story indicating that the town was already bypassed on both flanks, and isolated by the "Krauts." Fearing encirclement, the American force withdrew to the west, abandoning the village.¹⁸ This event can not be confirmed by American sources, but accounts of American activity there indicate the presence of only the 18th Cavalry Squadron from 18 December onward.¹⁹

It is certain that one team actually did misroute an American infantry regiment moving to the front. Posing as American Military Police at the Mont Rigi road junction, along the N27 highway from Liege, this team changed the road signs and mis-directed traffic for a period of several hours on the 17th of December. As the 16th Infantry Regiment, of the 1st Infantry Division, was moving in convoy to bolster the front in the south, the commandos mis-directed the entire regiment to Malmedy, rather than its planned destination of Waimes. As a result, the regiment was delayed in reaching its new defensive positions for that day.²⁰ When real American MPs appeared later to sort out the

confusion, they detected the commandos at the road junction. The commando team beat a hasty withdrawal, and as their jeep speeded out of the area, it was reported that one of the "MPs" was still standing on the jeep's front bumper, clinging to the wire cutters, from where he had been directing traffic!²¹

One unidentified team located a gasoline dump, which was reported to I SS Panzer Corps headquarters by Skorzeny for possible use by the German armor.²² *Kampfgruppe* Peiper did refuel from a captured American fuel dump at Bullingen on 17 December,²³ but there is no confirmation that this was the dump that the Commando team is claimed to have located.

At least one of the Demolition Commando teams appears to have conducted several significant sabotage activities. The team is reported to have discovered an ammunition dump, and blown up a large part of it on the evening of 16 December. Additionally the team cut a large telephone cable at several points.²⁴ This cable is reputed to have been the link between the American First Army Headquarters at Spa, Belgium, and 12th Army Group at Namur and was out for several hours, disrupting communications between General Hodges and General Bradley during a critical time of the opening battle.²⁵

This team may have directly assisted the advance of *Kampfgruppe* Peiper. During the evening of 17 December elements of the 5th Belgian Fusiliers Battalion and the 291st Engineer Battalion observed "strange" American soldiers preparing to "blow up" the bridge at Stavelot, Belgium, over the Ambleve River.²⁶ Although a collection of engineers from the 202d Engineer Battalion had actually prepared the bridge for demolition, they did so with numerous stragglers in their midst. A pair of soldiers spotted by the Belgians near the bridge were considered suspicious, but were never challenged.²⁷ It is unconfirmed by Skorzeny if these were commandos from this team neutralizing the prepared demolitions on the bridge. However it is a fact that when Peiper's tanks began to approach the bridge

on the morning of the 18th, the explosives charges failed to go off when the Americans attempted to blow up the span, and the bridge was captured intact by the Germans.²⁸ This action allowed Peiper's forces to quickly seize Stavelot and continue to proceed with their advance westward.

It appears that this Demolition Commando team was the only element of the Stielau Company to sustain a combat fatality during Operation *Greif*. While attempting to re-enter German lines on 18 December, the team ran into an American unit moving to counterattack *Kampfgruppe* Peiper. In the attempt to race past the Americans in their jeep, the team came under fire and an officer on the team was fatally shot. The remaining three team members continued on, and were eventually able to link-up with Peiper's forces near Wanne, Belgium on Christmas Eve.²⁹ Some other teams were not as fortunate.

The Lead Commando team supporting 1st SS Panzer Division successfully infiltrated American lines on the 17th of December, and by noon-time penetrated forty kilometers to the village of Aywaille, Belgium.³⁰ Stopped by an MP checkpoint in the village, the team was queried to give the password for the day. They were unable to do this and were promptly detained. At first PFCs Lawrence, Sensenbach, and van der Werth seemed unremarkable. However, a quick examination of their jeep soon proved that these three were no ordinary GIs. Wads of counterfeit money, explosives, and a German automatic in the jeep prompted a more detailed search of the trio. Their German Army pay books, which they carried on their person, identified them as *Oberfahnrich* Billing, *Gefreiter* Schmidt, and *Unteroffizer* Pernass. The team was arrested and sent to the rear for interrogation.³¹

It appears that this team was primarily responsible for creating the spy scare within the American army. During interrogation, the team members revealed their mission of reconnaissance, and detailed the attempts to reach the Meuse River bridges. They confirmed that additional teams were already behind the American lines. Pressed for every

bit of information they held, they soon blurted out the various wild rumors that had circulated throughout Grafenwoehr during their training. Unsure of the missions of all the elements under *Greif*, the commandos may have believed some of the rumors to be true. The Allies believed one of them too.

This team told their captors that part of Skorzeny's mission was to infiltrate to Paris and capture General Eisenhower.³² The news of this plot, as well as the fact that numerous German "spy teams" were operating behind American lines, spread like wild fire throughout the Allied camp. It was not long before Allied security was tightened, and no one traveling the snowy roads of Belgium was above suspicion.

The third Reconnaissance Commando team did not fare well either. Although penetrating the American lines and infiltrating close to its target, the bridge over the Meuse River between Huy and Namur, the team was halted at an American checkpoint short of the bridge. Unable to produce a valid "trip ticket", the Military Police arrested the four man team. A quick search revealed they were wearing German uniforms beneath their American battle dress, and their jeep was laden with German weapons and explosives. The team leader, Lieutenant Gunther Shultz, was to talk freely to his captors. The rumors of Grafenwoehr were again to come into play with amazing effects. The news of the capture of this team was to also spread quickly, and it rapidly fueled the "spy mania" that had begun to grip the American rear areas.³³

One Reconnaissance Commando team and one Demolition Commando team are unaccounted for in records and accounts of *Greif's* opening days, and they appear to have not accomplished any part of their missions. It is probable that these are the two teams that Otto Skorzeny referred to whose "courage and resolution had left them".³⁴ Although dispatched through the American lines they seem to have been inactive in comparison to the exploits of the other teams. They succeeded in re-entering German lines and eventually linked-up with the rest of the Commando company.

However, it appears that one of these teams had entered the town of Malmedy on the 17th of December. The team leader, an elderly naval officer, *Korvettenkapitan* von Behr, apparently had not intended to get into the American lines, but had become lost and passed through Malmedy by mistake. He did not observe any significant defensive preparations in the town.³⁵ Von Behr's subsequent oral report to Skorzeny on 19 December, after the team re-entered German lines, was to have deadly repercussions for the fate of Panzer Brigade 150.

Skorzeny, still at Schmittheim with I SS Panzer Corps HQ, never received any of these reports directly by radio, as the weather and terrain disrupted effective, long range communications.³⁶ He was to learn of much of this information only after the exfiltration and link-up of the teams, such as the report of von Behr.

After 18 December no more commando teams were sent behind American lines as part of Operation *Greif*.³⁷ As the opportunity to employ Panzer Brigade 150 began to wane with the stiffening of the American defense, Skorzeny regarded the special task of the commando company at an end.³⁸ After Operation *Greif* was over, Sixth Panzer Army still employed several teams to conduct similar clandestine missions on a local basis from 19 December onward in support of the continued German offensive.³⁹ The Stielau Company was to continue local reconnaissance operations even into January 1945, long after the demise of *Wacht Am Rhein*, but not under Skorzeny's command.⁴⁰ Skorzeny, however, did not consider these activities a part of Operation *Greif*.⁴¹

A number of small units spontaneously employed reconnaissance teams consisting of ordinary German soldiers in recently captured uniforms and vehicles. Also, many a German soldier equipped himself with some recently liberated, and warm, American clothing to supplement his kit.⁴² Although having nothing to do with *Greif*, to the Allies, this must have appeared as a part of a continued German plan. The Stielau Commando Company remained at the front until it was eventually withdrawn and

disbanded at the end of January 1945. Several of its captured soldiers were executed by the Americans as spies, as a result of wearing American uniforms.⁴³

Of the 44 commandos sent through the American lines, according to Skorzeny, eight failed to return.⁴⁴ These would appear to be the two captured teams and the one fatality. Although eighteen German soldiers were tried and executed as spies, Skorzeny was to claim after the war that the majority of them were not from the *Einheit Stielau* commando unit or part of Operation *Greif*, but rather unlucky participants in local operations.⁴⁵ Given less than two days for their tasks, those 44 men were able to accomplish the missions assigned them with a great degree of success. Two of the three key bridge targets were reached and reconnoitered by the Reconnaissance Commandos, and valuable intelligence was obtained. Numerous acts of sabotage by the teams added to the confusion spreading through the American ranks. The psychological impact of the commando operations would have profound effects.

The Stielau commandos, while not perfect, were able to accomplish the missions that Skorzeny had planned for them. The boldness of their infiltration plan, and the high degree of independent initiative shown by the commando team leaders combined to achieve this success. The commandos had blazed a path for Panzer Brigade 150 to follow. It would be up to the other half of Operation *Greif* to seize upon this, and prevent it from being an isolated success.

Panzer Brigade 150, the second part of Operation *Greif*, left Grafenwoehr on 13 December enroute to the front. The brigade's battle groups were tasked to infiltrate behind the lines disguised as American armored units. Their mission was to seize the key bridges over the Meuse river in order to allow the armored spearheads of Sixth Panzer Army to continue their attack uninterrupted. Panzer Brigade 150 moved into the area of Munstereifel, Germany on 14 December 1944 and occupied an assembly area in preparation for the forthcoming offensive. Careful to maintain their security screen, no

one from the brigade was allowed to move forward to the front to conduct reconnaissance or coordinate with the conventional units.⁴⁶ Likewise, no liaison teams were established or exchanged between the *Greif* forces and the conventional unit headquarters. Moving to their forward attack positions during the dark morning of 16 December, the three battle groups of the brigade lined up behind the rear of the attacking divisional spearheads. The disguised vehicles of Battle Groups X, Y, and Z wedged themselves into the tight columns of the 1st SS Panzer, 12th SS Panzer, and the 12th *Volks Grenadier* Divisions,⁴⁷ and prepared to race on to their objectives. They would never get to see them.

Panzer Brigade 150 failed to accomplish its primary mission; the seizure intact of a bridge over the Meuse River. In fact, it was never even committed to make an attempt for the bridges, but was destined to bleed itself in a conventional attack role. The original mission was aborted by the second day of the offensive. One key reason for this failure was the inability of the conventional attacks to create a penetration of the American lines on the opening day of the offensive. Through no fault of *Greif* units, there was no hole in the defense to slip the brigade through. The planned conditions for the employment of the brigade were never established. However, the poor coordination between the *Greif* units and conventional forces, distant and befuddled command and control, and the lack of adequate personnel, equipment, and training precluded the brigade from capitalizing on any windows of opportunity that would appear..

From the earliest planning sessions, Skorzeny had always considered it vital for penetrations to be effected in which to pass the battle groups of the brigade through.⁴⁸ In terms of terrain and distance, he considered it essential that a penetration be made at the Hohen Venn Ridge, which flattened out about 40 kilometers from the Meuse.⁴⁹ Additionally, as the brigade's battle groups lacked a great deal of combat power, he did not plan on fighting his way to the objectives, rather, the brigade would have to capitalize on American panic and retreat in order to mix in with the fleeing enemy. Skorzeny had

emphasized these points at a planning conference on 26 October to the FHQ Chief of Staff:

When I saw Colonel-General Jodl on the 26th October, I again emphasized the short time at our disposal, and that in my opinion 'Operation *Greif*' could only succeed if it was begun the first night after the offensive started and made fullest use of the enemy's surprise and disarray. It was vital to us that the front-line troops should reach their objectives and, in particular, have passed the Hohen Venn ridge at all points.⁵⁰

All of his planning and preparations set these as pre-conditions for launching the brigade towards the Meuse bridges. Skorzeny's plans envisioned seizing the bridges on the first day of the offensive, and turning them over to elements of Sixth Panzer Army by the following day.⁵¹ Given the lack of adequate combat power to fight his way through American defenses, and lacking an effective disguise as an American unit with which to infiltrate easily through the lines, these were not unrealistic conditions for Skorzeny.

The opening day of the offensive came and went without these conditions being met. By the end of 16 December, Sixth Panzer Army had failed to achieve a breakthrough with the first assaults of its infantry divisions. At the close of the day, gains of only about five kilometers had been made. The Germans were still some twenty kilometers short of the Hohen Venn, and the U.S. 99th Infantry Division was still maintaining a viable defense.⁵² The Panzer Divisions were left waiting at their jump off positions, crammed bumper to bumper on the few decent roads in the area. The battle groups of Panzer Brigade 150 were jammed in behind them, likewise unable to move at all on the 16th of December, but nevertheless enduring American artillery fire. It was during this period that the commander of Battle Group X, LTC Hardieck was killed when passing through an uncleared minefield, and replaced by Skorzeny's Chief of Staff, *SS Hauptsturmfueher* von Foelkersam.⁵³

Skorzeny, apparently not content with fighting the war by radio from Schmittheim, moved forward to assess the situation for himself. He described the situation as follows:

The 16th of December passed without a decisive success on the front of the Sixth Armored Army, and even by mid-day it was clear that the armored divisions would have to be sent in to effect a decisive breakthrough. I drove to Losheim to get a clearer picture of the situation. The roads were simply crammed with vehicles of every kind and, in practice, all officers had to walk beside their cars in order to help in keeping the traffic flowing. By the time I reached Losheim I must have walked at least ten kilometers. Apparently the artillery bombardment had no great effect on the enemy positions at Losheimer Graben, the Americans were defending themselves particularly stoutly and the attack was progressing but slowly. The intended collapse of the whole front had not been achieved.⁵⁴

Already the planned conditions for committing the brigade had passed. Dubious of success even before the operation began, Skorzeny was forced to weigh the merits of continuing with the mission. By his previously established criteria, it looked as if Operation *Greif* would be unlikely to succeed. Skorzeny, stubborn, proud, and not one to quit, nevertheless considered cancelling the operation on that first day. However, reluctant to give in easily, he decided to continue with the operation, and attempt to seize his objectives during the following day, if a breakthrough was achieved.

Skorzeny described his decision on that first day:

I was now faced with a critical decision, as it was already plain that the day's objectives had not been attained. The logical inference was that I must call off Operation *Greif*, something which was entirely against the grain, after all our tremendous preparations. I was not in the habit of abandoning my purpose so easily! I reflected that success was still possible if the armored divisions went in that night and decided to wait another twenty-four hours. If the Hohen Venn had then been passed, the attacking wave would probably reach the Meuse and seizing of the bridges by my men could be decisive.⁵⁵

If the panzer units broke through the Hohen Venn area, Skorzeny would then order his battle groups to infiltrate the American lines and move to the bridges. Skorzeny's last thought seems to indicate one additional factor concerning the commitment of the brigade. Even if Panzer Brigade 150 was able to slip through the American lines and seize

a bridge, Skorzeny was not going to do so unless assured that a link-up with the panzers was possible. It would appear that Skorzeny was not going to launch the brigade on a "suicide mission", even if the opportunity presented itself. Knowing the capability of his brigade, and understanding the offensive's overall lack of success, Skorzeny was not pushing the battle groups recklessly into action.

The 17th of December saw the commitment of the panzer divisions to gain a breakthrough. The 3d *Fallschirmjaeger* Division pushed open a hole through the withdrawing 14th Cavalry Group in the southern part of the attack sector. *Kampfgruppe* Peiper, the lead attack regiment of 1st SS Panzer Division, was side slipped through this hole by I SS Panzer Corps, and had by daylight of the 17th made a penetration of the American defenses at Honsfeld. By the end of the day Peiper had penetrated almost twenty kilometers to the outskirts of Stavelot, but was still east of the Hohen Venn. Although dramatic gains were achieved, Peiper's *Kampfgruppe* was alone in advancing so deeply. The rest of I SS Panzer Corps was ensnared in a thirty kilometer traffic jam. Additionally, although some units were captured without a fight, some American units were putting up fierce resistance against the rest of the I SS Panzer Corps.⁵⁶

The battle groups of Panzer Brigade 150 were no where near the fight. Intending to pass around or through the lead spearheads like the Stielau Commando teams, the brigade could not even reach the front.⁵⁷ While *Kampfgruppe* Peiper was planning its assault on Stavelot, Battle Group X, the force designated to pass through Peiper's unit, was some ten kilometers away, still east of Malmedy, caught among the traffic jam of vehicles all clawing their way along the same road in an attempt to keep up with Peiper. Even if they had wanted to pass through Peiper's forces, they would face a difficult time doing so from so far behind.

The absence of any real coordination between the conventional units and the special operations forces began to show. Although a fleeting opportunity existed for Battle

Group X to pass forward on its mission, Peiper could not direct the battle group to move forward as he lacked command authority over the unit.⁵⁸ It appears that Battle Group X was clearly out of close coordination with him, and not closely following the *Kampfgruppe's* constantly zig-zagging spearhead. Neither unit had established any liaison teams or cells. Peiper vented his frustration after the war during an interrogation. When asked to appraise the *Greif* group with him he replied: "They might just as well as stayed at home, because they were never near the head of the column where they had planned to be."⁵⁹

Skorzeny jumped his command post forward with the Corps HQ to the town of Manderfeld. Once again he too experienced the tremendous traffic jams along the roads and attempted to get traffic moving himself.⁶⁰ It must be assumed that he was out of touch with his deputy, von Foelkersam, the nominal brigade commander with Battle Group X, as well as the rest of the *Greif* force during these moves. Skorzeny, far beyond the front was obviously unable to direct the brigade effectively. Often out of radio contact, frequently on the move, and distanced from the front, Skorzeny and his three-man command post could not effectively control the employment of the battle groups. Although in touch with I SS Panzer Corps Headquarters, he had no command authority over the armored units that his battle groups were following, nor did they control his battle groups. Short of attempting to pass an order to commit the battle groups, once he ascertained from I SS Panzer Corps that the Hohen Venn had been breached, it appears that there was not much that Skorzeny could do to influence the operation.

Likewise, the battle groups were not receiving any instructions from the units that they were following. It is unclear who, if anyone, was actively following the status of the brigade's battle groups and was ready to act on any fleeting opportunities. Given an opportunity to pass ahead of *Kampfgruppe* Peiper and race for the bridges, Panzer Brigade

150 might just have let it slip by. The lack of integrated command and control over the special and conventional elements of the offensive was beginning to doom the operation.

Skorzeny attempted to gauge his situation. He moved to Losheim to the Stielau command post, and then back to Corps headquarters that evening for a "council of war."

His assessment of the situation that day revealed:

It was true that surprise had been complete, but the idea of a sweep to the Meuse in a single rush, and the enemy retiring without fighting, had to be abandoned. There was no question of the panic flight which alone would have given "Operation *Greif*" a chance. Nor could we anticipate that the Meuse could be reached in our battle sector on the next day, or the even the day after that. The enemy was already bringing up reserves and throwing them into the fight.⁶¹

With this assessment, and a good understanding of the traffic conditions based upon his trips forward, Skorzeny decided the fate of Operation *Greif*. The conditions for committing the brigade had still not been met. Peiper was still east of the Hohen Venn. American units were still fighting stubbornly. His battle groups were scattered and ensnarled in massive traffic jams. The element of surprise had now passed. In Skorzeny's eyes what had always been a gamble had now become the impossible. He decided late that evening of 17 December at the "council of war," to abort the operation.⁶² "After ripe consideration, I reported to Army Headquarters my suggestion to renounce our original intentions, and received its approval."⁶³ Operation *Greif* was over.

But the war was not over for Panzer Brigade 150. After having made his decision to cancel Operation *Greif*, Skorzeny recommended to the Sixth Panzer Army commander that the brigade be consolidated and employed as a "normal army unit". This recommendation was accepted, and as it was still in the area of the I SS Panzer Corps, Skorzeny put the brigade under the operational control of that corps, "for use as ordinary infantry".⁶⁴ The brigade was to assemble south of the town of Malmedy. Although his forces were to move and operate within the 1st SS Panzer Division sector, the division held

no control or authority over the brigade,⁶⁵ although Skorzeny claims to have coordinated the brigade's movements with the divisional HQ in Ligneuville, Belgium.⁶⁶

Skorzeny assumed personal command of Panzer Brigade 150, and early on 19 December ordered the three battle groups to assemble in the vicinity of Ligneuville. On that day, the I SS Panzer Corps requested Skorzeny to attack and seize the town of Malmedy, on the northern flank of the penetration, in order to block expected American counterattacks. As the three battle groups of Panzer Brigade 150 were still struggling through the maze of traffic jams and poor roads, Skorzeny could not assemble them for an attack on the 19th, and accordingly the operation was postponed until the morning of 21 December.⁶⁷ Although by now the troops were back in German uniforms, the vehicles of the previous "*Rabenhugel*" effort still sported their American disguises.

Lacking artillery support, Skorzeny opted for a surprise attack on Malmedy at dawn on the 21st of December. The brigade's objective was the heights north of the town, where a defensive position was to be prepared to fend off the expected counterattacks.⁶⁸ Based upon the reports from the errant Commando team of *Kapitan* von Behr, Skorzeny believed the town of Malmedy to be lightly defended, and only by elements of the 291st Engineers. In reality, since the report of that team on the 19th of December, the town had been heavily reinforced. Elements of the American 120th Infantry Regiment of the 30th Infantry Division, along with units from the 823d Tank Destroyer Battalion, had joined the stubborn engineers and established firm defenses.⁶⁹

Skorzeny prepared for a two prong attack. Battle Group Y was to attack on the right flank, with Battle Group X, the main effort, on the left flank, while Battle Group Z, arriving late on the 20th, was to be in reserve upon its arrival, (see figure 6). The attack kicked off at 0300 hours on the 21st of December. The battle groups led their attacks with their phony U.S. tanks and half-tracks, and some real M8 armored cars. Although the appearance of these vehicles may have deceived some outposts in the dark, the American

front had settled and the defenders were anticipating a German attack, they could not confuse the columns of men and vehicles advancing towards them as anything but enemy for very long. The lead elements of the battle groups both struck mines along the roads they advanced on, and heavy fighting quickly ensued.⁷⁰

Despite fierce close quarters combat, some elements of Battle Group X actually penetrated into the town. However, the determined American resistance, backed up by thousands of artillery shells, eventually halted the attack. Skorzeny, himself wounded by the shell fire, was forced to withdraw the brigade to defensive positions on the hills south of Malmedy.⁷¹ For the next several days, the brigade was to continue probing attacks, but despite the unexpected assistance of the U.S. Ninth Air Force bombing Malmedy twice by mistake, the town was never taken.⁷² The brigade maintained its defense south of the town and endured the ever increasing American air and artillery attacks, but the expected American drive south never materialized.

On the 28th of December, Panzer Brigade 150 was relieved in place by elements of the 18th *Volks Grenadier* Division. The brigade moved into a temporary rest area at Schlierbach, Belgium, east of St. Vith, and then back to Grafenwoehr beginning on 2 January. There Panzer Brigade 150 was disbanded, and the men returned to their original units by the 23d of January 1945. The losses for the brigade throughout the offensive totalled over 450 men killed, wounded, or missing from the original force of 3,000.⁷³ SS *Obersturmbannführer* Otto Skorzeny returned to his original SS commando unit and was to continue conducting special operations until the end of the war. Panzer Brigade 150 had not accomplished its mission. The boldness of the plan and the desperate improvisations to mold the brigade into an effective unit were not enough. Even the success of the Stielau commandos did not help. The lack of coordination and effective command and control between the *Greif* units and the conventional forces, and the inadequate preparation of men and equipment, doomed Panzer Brigade 150 to failure.

The paratroopers of *Kampfgruppe* von der Heydte were to fare little better. Operation *Stoesser*, the airborne operation designed to seize a mountain crossroads in order to block American reinforcements along Sixth Panzer Army's northern flank, would be the second major special operation of the offensive. On the fifth day of its existence, 15 December, *Kampfgruppe* von der Heydte received orders that its drop would go in at 0430 hours on the 16th. Accordingly the airborne troops began to marshal at the departure airfields of Paderborn and Lippspring. However, by 0400 on the 16th, only half of the troops had assembled owing to lack of fuel for the transport vehicles. Consequently, the operation was called off, only to be resurrected later that day. Although Sixth Panzer Army had not made the expected progress in its attack, the paratroopers would still jump into the same drop zone, with the same mission of blocking reinforcements.⁷⁴ Although they did indeed jump, the paratroopers of Operation *Stoesser* would fail in their mission.

Operation *Stoesser* failed to accomplish its mission of blocking the highway north of Malmedy from American reinforcements. Unlike the forces of Operation *Greif*, the paratroops of *Kampfgruppe* von der Heydte did not have to rely on another unit to create a breakthrough before they were committed. Instead they had to rely on the *Luftwaffe*. Delivered to their objective area by *Luftwaffe* transports, the paratroopers were misdropped, scattered, and disorganized. Consequently, the battle group was never able to assemble a credible fighting force with which to block the roads. Outnumbered, freezing, and unable to accomplish their mission, the forces of Operation *Stoesser* eventually melted away. However, their presence behind American lines and limited combat actions were to have an unexpected positive impact in support of the German offensive.

Shortly after midnight, approximately 1,000 paratroopers boarded the JU-52 aircraft, and the first lift of transporters started out for the drop zone. Over 150 men of the battle group had to be left behind at the airfields, due to inadequate lift. It was planned that they would link up overland after Sixth Panzer Army had reached the paratroopers.⁷⁵ The

official *Luftwaffen-Kommando West* meteorological report had predicted wind speeds of 13 MPH over the drop zone for that evening. The local forecasters at Lippkring had predicted something much higher however.⁷⁶

The drop did not go well. The special measures taken to assist the pilots in locating the drop zone in the dark were of limited help to the inexperienced aircrews. Although the batteries of German searchlights positioned behind German lines helped guide aircraft part way, there was a 60 kilometer gap between the last searchlights and the incendiary markers near the drop zone. The Ju-88 night-bomber aircraft guiding the transports from the front lines to the drop zone in that gap had left the area by 0330 hours, by which time only the first lift had dropped. Numerous aircraft were to have difficulty in locating the drop zone accurately. Soon after crossing the front lines, heavy American anti-aircraft fire was to scatter the aircraft formations, and shoot several planes down.⁷⁷

However, the biggest disruptive factor was the higher than expected winds. Not only did these cause a wide dispersion of the jumpers after they exited the aircraft and sharply increase the number of jump casualties, but they caused the aircraft themselves to miscalculate their locations due to inaccurate airspeed calculations.⁷⁸

As a result of these difficulties, many aircraft, based on the decisions of inexperienced pilots and equally inexperienced jumpmasters, went off-course and were unable to identify the drop zone. Consequently, they released their loads of paratroopers far from the intended objective area. At least ten aircraft dropped their jumpers not in the Hohen Venn, but rather in the Bonn area, over 100 kilometers from the drop zone. Many others scattered their men throughout the Belgium countryside. Of the 106 aircraft involved in the drop, only 35 were to put their jumpers over the Hohen Venn area, much less the drop zone. Of that 35, only ten planes dropped their loads on or near the planned drop zone.⁷⁹

Of the almost 1,000 man strong battle group of Operation *Stoesser* that actually took off on 17 December, only 450 landed within the Hohen Venn area, and approximately 100 landed near the drop zone.⁸⁰ Colonel von der Heydte, first man out the door, was fortunate to have landed in the correct drop zone. He was able to initially round up only six other jumpers on the drop zone after landing. With this small group he made out for the objective area and the Baraque Michel crossroads. By 0500 only 25 men had assembled on the objective. The size of the force had increased to 150 by 0800. This collection of paratroopers lacked any heavy weapons, and had lost all their radio sets and ammunition and equipment bundles in the drop. Under-strength, under-armed, and out of communication, Colonel von der Heydte was forced to modify his plans.⁸¹

The original *Stoesser* plan was for the battle group to seize and hold the critical Eupen - Malmedy crossroads, and block American attempts at reinforcing or counterattacking southward along these arteries. This action was to limit the buildup of reinforcements ahead of Sixth Panzer Army's attack as well as protect the northern flank of the advance. German armor was to link-up with the paratroopers within two days, after the primary Army objectives were seized. This plan was to take a radical reversal on the 17th of December.

The baron outlined his plan for the morning of 17 December:

With this pitifully small number of men, who had salvaged only a single medium caliber mortar, I had only the slightest chance of success. I decided first of all to remain hidden near the road junction until the sounds of battle approached; then come forth from the forest to open up the road in the last minutes before the arrival of the German tanks.⁸²

Operation *Stoesser* had gone from blocking reinforcements and protecting the flank of the Panzer Army, to making a limited attack to effect a link-up with relieving forces.

Von der Heydte, while establishing his hide position in the forest near the crossroads and continuing to collect his men, did send out several reconnaissance patrol along the roads leading to Eupen, Malmedy, and Verviers. These patrols, scouting along

the roads and capturing messengers, succeeded in providing von der Heydte with a good picture of the enemy situation. Unfortunately, this intelligence, no doubt of value to Sixth Panzer Army, could not be relayed due to the lack of radios, or pigeons for that matter. The fire support team, from the long range artillery battery of 12th SS Panzer Artillery Regiment, which had somehow survived the jump, could not call for fire on the enemy convoys or gun positions located throughout the area.⁸³ Instead, *Kampfgruppe* von der Heydte had to content itself with counting the numerous large convoys heading south.

By the evening of the 17th, as stragglers and groups eventually reached the objective that night, the size of the paratroop force had reached about 300 men. One long-range radio was recovered, but it had been smashed during the drop and was useless. Throughout that day and the next, as small groups had moved to the assembly site, and small teams patrolled the area, they ambushed and harassed the American targets of opportunity they encountered enroute. Several vehicles had been destroyed along the roads, and over thirty prisoners had been captured. Obviously the jump and this activity did not go unnoticed, and by the afternoon of the 17th, American patrols were searching for the paratroopers in the area.⁸⁴

In order to avoid American detection of his main body, von der Heydte shifted his positions some three kilometers north of the crossroads during the early morning of 18 December into the dense firs of the Hertogenwald. Although some of the junior leaders recommended an immediate attack to cut the roads with the force at hand, von der Heydte elected to continue his reconnaissance and ambush operations.⁸⁵ Still without heavy weapons, with only a quarter of his original force, and possessing enough ammunition for one single strong engagement, the baron decided to wait. On 19 December American patrols located the battle group, and a small, but sharp skirmish produced several casualties. Von der Heydte again shifted the position of his force, this time four kilometers to the east, and closer to the front, in the area of the Herzogen-Hugel.⁸⁶

During the night of 18 December, a lone JU-88 bomber attempted an aerial resupply to the *Stoesser* force. Only a few of the "*Essenbomben*" containers were recovered, and these did not contain any food, ammunition, or weapons. The paratroopers, who had jumped without heavy equipment and only a 24 hour ration, were beginning to feel the effects of the cold weather and the lack of food. American patrols continued to search for his force, and larger and larger American units became involved in the search for the German parachutists.⁸⁷

The battle group did not succeed in blocking reinforcements racing south. Just as the Germans had anticipated, strong forces in the form of elements of the American 7th Armored, 30th Infantry, and 1st Infantry Divisions moved through those crossroads to bolster defenses in the south. The road to Malmedy was never blocked. Thus Operation *Stoesser*, from the day of insertion, failed to accomplish its intended mission. Colonel von der Heydte realized this, and came to the conclusion that given the state of his force, and the lack of resupply, he would not be able to accomplish the original mission, or even his modified plan of the 17th. On 19 December, von der Heydte decided to abandon his original mission, and break-out towards the German lines in the east (see figure 7).

The baron described his decision to abort his mission as follows:

On December 19 I realized that I could not hold the *Kampfgruppe* together for longer than one, or at the most, two days. I could only carry out a single engagement, after which ammunition for the machine guns would be exhausted. In one or two days the men would be badly weakened from hunger and cold. Originally, I had intended to fight this single action to open the Eupen-Malmedy road just before the approaching German armored point reached our hiding place but within the Sixth Panzer Army zone of attack the offensive had apparently bogged down. I decided, therefore, to abandon my original mission and to break through to the German lines. The single action would be fought not for the Eupen-Malmedy road, but for the road leading towards the east.⁸⁸

After releasing their American prisoners, and leaving a seriously wounded paratrooper under their care, the *Kampfgruppe* headed east on the night of 19-20 December. After crossing the Helle River, the paratroopers came under fire from

American positions and suffered several casualties in the ensuing fire fight. Uncertain of the enemy situation, von der Heydte decided to break contact, and withdrew back across the river to establish a defensive position on the high ground for the night. Early on the morning of 20 December, American infantry and armor began probing for his position. By mid-day this was enough for von der Heydte, given the enemy closing around him, and the poor condition of his men, he decided to disband the battle group. The paratroopers were to split up and "escape and evade" in small groups of three back to the German lines.⁸⁹

Most groups were successfully in slipping away from the position that evening. Colonel von der Heydte left his wounded with his remaining American prisoners, along with a note to MG Maxwell Taylor, (he believed his old foe from Normandy, the 101st Airborne, was in the area), requesting care for his men.⁹⁰ Von der Heydte traveled east on the 21st with his executive officer and runner towards Monschau, which he assumed was in German hands. It was not. That night the group reached the town and split up into the shelter of the houses. Von der Heydte wound up in a local's house and learned from them the town was in American hands on the morning of 22 December. Physically and mentally spent, with a broken arm, (he had injured it in an accident prior to the operation and jumped with it tied to his side), and frost-bitten feet, the baron sent a surrender note to the Americans in the town requesting an ambulance.⁹¹ He was captured by men of the 395th Infantry Regiment, 99th Infantry Division, and made a prisoner of war.

About 150 of the paratroopers eventually made it through the American lines and back to the German forces.⁹² The remainder were captured, killed, or simply missing. By the 22d of December, Operation *Stoesser* was completely over. Like Operation *Greif*, it too had failed in its primary mission. By any standard, it was a costly failure. Even the Germans themselves, some what candidly, acknowledged the failure, describing the mission as "Operation Mass Murder" in their front line soldier newspaper on 22

December.⁹³ The inadequate training, organization, and coordination of both the paratroopers and the pilots doomed Operation *Stoesser* to failure. But also like *Greif*, however, it was to have some positive impact on the German offensive.

Although having an impact out of all proportion to their small numbers, the German special operations failed to have a decisive impact on the overall campaign. Failing to achieve either of their assigned missions, neither Operations *Greif* or *Stoesser* enabled the conventional forces to achieve their objectives. However, it remains doubtful that given the Sixth Panzer Army's lack of success in achieving a clean breakthrough past the Hohen Venn Ridge, that the seizure of the respective *Greif* and *Stoesser* objectives would have had any decisive impact in and of themselves. Successfully accomplishing the special operations missions would not have been able to salvage the failed offensive, just as it was possible for *Wacht Am Rhein* to have succeeded even though the special operations failed. What impact the *Greif* and *Stoesser* missions did have, provided some help to the offensive, but not enough for its success.

Operation *Greif*, although a failure, did chalk up some notable successes, and provide some positive impact to the overall offensive. This was a result primarily of the seemingly isolated activities of the Stielau Commando Company, but even the attack of Panzer Brigade 150 may have assisted the offensive in small part.

The actions of the Stielau commandos during the first days of the offensive were to have unexpected results throughout the Allied camp. Their greatest contribution would be spreading confusion and chaos among the American ranks, and adding to the sense of panic among some defenders. The reports of the Reconnaissance Commandos, while very valuable, could never be acted upon by Sixth Panzer Army or Panzer Brigade 150. It was the scattered actions of the teams directed against the American forces that would become notorious.

News of the activities of the teams, whether local sabotage or the mis-routing of an infantry regiment heading to the front, spread quickly among the American soldiers fighting their desperate actions in the Ardennes. The word of capture of the two teams on the 17th of December, likewise spread like wild fire. Within days, in one of those ways that can only happen on the lines, American soldiers along the entire front were aware of the "German spies" operating in their rear.⁹⁴ The willing talk of some captured Stielau team members confirmed the scattered American reports of German soldiers operating behind the lines in American uniforms attempting to accomplish a variety of missions. Likewise, the capture by the 106th Infantry Division of a conventional force German officer with documents outlining some of the Operation *Greif* activities on the first day of the offensive, left no doubt in the American command that these commandos were a figment of anyone's imagination.

The American Command took the threat of the commandos seriously. It responded with this message sent to all units on 23 December:

Interrogation of prisoners of war indicates from two different SS sources that Skorzeny led small groups through the lines with six vehicles presumably command cars. They were carrying forged letters of recommendation and identification papers wearing English uniforms. Interview with General Eisenhower will be attempted by the party. They will use the cover story that they have returned from the front and have vital information regarding operations and an attempt on the General's life. Possibility exists that a change of vehicles and uniforms may be made before reaching Paris for the purpose of covering their tracks. It is possible that they have one officer with them in German uniform, claiming that they are taking him to higher headquarters for interrogation.⁹⁵

But it was the soldier's imagination that saw most of the German commandos during the battle. Perhaps there is something in the soldiers psyche that makes him particularly vulnerable to reports of unexpected activity during periods of tumult along the front. The surprise reports of unexpected infiltrators or paratroopers behind the lines has seemed to grip defending soldiers from Normandy to Panama. These activities change the status quo in the soldiers mind. Like any surprise action on the battlefield, its effects are

magnified several times. It is an effective "combat multiplier". This is exactly what happened in the Ardennes during December of 1944.

The 36 men of the Stielau Commando Company that had actually infiltrated the lines were seen and expected everywhere by American soldiers. The continued actions of post-*Greif* commando operations, such as the one killed at a checkpoint near Dinant on Christmas Eve, magnified by the reports of German paratroopers to boot, continued to fuel the commando scare.⁹⁶ During the precipitous withdrawals and rapid re-enforcement of numerous units throughout the entire front, soldiers and units became separated, mixed, and mis-oriented. In the resulting confusion, if an American soldier did not personally know another, he became automatically suspect of being a potential German infiltrator.

As General Omar Bradley put it: "A half-million GIs played cat and mouse with each other each time they met on the road. Neither rank nor credentials spared the traveler an inquisition at each intersection he passed".⁹⁷ This resulted in everyone from privates to generals having to prove their identity literally every time they encountered a new unit, checkpoint, or outpost, as they traveled along the front. As it was known that the captured German commandos had false identity papers, these identity checks usually took the form of questions that only a "real" American could answer. The front-line queries covered everything from sports, to movie stars, and presidents. Failure to answer correctly would result in detention and further questioning.

Bradley, the Twelfth Army Group Commander himself, was not above suspicion either as he traveled to the front. He described the situation in his memoirs:

Three times I was ordered to prove my identity by cautious GIs. The first time by identifying Springfield as the capital of Illinois, (my questioner held out for Chicago); the second time by locating the guard between the center and the tackle on a line of scrimmage; the third time by naming the then current spouse of a blonde named Betty Grable. Grable stopped me, but the sentry did not. Pleased at having stumped me, he nevertheless passed me on.⁹⁸

Bradley was not the only senior ranking officer moving to the front to be detained. Rumors of Germans posing as high-ranking officers abounded. General Bruce Clark, while orchestrating the defense of St. Vith on December 20th, was arrested and held for a period of time for having insisted the Chicago Cubs were in the American League. Eventually he was released, but only after signing an autograph for one of the detaining MPs.⁹⁹ Likewise, even the likes of Field Marshal Montgomery was detained at an American checkpoint as he traveled to the front, and attempted to roll through an American checkpoint. Halted and held at the check point, he had to wait several hours for positive identification before proceeding.¹⁰⁰

The commando scare was not limited to the front. After the confession of the Stielau team caught at Aywaille on the 17th of December indicated that General Eisenhower was a target of Operation *Greif* teams, the Supreme Commander became a virtual prisoner in his own headquarters in Versailles. Transferred to another building, (the original was von Rundstedt's former headquarters too), and forbidden by his security chief to leave the premises, Eisenhower was denied the opportunity to move to the front. An entire battalion secured the headquarters site. Security personnel went as far as having an Eisenhower look-a-like, Lieutenant Colonel Baldwin B. Smith, driven around the area as a decoy.¹⁰¹

Given Otto Skorzeny's reputation, the American counter intelligence was taking no chances. As it turned out, there was no attempt to kill or capture Eisenhower. Skorzeny claims there never was a plan to do so, and that the idea resulted from the wild rumors of *Greif's* Grafenwoehr training days.¹⁰² Although the Supreme Commander undoubtedly chafed at these restrictions, the war went on. For some it was far worse.

Unfortunately, numerous American soldiers were killed in acts of fratricide by jittery troops who had mistaken them for German infiltrators. On 20 December, two American soldiers were killed in the area of Bellevue, Belgium, by a local defensive patrol

from the Engineers in that area. Two more were killed and several wounded as late as January 2d, when an armor task force from the 6th Armored Division moving into the Wardin area opened fire on men from the 35th Infantry Division in a case of mistaken identity. It is likely that in the confusion prevailing during the first days of the battle that several other friendly casualties resulted from small incidents that were never reported or realized as fratricide.¹⁰³

While most of these episodes are colorful, they were no doubt of limited significance in and of themselves. None changed the course of the battle, if not the complexion, in the least. However, they prove to illustrate the profound effects that a mere handful of special operators can have on an entire army in a very short period of time. One can only imagine the effect such operations might have on an army on the verge of losing their will to fight.

Panzer Brigade 150 provided nominal impact on the campaign. The appearance of Panzer Brigade 150's "American" vehicles undoubtedly added just that much more credence to the threat of commando activity, but that was all. Also, it is possible that the conventional attacks of the brigade against Malmedy may have prevented an early American counterattack from the north to cut off the 1st SS Panzer Division. The aggressive attacks of the brigade very likely kept the Americans on the defensive. But, it appears that the Americans did not have the intention to counterattack at that time. Panzer Brigade 150's contributions were to be left to the area of future "what ifs".

Although Operation *Stoesser* failed in its primary mission, it too, did provide some positive contributions to the campaign. These took the form of adding to the uncertainty surrounding German intentions and fueling the commando scare, and most significantly, tying up American reinforcements.

The initial reports of parachute drops received by the American commanders

indicated multiple drops of German parachutists at several locations. This was in part through the successful use of the air-dropped dummies, and the disastrously poor scattering of the actual paratroopers. The terrible mis-drop on the 17th of December appeared to the American defenders as a deliberate attempt to spread a large paratroop force throughout the area. The over-estimation of the effectiveness of an airborne drop on the part of the defenders has become typical. News of the German airdrops, like the commando infiltrations, spread quickly among the defending Allied units.¹⁰⁴ This no doubt added in no small part to the rumors, stories and fears concerning the *Greif* commandos, and apparently magnified them.

The threat of airborne troops resulted in many units being put on alert to search for or react to a parachute drop. For the most part these were "wild goose chases". In one example, the 1102d, 1107th, and 1128th Engineer Groups were put on alert by the U.S. VIII Corps at the opening of the offensive to respond to airborne drops.¹⁰⁵ These were units that might have been employed elsewhere against real threats. Whether the widespread scare of paratroopers in the rear accomplished anything through these alerts is unclear. But similar to the Stielau commandos psychological impact, it serves to show the effect unexpected airborne activity in one's rear can have upon defenders.

What was real however were the American attempts to locate and eliminate the *Stoesser* force in the Hohen Venn area. At least two American regiments, and elements of others, were tied up for several days in attempts to find and neutralize von der Heydte's paratroopers. These were forces that were desperately needed elsewhere during the first critical days of the battle. Although Operation *Stoesser* failed to block reinforcements at its objective crossroads, its mere presence in the area tied down two-thirds of a division and kept it out of the desperate fighting in the south and east. In this sense, Operation *Stoesser* may have made one of the greatest tangible contributions to the German campaign.

Several American units were committed against the under-strength and ill-armed *Kampfgruppe* von der Heydte. Most notable was Combat Command A, (CCA), of the 3d Armored Division. While the rest of the division raced south to try and stem the tide of the German armored advance by *Kampfgruppe* Peiper and units further south, it was tasked to defend the Eupen area just north of the German drop zone. This brigade-size force of armor stayed in the Eupen area, out of the desperate battles in the south, for four critical days, 17-20 December, "defending" against and searching for von der Heydte's paratroopers.¹⁰⁶

The other regimental size-force directly involved in hunting down the German parachute force was the 18th Infantry from the 1st Infantry Division. While the rest of the division moved to and fought the critical battles to hold the northern shoulder of the German offensive on Elsenborn Ridge, this regiment stayed south of Eupen to fight the German paratroopers. Its combat power would not be felt at the critical engagements in the Butgenbach area.¹⁰⁷ It was this force that put most of the pressure on von der Heydte and forced his eventual withdrawal.

The rear echelons of several units, to include the 9th Infantry and 99th Infantry Divisions west of Monschau, were involved in small scale actions to root out German paratroopers in their own divisional rear areas. In fact, it was the 395th Infantry Regiment of the 99th that captured von der Heydte himself.¹⁰⁸

Thus, even with a terrible misdrop and a scratch force, the 1,000 jumpers of *Kampfgruppe* von der Heydte tied up five times their original number in attempts to destroy it, at a critical point in the overall battle. Although the casualty exchange ratio, and eventual result of the German offensive, show Operation *Stoesser* as a costly failure, that's still a pretty good "bang for the buck".

Operations *Greif* and *Stoesser* both failed to accomplish their assigned missions in support of Operation *Wacht Am Rhein*, which ultimately failed as well. They also failed

to have significant impact on the eventual outcome of the overall offensive. It is doubtful, that even if they had succeeded in seizing their assigned objectives, that the outcome of the campaign would have been any different. The failure of the conventional forces of Sixth Panzer Army to achieve a decisive breakthrough in their zone of attack would have rendered both operations moot.

As we have seen, both Operations *Greif* and *Stoesser* did make positive, though unexpected, contributions to the campaign. The fear, confusion, and disruption of command and control spread by the commandos and paratroopers undoubtedly added to the difficulties of the harried American defenders throughout the front. Additionally, the forces committed to counteract the special operations forces were combat units urgently needed elsewhere in the fighting.

The deficiencies in planning and preparation, which resulted from the inadequate time and resources available, drove the faulty execution of Operations *Greif* and *Stoesser*. Although the main offensive never set the conditions for their missions to have a decisive impact, their inadequate planning and preparation prohibited them from capitalizing on "windows of opportunity" to drive on and accomplish their respective missions. The failure of commanders at all levels to fully integrate and coordinate the special and the conventional operations served to make the inadequacies worse. The problems of Operations *Greif* and *Stoesser* were magnified by the faulty command and control structure for the missions. Even if a breakthrough had occurred, it is still uncertain if these operations, more so in the case of *Stoesser*, would have been able to accomplish their missions. Given proper time and preparation, it is quite possible that they could have been extremely effective.

As a result of the mis-steps that occurred throughout the planning, preparation and execution of Operations *Greif* and *Stoesser*, and the attempts of their men to overcome these handicaps, several valuable lessons emerge. An analysis of what went

right and wrong provides some important insights for the future, and is the subject of the next chapter.

ENDNOTES

¹Otto Skorzeny, Skorzeny's Special Missions (Aylesbury, England: First Futura Publications, 1974), p. 165.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., pp. 148 and 162.

⁴European Historical Division, European Theater Historical Interrogation (ETHINT) 12, Ardennes Offensive, Otto Skorzeny (Oberursel, Germany: USFET, August 1945), p. 6.

⁵Skorzeny, p. 169.

⁶Ibid., pp. 169-170.

⁷ETHINT # 12, pp. 7-8.

⁸Jean Paul Pallud, Battle of the Bulge, Then and Now (London: Battle of Britain Prints International Limited, 1984), pp.112-113, interview with Sgt. Rhode.

⁹Charles Whiting, Ardennes, The Secret War (New York: Stein and Day, 1985), p. 115.

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¹⁹Pallud, Battle of the Bulge, p. 107.

²⁰Charles B. MacDonald, A Time For Trumpets. The Untold Story Of The Battle Of The Bulge (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1985), p. 224.

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²⁵Whiting, p. 116.

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²⁷MacDonald, p. 236.

²⁸Ibid., p. 237.

²⁹Skorzeny, p. 171.

³⁰MacDonald, p. 225.

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³²Ibid.

³³MacDonald, pp. 225-226.

³⁴Skorzeny, p. 170.

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³⁷Skorzeny, p.169.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹ETHINT # 12, p.8.

⁴⁰Pallud, pp. 115-117.

⁴¹Ibid., p.106.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid., pp.109-111.

⁴⁴ETHINT # 12, p. 6.

⁴⁵Pallud, Battle of the Bulge, p. 106.

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⁵³Skorzeny, pp. 165-166.

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⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Ibid.

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⁶⁶Ibid., p.169.

⁶⁷Ibid., pp. 168-169.

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 169.

⁶⁹Pallud, Battle of the Bulge, pp. 119-122.

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹Skorzeny, pp. 173-175.

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⁷⁵European Historical Division, European Theater Historical Interrogation. (ETHINT) 75 German Paratroops in the Ardennes. An Interview with Obstlt Von der Heydte (London, England: USFET, October 1945), p. 1.

⁷⁶Pallud, Battle of the Bulge, pp. 86-87.

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⁷⁸Ibid.

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰Ibid.

⁸¹Ibid.

⁸²Ibid.

⁸³ETHINT # 75, p. 1.

⁸⁴Ibid.

⁸⁵Whiting, pp. 158-159.

⁸⁶Pallud, Battle of the Bulge, pp. 88-89.

⁸⁷Ibid.

⁸⁸Ibid.

⁸⁹Ibid., p. 89.

⁹⁰ETHINT # 75, pp. 1-2.

⁹¹Whiting, pp. 162-163.

⁹²ETHINT # 75, p. 2.

- ⁹³Cole, p.271.
- ⁹⁴Whiting, pp. 150-160.
- ⁹⁵Infield, p.87, extract from National Archives.
- ⁹⁶Whiting, p.157.
- ⁹⁷Ibid., pp. 150-152.
- ⁹⁸Ibid., p.152, extract from Bradley's memoirs.
- ⁹⁹Ibid., pp.151-152.
- ¹⁰⁰Infield, p. 88.
- ¹⁰¹MacDonald, pp.225-226.
- ¹⁰²ETHINT # 12, pp. 10-11.
- ¹⁰³Pallud, Battle of the Bulge, pp. 108-109.
- ¹⁰⁴Whiting, pp. 153-156.
- ¹⁰⁵Cole, p.271.
- ¹⁰⁶Cole, pp. 352-353; Whiting p.137.
- ¹⁰⁷MacDonald, p. 402.
- ¹⁰⁸Pallud, p. 89.

CHAPTER 6 LESSONS LEARNED

Numerous "lessons-learned" can be derived from an examination of Operations *Greif* and *Stoesser*. While most are decidedly negative, some positive ones are also evident as well. The negative lessons-learned result from the violation of what we now consider as generally accepted principles, such as the U. S. Army's Special Operations Imperatives, SOF "Truths," or the Principles of War, by the German planners and operators.¹ The positive lessons, while perhaps not resulting from any codified set of principles, likewise are of importance to our special operations of today.

Although there were clearly other factors, such as the failure of Sixth Panzer Army to gain a penetration, or the *Luftwaffe's* poor navigation, that influenced the failure of the operations, these lessons-learned stand alone as issues that decide success or failure in a special operation. All of these lessons-learned are of value for special operations of the future, and the integration of these operations into an overall campaign. A review of these lessons by both special operations and conventional force planners may aid in preventing similar failures during the conduct of some future operations.

Perhaps because both Operations *Greif* and *Stoesser* ultimately failed in their missions, the negative lessons outweigh the positive. The key "negative" lessons-learned from these operations include: the lack of available time for planning, preparation, and conduct of the missions; inadequate preparation in the form of personnel selection, training, and rehearsals; the lack of specialized equipment; the need for close coordination between special and conventional forces and the lack of full and close integration between

special operations and conventional planning and command and control; and the excessive and counter-productive security measures that inhibited the missions.

One key factor for both operations was the lack of time available to prepare for the missions. In both cases, the available time from receipt of mission guidance from higher headquarters, to execution of the mission, was grossly inadequate. High-risk, complex operations, involving ill-prepared and un-organized forces, require large amounts of time to plan, organize, prepare, and then execute. While in a wartime situation, time is always a critical commodity. However, it is essential for planners and commanders to match their resources to the mission, if they hope for even a slim chance of success. In the case of Operations *Greif* and *Stoesser*, they were not given sufficient time to prepare for the high-risk, specialized missions they were tasked with. This is a clear validation of the SOF Truth: "Competent Special Operations Forces cannot be created after emergencies occur." In the case of both operations, there were no standing units the German military could turn to in order to meet the requirements of the missions. Rather, special operations units had to be created after the need arose, with disastrous results.

In the case of Operation *Greif*, approximately five weeks, from October 22d to December 1st, were available to prepare for the mission, as the offensive was originally scheduled to commence in early December.² While at face value, this may seem as adequate time, in reality it was not. The *Greif* force had to be created from scratch. Volunteers from across the entire German Armed Forces had to be recruited, screened, selected, and trained. The special equipment required had to be located, transported, and made available for training. Planning had to occur for a type of mission that had never been conducted on this large a scale. Disparate units from various arms of the *Luftwaffe*, SS, and *Wermacht* had to be molded into a cohesive fighting force. Additionally, throughout the planning and preparation for Operation *Greif*, the chief architect,

Skorzeny, was still involved in conducting more "routine" special operations with his SS commando force and other special projects.³

Five weeks might have been more than enough for a more routine mission. However, Operation *Greif* was anything but routine. Infiltrating behind enemy lines disguised as American forces to seize critical objectives, gather intelligence, and conduct sabotage was definitely a high risk operation. Small mistakes would, and did, result in mission failure and loss of life. A cohesive, well-trained, well-organized force, possessing the requisite skills and the proper equipment, may have been able to accomplish the necessary planning and organization within five weeks. A scratch force like that of Operation *Greif* could not have hoped to manage properly in five weeks. It did not.

Although they managed some marvelous feats of improvisation during the preparation for *Greif*, by *O-Tag*, the forces were still ill-equipped and ill-trained, and the plan was poorly coordinated. Nothing highlights the inadequacies of the available time or of the forces than Skorzeny's protests to Hitler,⁴ or his own admission early in the *Greif* planning that: "We realized we were being asked the impossible."⁵

Operation *Stoesser* was in worse shape. Although the mission assigned was not nearly as complex or specialized as *Greif*, Colonel von der Heydte barely had four days, from December 10th to December 14th, to plan, prepare for, and coordinate the mission. Although it is a hallmark of airborne troops to rapidly respond to unexpected missions, time is still required to prepare for a high-risk airborne operation behind enemy lines. A fully trained airborne unit, along with a trained air force transport force, could probably have pulled off a relatively small scale airborne operation like Operation *Stoesser* within four days.

However, like *Greif*, the *Stoesser* force had to be created from scratch. By November of 1944, the German Wehrmacht did not have any airborne regiments that were parachute trained as a unit. The force employed was a conglomerate of hastily assembled

men and equipment. With this scratch force, there was barely sufficient time to get organized into combat formations. There was no time to train, rehearse, or develop the unit. Likewise, the *Luftwaffe* transport squadrons were equally ill-trained or prepared for this sort of mission. It had been several years since the last large scale operational drop. Additionally, there was no time to coordinate properly the activities of the paratroopers and the transport pilots. Without additional time to train or rehearse the mission, the inexperienced *Luftwaffe* pilots scattered the force during the drop, and thereby doomed the mission to failure. Clearly, more time to prepare both the airborne battle group and the airforce transport squadrons was required. Detailed coordination, joint training, and rehearsals should have been conducted given the sad state of readiness for both units.

The lack of available time exacerbated many of the problems associated with both missions. It influenced the inadequate planning, inhibited coordination, and prevented effective organization and training of the forces. These problems were to lead to the failures experienced on the battlefield. Unlike a conventional unit with a conventional mission, where a fragmentary order and a few hours may suffice, special operations require longer amounts of time with which to plan and prepare in order to be successful. The results of these operations serve to illustrate that successful special operations forces cannot be quickly created after the emergency arises.

The special operations units of Operations *Greif* and *Stoesser* were not fully manned by the proper personnel required for such missions. Special operations require specially selected and trained soldiers, with the unique skills required of their missions. This point in both operations serves to validate the SOF Truth: "Special Operations Forces cannot be mass produced." Special operations soldiers need to possess the required level of training and experience, and the unique skills, required of their missions. Attempting to quickly build special operations units by expedient short cuts, and filling them with unqualified personnel, will result in units that are not capable of accomplishing their

assigned missions. Although attempts were made to screen the soldiers of both operations, *Greif* and *Stoesser* lacked the numbers of qualified personnel they required.

Paramount to Operation *Greif* was the requirement to pose as an American unit while conducting a wide range of activities. In order to accomplish this it was necessary for the soldiers of the force to possess a range of skills from standard infantry tasks to demolitions. Obviously key was the ability to speak English as an American soldier would. Although the *Greif* commanders established a selection process to determine language ability, they came no where near to obtaining the numbers of qualified speakers required. Likewise, those personnel selected for their language ability for the most demanding of the commando jobs, usually had the least military, must less special operations, experience and training. Additionally, the remaining personnel recruited were a hodge-podge of backgrounds, skills, and experience.

These inadequacies resulted in a much less capable force then envisioned. It also resulted in the "drafting" of regular infantry and armor units to stiffen and flesh out the force. With the exception of about ten small commando teams, much fewer then were expected, few of the Operation *Greif* soldiers could pass as an American under any amount of scrutiny. The combat capability of the individual soldiers could only be imagined, although Skorzeny was clearly not too impressed.⁶

The personnel "selected" for Operation *Stoesser* were generally not prepared for the special mission that lay ahead of them. The entire battle group was comprised of individual draftees and volunteers from several parachute regiments already on the front lines. Tasked to provide their best men for the mission, the front-line commanders ended up sending some of their worst. The high degree of aggressiveness, initiative, and independence required in airborne soldiers on a special mission like *Stoesser* was lacking in many of them. Many had never even conducted a parachute jump before. Colonel von der

Heydte did his best to select the best, but was still forced to accept men who could not meet the standards required of the mission.

Aside from the obvious lack of cohesion among the virtual strangers within the companies of the battle group, the combat capability of the individual soldiers and units must have been lacking. This may account for the inability to rapidly assemble jumpers after the drop, to poor performance in fire-fights, and even for von der Heydte's reluctance to commit the force to open battle. Colonel von der Heydte summed up his estimate of the force: "Never during my fighting career had I been in command of a unit with less fighting spirit."⁷ The facts speak for themselves.

The situation with the *Luftwaffe* pilots was similar. As this was a joint operation, their skills would likewise spell success or failure for the overall operation. There was nothing special about the pilots hurriedly brought together for the *Stoesser* drop. Most of them were unqualified for the task at hand. Their lack of proficiency in conducting a night drop into a relatively small drop zone was to spell disaster for Operation *Stoesser*, and resulted in the terrible mis-drop and scattering of the paratroopers.

Specially selected and trained personnel are required for all parts of a successful special operation. The lack of such soldiers and airmen contributed significantly to the failures experienced by the German special operations forces, and reinforce the fact that special operations forces cannot be quickly mass produced.

Operations *Greif* and *Stoesser* lacked the special equipment required to conduct their special missions. The difficulties encountered in both operations also serve to endorse the SOF Truth that "Special Operations Forces cannot be mass produced." Special operations require special equipment to accomplish the unique tasks assigned, or to operate in the environment of their targets. Regular, mass produced, equipment will often not suffice to meet the needs of the mission. Although a number of improvisations were attempted to fill the existing voids, both *Greif* and *Stoesser* went into action ill-equipped.

As part of their American disguises, the Stielau Commando Company and Panzer Brigade 150 would both require large amounts of American equipment. The failure of Operation *Rabenhugel* to procure the necessary vehicles, clothing, and weapons was apparent at the very inception of Operation *Greif*. With the exception of several teams from the commandos, the *Greif* force was completely under-equipped for its specialized deception task. Panzer Brigade 150 had to make do with German vehicles modified to appear as American equipment. Skorzeny was doubtful as to the effectiveness of the camouflage cover of his force.⁸ As *Greif* depended on the ability to deceive rather than fight in order to reach their objective, this situation clearly put the mission in jeopardy.

Additionally, the lack of suitable long-range radio equipment kept many of the commando teams reports from reaching their parent headquarters, or prevented the re-direction of the brigade's battle groups.

Operation *Stoesser* lacked several items of equipment that would have enhanced its low probability for success. The battle group lacked suitable numbers of the heavy weapons it would require to make a determined stand astride their mountain crossroads. Jumping in with just barely enough equipment, almost all of the heavy weapons were never recovered. Additional weapons, or specialized containers adaptable to personnel drops, might have enabled more weapons to get to the objective area and enabled the force to make a credible fight. Also, the battle group lacked adequate means for long-range communications. All of their radios were lost in the jump, and the alternative means of communications requested by von der Heydte, the carrier pigeons, was not approved.

The *Luftwaffe* lacked the special equipment needed for a precision night combat drop. Their Allied counterparts had already realized the need for specialized navigational aids and had developed an electronic beacon for guiding jump aircraft to their drop zones. As a result of the lack of specialized navigational equipment, the *Luftwaffe* pilots were

forced to rely on much less accurate expedient techniques, with a resultant loss of drop accuracy.

Just as specially trained and qualified personnel are required to meet the demands of unique special operations, so is special equipment a prerequisite to successful accomplishment of the assigned missions. Common items, although in large quantities in the inventory, may not be sufficient to fulfill the needs of the special operations units.

One of the most important lessons to arise from Operations *Greif* and *Stoesser* is the failure of the Germans to adequately coordinate and provide clear command and control for their special operations. Numerous lapses in coordination between the special and conventional units caused confusion, delays, and missed opportunities. The highly centralized command and control at the strategic level had a similar effect. Together, both contributed to mission failure. These failures were a violation of the Special Operations Imperative: "Facilitate interagency activities," and of the Principle of War of unity of effort. Special operations must be closely integrated with the conventional operations they support. The actions of special and conventional units must be coordinated at all levels. Clear lines of command and control must exist to permit flexible and effective employment of the forces. The failures in these areas during Operations *Greif* and *Stoesser* serve to validate the Special Operations Imperative, and the associated Principle of War, regarding coordination, integration, and command and control.

The lack of effective coordination is most obvious, and most damaging, within Operation *Greif*. This was in an operation where both elements had to rely upon the other for success. Neither force was operating in a vacuum. The operations between the conventional forces and the special operations units suffered from a lack of coordination for four main reasons.

One of the key inhibitors of effective coordination was the strict requirement for operational security and secrecy. As the information concerning the offensive as a whole

was compartmentalized, and kept at the highest levels, the units conducting the operations on the ground were kept "in the dark." Quite obviously, you could not coordinate what you did not know about. As a result, commanders such as battle group leaders from Panzer Brigade 150 and the I SS Panzer Corps spearheads could not get together to coordinate the mutual details of their missions.

Skorzeny's commanders were among the first to learn of their general mission on 20 November, but did not learn the real objectives until 14 December.⁹ Peiper, the key spearhead commander, was not to learn of his mission until December 14th also. There was time for one short coordination meeting between the divisional commanders and Skorzeny on 15 December. Also, only one hasty meeting was conducted between Peiper, LTC Hardieck of Battle Group X, and commando representatives on 15 December. Little was accomplished save introductions, discussion of measures to avoid fratricide, and a general outlining of the concept of operations.¹⁰ A few hours later, the offensive began.

Although several higher level conferences had been held earlier where Skorzeny had spoken to the Army level commanders about *Greif*, these could not substitute for direct "face to face" coordination of details among the units that would be fighting together.¹¹

Another less obvious reason for a lack of effective coordination seems to be the mistrust, or even dislike, between the conventional commanders and the special operations leaders like Skorzeny. This may have been part of the traditional Army verse SS feuds that occurred throughout the war. Statements from SS leaders like Peiper,¹² or the Sixth Panzer Army commander, Sepp Dietrich,¹³ seem to indicate a general disdain for the special operations units. Von der Heydte, upon learning of Skorzeny's participation in the offensive, appeared disgusted,¹⁴ and Field Marshal von Rundstedt likewise seemed to divorce himself from the special operations entirely.¹⁵ Although Skorzeny never expressed any opinions in his memoirs, I suspect the feeling may have been mutual.

The final cause of ineffective and inadequate coordination among the units involved in the operations was the lack of any established liaison teams or cells. Neither the special operations units, nor the regular divisions and regiments, exchanged liaison officers. A liaison team located at each major special operations headquarters, such as the Operation *Greif* battle groups, or with the regular units, such as *Kampfgruppe* Peiper, would have enabled each force to work more closely in concert with one another. The presence of such teams might have led to the decision to launch Battle Group X after a bridge upon the successful push through Stavelot. Such liaison teams, communicating with their parent units, would very likely have permitted a greater sharing of the valuable intelligence gained by the Stielau commandos.

Operation *Stoesser* suffered from a failure to coordinate the many details between the paratroopers and the *Luftwaffe* transporters. The many details requiring coordination for a night parachute drop behind enemy lines were not fully ironed-out. Also, *Kampfgruppe* von der Heydte was unable to conduct any coordination with the units that might link up with it, except for procuring a fire support team from the Sixth Panzer Army's artillery.¹⁶ Von der Heydte's short meeting at Sixth Panzer Army headquarters left several issues unresolved.

The highly centralized command and control of the special operations served to magnify the deficiencies in coordination. Operation *Greif* was commanded by Skorzeny, through SS channels to the FHQ. Skorzeny retained control of his commandos and Panzer Brigade 150 throughout the offensive. The conventional leaders, from Peiper through the commanders of 1st SS Panzer division and I SS Panzer Corps had no command authority over Skorzeny's forces, despite them moving and fighting with their units. Nor did the higher levels exercise any authority over them. Dietrich, the Sixth Panzer Army Commander,¹⁷ and even von Rundstedt, the Commander-in-Chief of the German Western Front, claimed to have no operational control over *Greif*.¹⁸ Likewise,

Stoesser was controlled through Army Group channels by Field Marshal Model, rather than any elements of the Sixth Panzer Army. Although the paratroopers were in his sector, Dietrich, the Army commander, did not have complete control over them.¹⁹ Rather than exercising operational control over all of the forces operating in their zones, to include the special operations units, the operational level commanders were little more than observers of the special operations activities. They could not direct these units in order to influence the overall battle, thereby promising disunity of effort during the campaign.

The lack of coordination, and the highly centralized, and at times distant command and control lines, made it impossible to respond to and exploit opportunities on the battlefield. The failure to pass Battle Group X forward through *Kampfgruppe* Peiper, for example, was a failure of coordination and command and control. In this sense it contributed to the failure of the overall operation. Unity of effort, close coordination and full integration of plans are required between special and conventional forces in order to ensure mission success.

One last negative lesson-learned is in the arena of operational security. The overpowering desire for strict and absolute secrecy emanating from Hitler resulted in a multitude of ramifications. Although surprise was essential to the offensive, we have seen how the limits on dissemination of information affected everything from planning, to preparation, and coordination. It also was a prime cause for the lack of preparation time for the operations. The strict safeguards on secrecy were counterproductive in the long-run, and ultimately did more harm than good. This excessive effort at maintaining the secrecy of the operation was in contradiction to the Special Operations Imperative: "Balance security and synchronization." It would serve to contribute to the failure of the special operations missions.

Ironically, while depriving combat commanders involved in the operation the essential information they required, the German high command was unwittingly giving it to

the Allies. The OKW message calling for recruits for Skorzeny's mission is a prime example. If applied, the cloak of secrecy should obviously be uniform. However, it should not be considered impossible to disseminate critical bits of information to key commanders at various levels and provide them with adequate preparation opportunities, without sacrificing secrecy. The alternative is to cause problems that may ultimately result in mission failure. Such was the case with the German special operations in the Ardennes.

Despite the problems encountered in the preparation and execution of *Greif* and *Stoesser*, some positive lessons-learned emerge from the operations. Two of these are the effects of boldness, initiative, and improvisation, and the psychological effects that special operations can have on one's adversary.

The boldness of both operations clearly achieved surprise within the Allied camp. The unexpected, and in the case of Operation *Greif*, the unorthodox , missions had their chances of success boosted by the surprise they generated. This slowed down Allied reactions and caused confusion as to the German's intent. However, the most successful aspect of boldness was that of using the ruse of appearing as an American unit. Discounting Panzer Brigade 150, the commandos of the Stielau unit were extremely successful in using their American disguises to infiltrate American lines and conduct operations. The technique of posing as members of the enemy army, by even minimally prepared personnel, proved to be quite effective. Of course, it proved to be quite dangerous if captured, as evidenced by the American force's execution of the captured commandos.

In a heavily defended or populated area, or one lacking concealment, this technique might be the only way to procure human intelligence behind the enemy's lines, or penetrate to an assigned target. It would be the only way to conduct the "acts of confusion," such as misdirecting traffic, done by the Stielau Commandos.

Throughout the planning of both operations, the leaders displayed a high degree of initiative and the ability to improvise. Both were required to overcome the faults and problems encountered during their mission preparation. Operation *Greif* in particular showed the extremes of improvisations, as German tanks were modified to appear as their American counterparts. Once committed to the battle, the *Greif* commandos exhibited a great deal of initiative on the part of the junior leaders. Operating with the broadest mission-type guidance, they were able to respond to or create opportunities for sabotage and intelligence gathering. The successful infiltration to the Meuse River bridges, or the mis-directing of the American 16th Infantry regiment are some examples of the initiative displayed by the commando team leaders.

Both Operations *Greif* and *Stoesser* produced a psychological impact among the American defenders out of all proportion to their small numbers. Even against the Americans, who already had a good idea of the inevitable outcome of the war, the effects were tremendous. Commandos and paratroopers were seen everywhere. The knowledge of enemy personnel operating behind one's lines seems to add to the sense of confusion and panic that may arise as a result of a conventional attack. One can only imagine the even greater success the *Greif* commandos and *Stoesser* paratroopers would have had if the American front had crumbled, and the defenders were in full flight as hoped. The effects on a panicked, ill-trained, or ill-disciplined army could be severe. This effect seems to be the natural by-product of certain special operations, and should be anticipated and exploited.

The lessons-learned arising out of Operations *Greif* and *Stoesser* are valuable elements of history that should not be ignored. They provide indicators of where the German special operations went right and wrong. If they had been corrected or overcome, it is possible that the operations may not have ended in failure. A study of these lessons is extremely valuable as a preventative measure for avoiding similar mistakes, or as a set of

examples to highlight some of the positive aspects of the operations. The issues, problems and lessons that surfaced during Operations *Greif* and *Stoesser* were not unique to the German military of World War II. They are not new, but, nor are they only a relic of past history. These lessons have application for the U.S. military of today, as we wrestle with the very same issues and problems in the conduct of our own operations.

ENDNOTES

¹For greater detail and additional information regarding fundamentals of special operations, see Department of the Army, FM 100-25, Doctrine for Army Special Operations Forces (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1991), pp. 2-1 to 2-20.

²Otto Skorzeny, Special Missions (Aylesbury, England: First Futura Publications, 1974), p. 153.

³*Ibid.*, p. 147

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵*Ibid.*, p.153.

⁶*Ibid.*, p.157.

⁷Charles Whiting, Ardennes, The Secret War (New York: Stein and Day, 1985), p.90.

⁸Skorzeny, p.155.

⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 158; 164.

¹⁰European Historical Division, European Theater Historical Interrogation (ETHINT) 10 Oberst Jochen Peiper, 1 SS Panzer Regiment. (Dec 11-24, 1944) (Freising, Germany: USFET, September 1945), pp. 10-12.

¹¹Skorzeny, pp. 163-164.

¹²ETHINT # 10, p. 6.

¹³European Historical Division, European Theater Historical Interrogation (ETHINT) 15 Sixth Panzer Army in the Ardennes Offensive. Obstgrf Dietrich (Oberursel, Germany: USFET, August 1945), p.11.

¹⁴Whiting, p.92.

¹⁵European Historical Division, European Theater Historical Interrogation.
(ETHINT) 47 The Ardennes Offensive. Genfldm von Rundstedt (Unknown: USFET,
August 1945), p.13.

¹⁶Whiting, p. 96.

¹⁷ETHINT # 15, p.10.

¹⁸ETHINT # 47, p.13.

¹⁹ETHINT # 15. p. 9.

CHAPTER 7 CONCLUSION

A thorough analysis of the German special operations conducted during Operation *Wacht Am Rhein* raises several interesting questions and issues. Why did the Germans attempt such operations when there was such a low probability of success? Could they have succeeded had they done some things differently? What are the implications for U.S. military special operations of today?

At the very outset of the planning for both operations it became apparent to both Skorzeny and von der Heydte that they had a very low probability of success. Accordingly, both commanders attempted to get their mission cancelled, for varying reasons, prior to the start of the offensive. Given this, what prompted the operations to be approved at the higher levels of command, and what prompted the commanders of Operations *Greif* and *Stoesser* to continue with the missions and execute them?

Clearly the driving force behind both missions was Hitler. This simply was the most likely reason for executing what were, in effect, military gambles at best. At that stage of the war Hitler was the *de facto* commander of the German military. His pet projects, like the offensive itself, were not going to be changed. Furthermore, at that level, the operations must have looked great on paper, or on a planning map. Unfortunately, no one pushed the issue with Hitler that the projections of equipment and support for Operations *Greif* and *Stoesser* were unrealistic or un-deliverable. It seems that no one wanted to tell the *Fuhrer* the bad news,¹ and even those that did were ignored, if we are to believe Skorzeny.

But there is an additional element that must be considered when attempting to understand why these missions were allowed to continue. Operations *Greif* and *Stoesser*, like the larger offensive itself, could be considered acts of desperation. The end of 1944 saw the demise of Germany. The operations were conceived in a period of great crisis and desperation for Germany, where anything that offered a glimmer of hope for forestalling defeat was a viable option. Field Marshal Model's sobering estimate of the offensive's ten percent chance of success and his subsequent decision to proceed with the offensive, and von der Heydte's airborne drop, is indicative of this attitude among the senior German leaders.

When does a commander say no? The commander's of the operations, Skorzeny and von der Heydte, were also motivated by other issues to continue on with the mission. Perhaps, in the case of both men, the most important driving force was a sense of duty. Although both commanders tried to abort their missions, they apparently felt it was their duty to continue with the operations as professional German military officers when they were overruled by their higher commanders. Although they may have disagreed with the plans, they both put themselves in harms way to execute them. Additionally, their pride as a commando or paratrooper was not likely to permit them to quit the missions. Both men were more likely to say "can do", rather than "no way" when assigned a difficult task. This is an attitude that is not foreign to the American military either.

Another factor, which should not be discounted, was concern over punishment should they not attempt to execute the missions. Although this was never obvious in the case of Skorzeny, one of Hitler's "fair-haired boys", he was close enough to Hitler to know what could happen if orders were disobeyed. In the case of von der Heydte, the consequences of failing to proceed with the mission were much more obvious. An aristocrat related to the conspirators on Hitler's life, and not the most strident of Nazi supporters, von der Heydte was not above suspicion. In fact, when the airborne drop did

not go as scheduled on 16 December, he was confronted by an investigating officer inquiring into why the jump was cancelled. Von der Heydte was eventually to convince the investigator that it was a lack of fuel for the transport trucks that prevented assembling the paratroopers and forced cancelling the drop, and not an attempt at disloyalty or cowardice.²

As a final note, it can be argued, that once their forces were committed on the missions, both commanders seemed to delay their commitment into an engagement with the enemy. In the case of Operation *Stoesser*, this is fairly clear. Von der Heydte did indeed avoid a heavy engagement that he thought would be un-winnable with his meager force. Skorzeny also clearly delayed committing the battle groups into an attack for the bridges that would be unsupported by the Sixth Panzer Army, and which would result in an unnecessary loss of life. However, he did not hesitate to employ his force as a regular unit in a conventional attack, although it was obviously not a "suicide" type of mission.

It is quite possible that if fully committed under the right conditions, both Operations *Greif* and *Stoesser* could have succeeded. Furthermore, if some of the previously discussed lessons-learned had been properly addressed by these forces, the probability of success would have been fairly high.

As ill prepared as it was, Panzer Brigade 150 could have still accomplished its mission of seizing bridges over the Meuse River, provided the necessary breakthrough had been effected by Sixth Panzer Army. Acting on the intelligence gleaned by the Stielau Commando teams, and capitalizing on the American's hasty withdrawal westward, it is very likely that the brigade could have mixed in with an enemy column and seized a bridge before it was blown. If the panzer spearheads were just behind the rest of the fleeing Americans, in the confusion of the first night, it is also likely they could have held until a link-up with the German armor forces.

With better coordination and more responsive command and control between *Kampfgruppe* Peiper and Battle Group X, it appeared possible that the *Greif* force could have been passed forward at Honsfeld, or Stavelot on the 17th of December. Although this window of opportunity existed, and it may have been possible to reach and seize a bridge on the 17th, the *Greif* force would likely have died on the vine fruitlessly awaiting the German armor.

Given an accurate drop by the *Luftwaffe*, and a resultant rapid assembly of the jumpers with most of their equipment, it is very likely that the Operation *Stoesser* battle group could have cut the Malmedy to Eupen road and blocked reinforcements. Instead of racing through in long convoys, the reinforcing divisions would have had to fight their way through the paratroopers. Although possessing superior combat power, the Americans, facing an unknown and over-estimated enemy force, would have consumed valuable time clearing or bypassing the battle group. It is quite possible that the *Stoesser* force could have made its two day stand, but not much longer than that. If the Sixth Panzer Army had achieved a penetration, such an action could have been of great significance. But, given the reality of the situation, even if it was successful, the *Stoesser* force would have met a fate similar to *Greif's* Battle Group X if it had been stranded behind American lines.

The conduct and failure of Operations *Greif* and *Stoesser* hold a great deal of significance for the U.S. military of today. Foremost, they serve to illustrate the validity of the Special Operations Principles, Imperatives, and "Truths" that current doctrine is built upon. The violations of several of these resulted in the failure of both operations. The lessons of these operations are of value for both conventional and special operations forces. We have experienced similar problems in the history of our special operations, and the lessons gained from the German operations reinforce the lessons of our own experiences. However, by following the principles and imperatives in our doctrine, we can overcome such problems and avoid such disasters in the future.

A lack of experienced, properly trained, replacements, and incomplete planning and inadequate intelligence contributed to the 1st Ranger Battalion's disaster at Cisterna, Italy. Excessive operational security, confused command arrangements, and poor coordination among participating units added to the failure of Operation Eagle Claw in the Iranian desert. Unclear command lines and inadequate coordination between conventional and special operations forces have caused mis-steps from Grenada to Somalia.

We too have successfully employed the positive aspects of Operations *Greif* and *Stoesser*, and would do well to continue to do so in the future. Bold, innovative action has brought success, such as the World War II First Special Service Force's spectacular climb and seizure of Mount la Difensa from the Germans in Italy, or the airborne drop on Los Banos Prison to rescue Japanese-held American POWs in the Philippines. The use of enemy uniforms to infiltrate hostile territory during clandestine missions has been effectively employed by the American military in the past. From the Jedburgh teams of the OSS in Europe, to the Special Forces teams of Projects DELTA, SIGMA, and OMEGA, and the Military Assistance Command Vietnam - Studies and Observation Group (MACV-SOG) operations in Vietnam, U.S. special operations forces have successfully conducted operations posing as the enemy. Boldness, improvisation and initiative have characterized the successful special operations of the past.

Two U.S. military operations provide specific examples of how the proper application of SOF principles and the "lessons-learned" from the *Greif* and *Stoesser* missions can result in successful actions. The Son Tay Prison heliborne raid into North Vietnam on 21 November 1970, and the 14 September 1943 parachute drop at Avellino, Italy provide interesting comparisons to Operations *Greif* and *Stoesser*.

The U.S. raid to liberate American POWs at the North Vietnamese prison at Son Tay is an excellent example of how a unit can successfully conduct a difficult special operation. The raid, launched hundreds of miles behind enemy lines, was the result of

over six months of detailed planning and three months of intensive training and rehearsals. Like Operation *Greif*, the special operations force, Task Force Ivory Coast, was formed from personnel from several different units. But unlike *Greif*, the special operators and pilots for this mission were specially selected, and thoroughly trained warriors who could meet the demanding needs of the mission. The task force received the unique special equipment it required for the mission. Everything from special demolitions to long-range helicopters was procured. The task force, also like *Greif*, operated under strict security restrictions. But enough information was disseminated to allow for proper training and preparation. The task force conducted dozens of rehearsals on full-scale mock-ups of the targets. Every member of the task force was thoroughly trained for his role in the mission. The joint mission was well coordinated and integrated at every level, to include the supporting Air Force and Navy air operations.. Clear command and control existed from the individual team or crew level to the special planning group at the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The result was a well-prepared force that executed the mission near-flawlessly and with a high degree of initiative. Although the POWs had been removed shortly before the raid, the psychological impact of the operation materially contributed to improving the welfare of all of the American prisoners.³

The night parachute drop of the 509th Parachute Battalion at Avellino, Italy is an excellent example of an operation in response to a crisis situation and conducted with little preparation time. The operation was a desperate measure to prevent the destruction of the American invasion beachhead at Salerno, Italy in 1943, and the 509th, in Fifth Army reserve was called to assist. Very similar to Operation *Stoesser*, the 509th was tasked to parachute at night behind enemy lines to seize a large crossroads area and deny its use to German units moving south to oppose the Salerno beachhead. Like *Stoesser*, the American paratroopers had little preparation time for the mission. Instead of six days, however, the 509th had just six hours to prepare for the operation. Also like *Kampfgruppe*

von der Heydte, the transport aircraft became badly scattered during the drop, and only ten aircraft reached the right drop zone. The paratroopers were scattered over a wide area, and only a small group was assembled.

However, despite these handicaps, the American paratroopers were able to tie up sizeable numbers of German units. Unlike the *Stoesser* force, the 509th was an experienced unit with very high esprit de corps and strong unit cohesion. Rather than hide, they would fight. Turned back from the crossroads by German armored units, the small group of assembled paratroopers continued to ambush and attack German units. Small, scattered groups of paratroopers fought in the areas where they had landed, some for weeks after the drop. The result was a diversion of German forces to combat the airborne troops, who appeared to be everywhere. This resulted in the easing of some pressure on the beachhead, and clearly assisted the overall campaign.⁴

Both of these operations from our past show how proper consideration of the principles underlying the lessons-learned from *Operations Greif* and *Stoesser* can result in successful missions, despite numerous obstacles.

However, the most important lesson for the American military of today that should be gained from this study is the need for standing special operations forces, headquarters, and coordination elements that are properly manned, trained, and equipped. Only a force in readiness, one that has already prepared itself to conduct demanding, and time sensitive missions, can overcome the type of handicaps faced by the men of *Operations Greif* and *Stoesser*. Such a force, with specially selected and trained personnel, possessing special mission equipment, and trained into a cohesive team could have overcome the obstacles the German special operations faced.

Likewise, an established, parent special operations headquarters for conducting unilateral and joint special operations planning, training, and coordination, as well as interfacing with their conventional counterparts and integrating operations into the overall

campaign plan, could have spelled the measure of success for missions like *Greif* and *Stoesser*. Finally, dedicated special operations coordination and liaison teams attached to the conventional force headquarters would have ensured the required level of coordination and information exchange between the two elements.

Attempts to scrape together ad-hoc units, and prepare them under unrealistic time constraints for specialized and demanding missions, will inevitably fail. Failure to coordinate and integrate the efforts of special operations and conventional forces can lead to failure of the overall campaign plans. Conducting planning and preparation in a vacuum will result in almost certain difficulties during execution. Standing special operations units, headquarters, and coordination elements serve to prevent these pitfalls.

Fortunately the U.S. military currently has such organizations in existence today. Special operations forces such as the U.S. Army Special Forces, Rangers and Special Operations Aviation Regiment, U.S. Navy SEALs, and U.S. Air Force Special Operations Wings stand ready and prepared to execute a wide variety of missions with little notice. They possess the knowledge and skills, the trained personnel, and the special equipment, to include regional expertise, language training and foreign equipment, to conduct demanding missions like Operations *Greif* and *Stoesser*. At the strategic level the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) and individual service special operations and warfare commands, provide the consolidated, joint command and control required for planning, preparing, and conducting special operations missions. At the operational level, special operations commands organic to each Unified Command ensure the integration of special operations into overall campaign plans and provide joint command and control for special operations forces. Special Operations Coordination cells (SOCORDs) assigned to each Army corps, and Special Operations Command and Control Elements (SOCCE) attached to conventional headquarters coordinate the actions and requirements of both the

special and conventional units. Finally, an established doctrine ties the activities of all these units together.

In order to prevent failures of the type met by Operations *Greif* and *Stoesser*, we must maintain the current organizations and continue to improve our levels of readiness, integration and coordination, while at the same time thoroughly understanding the roles, capabilities, limitations, and employment considerations of our forces. Additionally, we must adhere to the Special Operations Principles, Imperatives, and Truths that shape our special operations doctrine. By doing all of this, special operations and conventional planners, commanders, and soldiers can avoid costly problems in the future.

Although we have such organizations and doctrine, however, we must not take them for granted. Successful special operations will not happen by themselves. A continuous effort to support and improve the U.S. military's investment in special operations infrastructure and readiness is required. Both special and conventional force commanders and planners must fully integrate and coordinate their efforts in order to achieve overall campaign goals. When special operations support conventional plans, or vice a versa, neither can be planned or executed in a vacuum in order to achieve the success of the mission. Both special and conventional warriors must not let branch, service, or unit rivalries get in the way of effective coordination and teamwork.

Failure to understand and apply as appropriate the Special Operations Truths, Imperatives, or the common Principles of War can lead to failures in mission accomplishment. Failure to properly plan and prepare, integrate and coordinate, and command and control special operations will likewise lead to mission failures. The failure to maintain properly trained and equipped special operations units and commands will ensure that a military force is not ready to respond when the need arises. Failures such as these are the legacy of Operations *Greif* and *Stoesser*. The U.S. military must learn from these failures and thereby avoid repeating them in the future.

This analysis has only scratched the surface of this subject. It has been limited by the available documents and sources printed in English. It would be extremely valuable to examine this operation from German sources, and get a fuller, and more detailed, German perspective, perhaps not colored by the interrogator's questions or the autobiographer's ego. Such continued study would be valuable as the problems faced by the Germans in conducting, and the Americans in combatting, Operations *Greif* and *Stoesser* will be with us in the future. There is still much more to learn about the integration of special operations into conventional campaign plans and operations. The unique and unorthodox techniques employed during these operations are worthy of detailed examination and analysis. The German special operations effort during *Wacht Am Rhein* is clearly a topic deserving additional study.

The German special operations conducted in support of Operation *Wacht Am Rhein* were ultimately failures because of the inadequate planning, preparation, and coordination of the operations. The lack of time to assemble, train, equip, and rehearse the forces of Operations *Greif* and *Stoesser* guaranteed their ineffectiveness. The resulting forces were improperly manned, trained and equipped for their missions, and suffered from inadequate command and control. The inhibiting factor of strict secrecy, coupled with the extremely short planning time, prohibited effective coordination of the operations with the supporting and supported units. The result during the execution of the missions were poorly integrated special and conventional operations, and ultimate failure.

Although the bold nature of the operations and the leaders, the improvisations to overcome handicaps, and the initiative displayed during execution by the men produced some small successes, they were not enough to outweigh the failures. Likewise the contributions generated by these forces in terms of psychological impact, intelligence gathering, and commitment of enemy forces, were not enough to offset the overall failure of the German offensive.

Although a failure for the Germans, the special operations conducted during the *Wacht Am Rhein* Ardennes offensive provide the U. S. military of today with valuable lessons that we must avoid re-learning, or be prepared to exploit, on the inevitable battlefields of the future.

ENDNOTES

¹Otto Skorzeny, Special Missions (Aylesbury, England: First Futura Publications, 1974), p.150.

²Charles Whiting, Ardennes, The Secret War (New York: Stein and Day, 1985), pp. 120-121.

³For a detailed account of this operation, see Benjamin Schemmer, The Raid (New York: Harper and Row, 1976).

⁴For a detailed account of this operation, see Gerald Devlin, Paratrooper! (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979), pp.306-330.

APPENDIX A
GLOSSARY

<i>Ami</i>	German soldier slang for an American soldier.
Auk	North-Sea diving bird.
<i>Einheit Stielau</i>	Stielau Unit; the Operation <i>Greif</i> commando unit, named after its commander, Captain Stielau.
<i>Essenbomben</i>	Food bomb; an aerial resupply container.
<i>Fallschirmjaeger</i>	Airborne or paratrooper.
<i>Fallschirmkorps</i>	Airborne Corps.
<i>Feldwebel</i>	Technical Sergeant.
<i>Gefreiter</i>	Private First Class.
<i>Generalleutnant</i>	Major General.
<i>Generaloberst</i>	General.
<i>Grafenwoehr</i>	German training site where the Operation <i>Greif</i> units were formed and trained.
<i>Greif</i>	Griffin; the code-name for Otto Skorzeny's special operation, named after the winged lion of mythology.
FHQ	<i>Fuhrer</i> Headquarters.
<i>Hauptmann</i>	Captain.
<i>(SS) Hauptsturmbannfuhrer</i>	SS captain.
<i>Heersgruppe</i>	Army Group.

<i>(SS) Jagdverbände Mitte</i>	Hunter Group Center, the name for Skorzeny's special commando unit.
JU-52	Junkers-52; the standard <i>Luftwaffe</i> transport airplane.
JU-88	Junkers-88; a standard <i>Luftwaffe</i> medium bomber.
<i>Kampfgruppe</i>	Combat, or battle group.
<i>Korvetten Kapitän</i>	Corvette Captain; commander of a small naval ship.
<i>Leutnant</i>	2nd Lieutenant.
<i>Luftwaffe</i>	Air Force.
<i>Luftwaffen-Kommando West</i>	Airforce Command West front.
M4	American "Sherman" medium tank.
M10	American self-propelled tank destroyer.
<i>Oberfähnrich</i>	First Sergeant.
<i>Obergefreiter</i>	Corporal.
<i>Oberquartiermeister</i>	General staff officer at an army headquarters in charge of supply and administration.
<i>Oberstleutnant</i>	Lieutenant Colonel.
<i>(SS) Obersturmbannführer</i>	SS Lieutenant Colonel.
<i>OB-West</i>	<i>Oberbefehlshaber West</i> (Commander in Chief West Headquarters).
OKW	<i>Oberkommando der Wehrmacht</i> (Armed Forces High Command).
<i>O-Tag</i>	D-Day.
Panther MkV	German medium tank.

<i>Panzerfaust</i>	Armored-fist; a German light anti-tank weapon.
<i>Rabenhugel</i>	Raven-hill; the code-name for the equipment procurement effort in support of Operation <i>Greif</i> .
<i>SS</i>	<i>Schutzstaffel</i> (Elite guard).
<i>Stoesser</i>	Auk; the code-name for the German airborne operation in the Ardenne.
<i>SO</i>	Special Operations.
<i>SOF</i>	Special operations forces.
<i>Sturmgeschutz</i>	German self-propelled assault gun.
<i>Transportgeschwader</i>	Air Force transport squadron.
<i>Unteroffizier</i>	Sergeant.
<i>Volks Grenadier</i>	People's Grenadier; a honorific German unit title.
<i>Wacht Am Rhein</i>	Watch on the Rhine; code-name for the German Ardennes Offensive.
<i>Waffen SS</i>	Armed SS.
<i>Wermacht</i>	German Armed Forces.

APPENDIX B
CHRONOLOGY

- 14 SEP American forces penetrate German soil in the Aachen area.
- 16 SEP Hitler first proposes plans for Ardennes counter-offensive.
- 21 OCT Otto Skorzeny briefed on offensive and plans for Operation *Greif*.
- 25 OCT OKW message recruiting soldiers for Operation *Greif* distributed.
- 2 NOV Operation *Rabenhugel*, the procurement of equipment for *Greif*, begins.
- 10 NOV OKW Operation Directive for *Wacht Am Rhein* issued.
- 25 NOV Target date for completing the organization of the *Greif* force.
Initial planning date for the start of the counter-offensive.
- 4 DEC Field Marshal Model proposes airborne operation to support offensive;
Operation *Stoesser*.
- 8 DEC Col von der Heydte receives warning order for Operation *Stoesser* from
General Student.
- 9 DEC Paratroopers for *Kampfgruppe* von der Heydte assemble at Aalten.
- 10 DEC Skorzeny briefs *Greif* battle group commanders on their actual missions.
Second planned "*O-Tag*", or start day for the offensive.
- 11 DEC Col von der Heydte briefed on the actual mission for Operation *Stoesser* at
Sixth Panzer Army Headquarters.
- 12 DEC Corps and division commanders briefed on plans for the offensive and
Operation *Greif*.
- 13 DEC Panzer Brigade 150 moves to forward assembly areas for the offensive.
Kampfgruppe von der Heydte receives its weapons and equipment.

- Target date for completing organization of *Kampfgruppe* von der Heydte. *Kampfgruppe* von der Heydte moves to a holding area near the departure airfields for the offensive.
- Von der Heydte links up with supporting *Luftwaffe* transport commander.
- 14 DEC Spearhead commanders, (*Kampfgruppe* Peiper), briefed on plans for the offensive by division commanders.
- 15 DEC Peiper briefs subordinate commanders of his *Kampfgruppe*.
 Coordination meeting conducted between Panzer Brigade 150 Battle Group X commander, Willi Hardieck, and Peiper.
 Third planned *O-Tag* for the offensive.
- 16 DEC Actual *O-Tag* for the offensive; *Wacht Am Rhein* begins.
 Operation *Greif* begins; Stielau commandos begin infiltration of American lines; Reconnaissance teams reach Meuse bridges.
 Operation *Stoesser* postponed as troops fail to reach departure airfields in time.
 Attacking infantry divisions fail to create a penetration of American lines.
- 17 DEC *Kampfgruppe* Peiper achieves a limited penetration of American defenses.
 Operation *Stoesser* begins; airborne drop in the Hohen Venn conducted.
 Two commando teams compromised and captured by the Americans.
 I SS Panzer Corps still east of Hohen Venn Ridge.
 Skorzeny cancels Operation *Greif*.
- 18 DEC Panzer Brigade 150 placed under Sixth Panzer Army for conventional employment.
Kampfgruppe von der Heydte assembled with only 300 men.
- 19 DEC Sixth Panzer Army attack stalled.

- 20 DEC *Kampfgruppe* von der Heydte disbanded; paratroopers attempt to "escape and evade" to German lines.
- 21 DEC Panzer Brigade 150 launches attack against American positions in Malmedy.
- 23 DEC Captured *Greif* commandos executed by American firing squad.
- 28 DEC Panzer Brigade 150 withdrawn from the front.
- 3 JAN Allies begin counter-offensive to erase the "bulge".
- 23 JAN Panzer Brigade 150 disbanded.

APPENDIX C
FIGURES

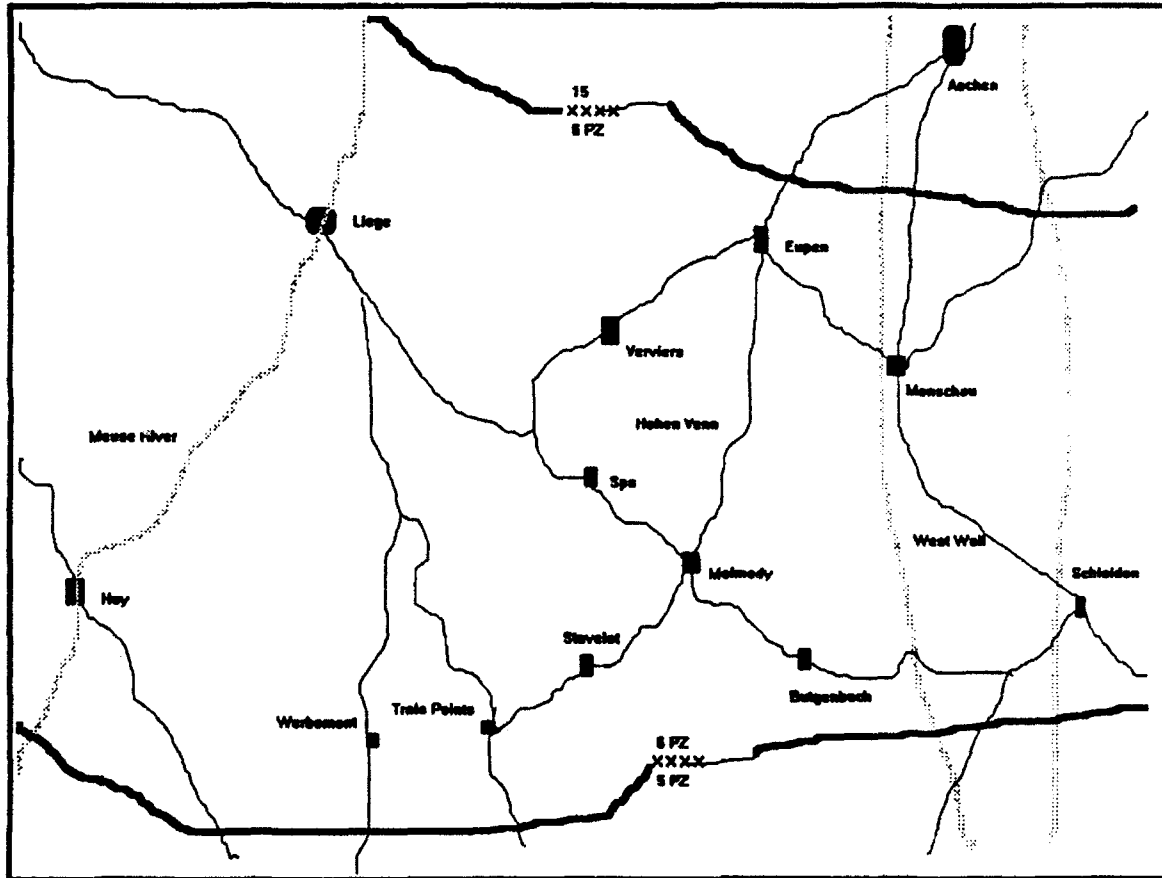


Figure 1. Map of Sixth Panzer Army's initial zone of attack.

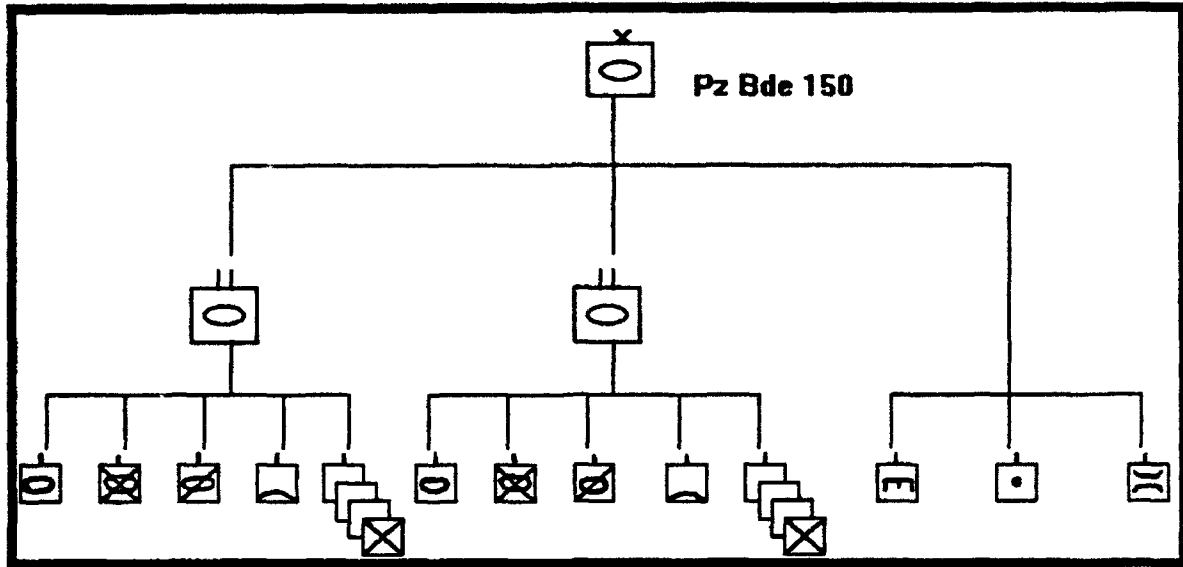


Figure 2. Initial proposed organization for Panzer Brigade 150.

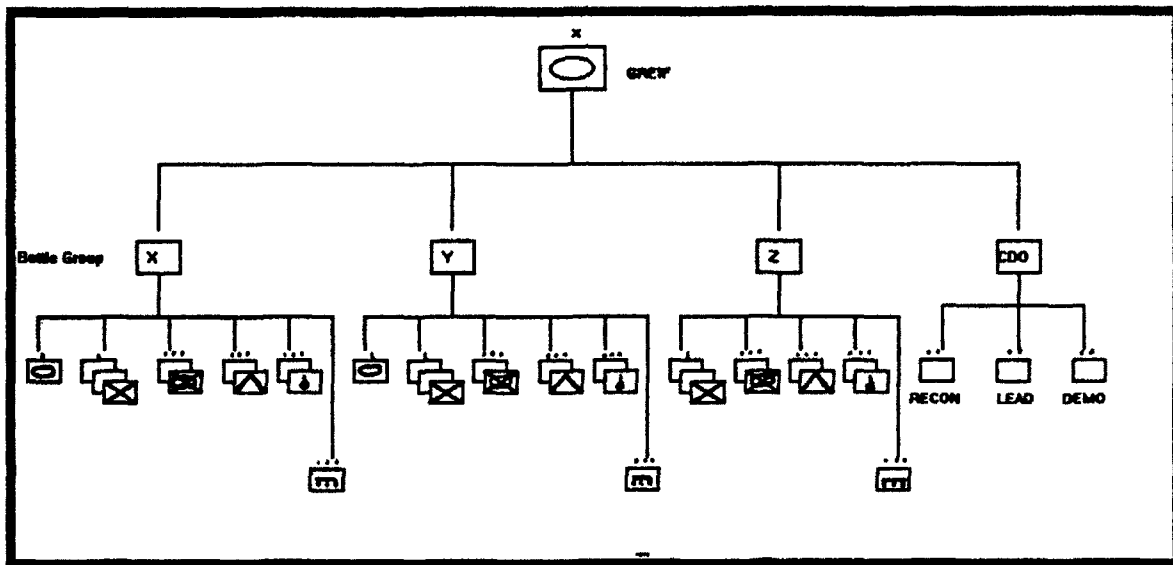


Figure 3. Actual task organization for Operation *Greif* force.

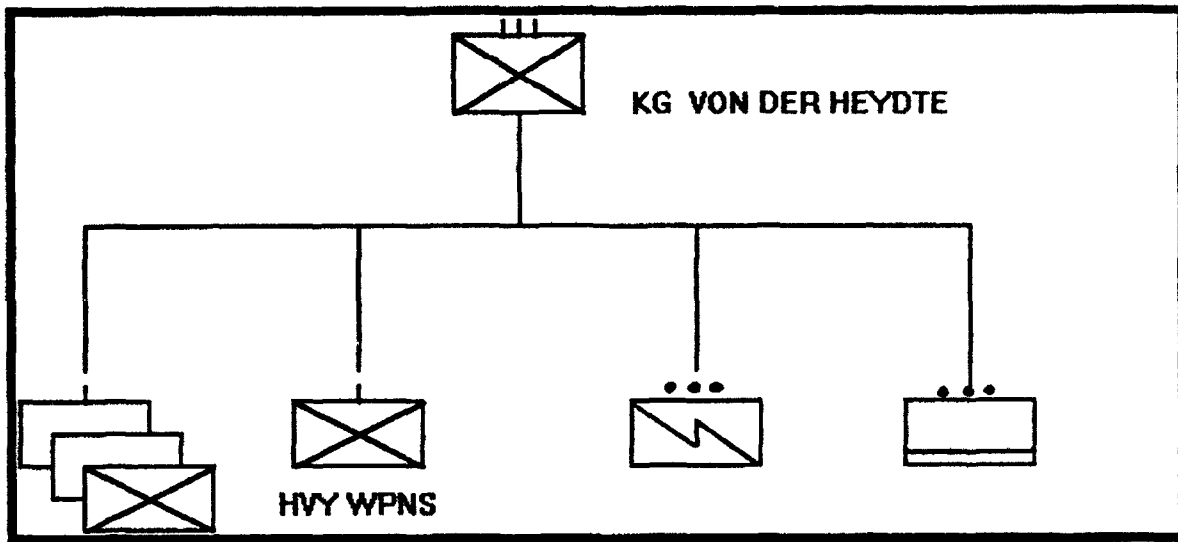


Figure 4. *Kampfgruppe* von der Heydte task organization.

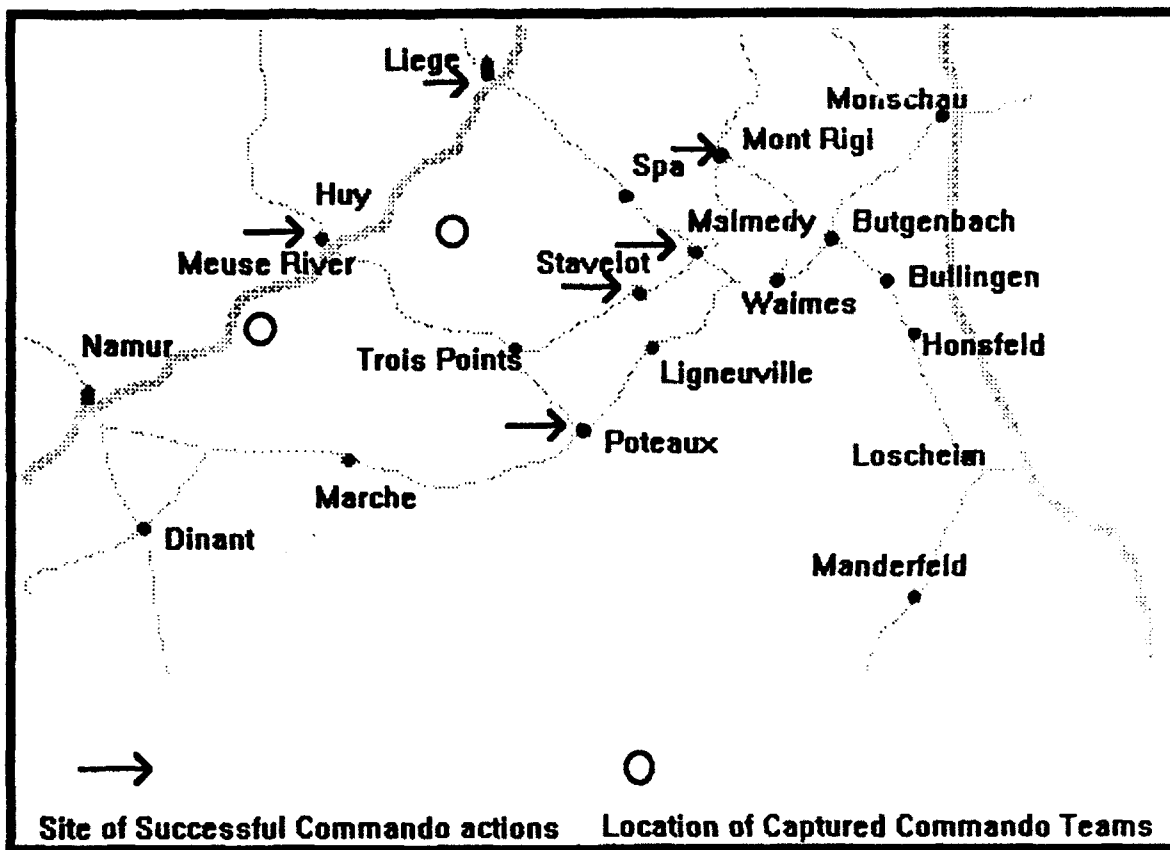


Figure 5. Map of Stielau Commando activities.

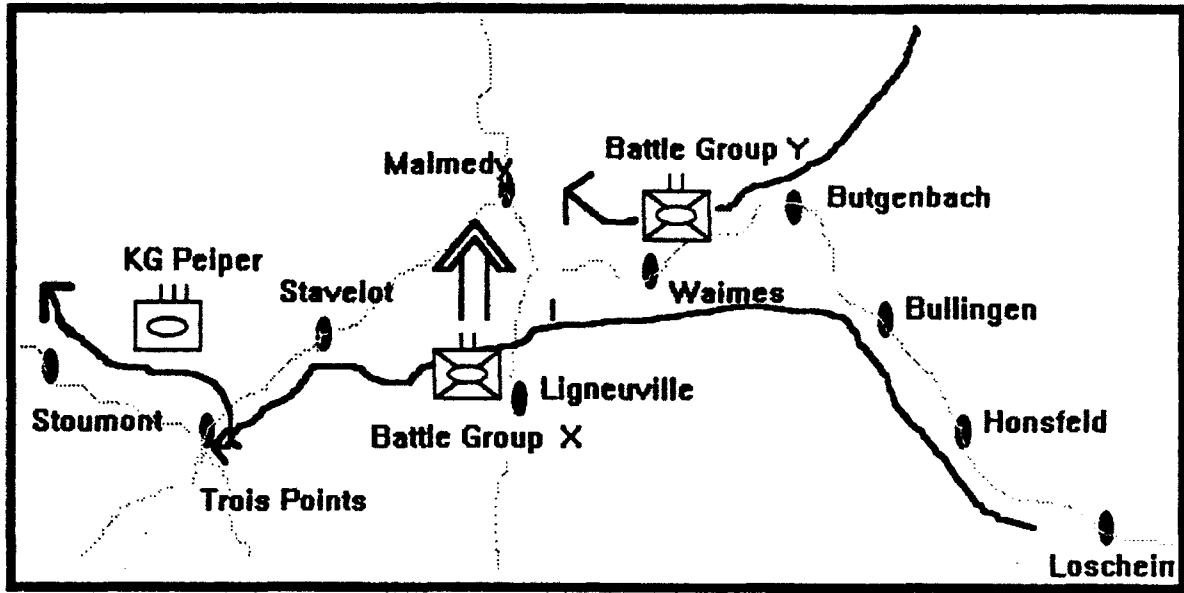


Figure 6. Map of actions of Panzer Brigade 150 and *Kampfgruppe Peiper*.

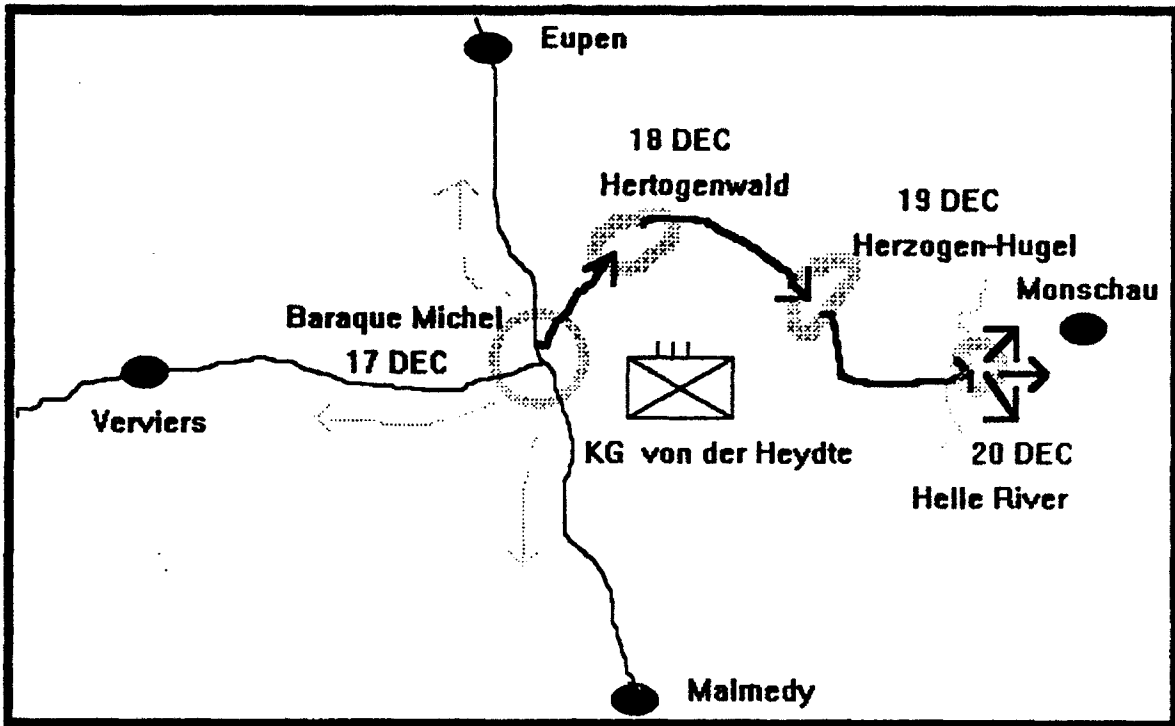


Figure 7. Map of actions of *Kampfgruppe* von der Heydte.

APPENDIX D BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Several primary and several secondary sources were extremely valuable in preparing this study. Although many sources address the topic of the Ardennes Offensive, and some cover the special operations, no one source provides a complete and objective view of Operations *Greif* and *Stoesser*.

One key primary source was the post-war interviews conducted by the European Historical Division. These *European Theater Historical Interrogations*, or *ETHINTs*, and similar manuscripts, provided primary source information from the German commanders involved in the Ardennes Offensive and the German special operations. These were published in 1954 by the Headquarters, U.S. Army, Europe, Historical Division, and are found in the *Guide to Foreign Military Studies, 1945-54*. Interrogations of the key players in the offensive such as Skorzeny, von der Heydte, Peiper, Kraemer, Dietrich, Model, and von Rundstedt, provided the German view of the operations. These interrogations covered the gamut of mission planning, organization, preparation, execution, aftermath, and reasons for failure of the offensive. One note of caution concerning these sources is that they were conducted immediately after the war while the subjects were captured prisoners of war. Given the numerous charges of war crimes stemming from the campaign, it would not be surprising if many of the commanders interviewed colored their stories to avoid incriminating themselves.

Another key primary source was Otto Skorzeny's autobiography, *Special Missions*. This book provided a great deal of the information concerning Operation *Greif* and Hitler's discussions with Skorzeny regarding the offensive. Much of it is corroborated

to avoid any blame for war crimes, not to mention for the mission failure. Additionally, it is the sole source for some of the information concerning *Greif*, as Skorzeny was the only living individual privy to some of the closely guarded information about the operation.

The last source of primary source material were the numerous extracts of interviews conducted by several authors, most notably Jean Paul Pallud, Glenn B. Infield, and Charles Whiting, obtained while they researched their published works. These interviews conducted with Operation *Greif* and *Stoesser* participants, as well as American soldiers involved in the battle, are found in several of their books.. These serve to fill in some of the gaps of the historical documents, and provide additional detail concerning both operations.

Several books were key secondary sources for information concerning the overall campaign, and the American reaction to the offensive. Hugh M. Cole's official military history of the campaign, *The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge*, is an excellent secondary source about the entire offensive. Based on official after action reports, logs, and journals, it is almost a primary source in its own right, and it provides a wealth of information to the researcher. Jean Paul Pallud's *Battle of the Bulge, Then and Now* is another excellent secondary source concerning the campaign and the special operations. Based on first hand accounts, examination of documents, and visits to the battle sites, it likewise is a definitive source on many aspects of the offensive. Charles B. MacDonald's *A Time For Trumpets* was also an excellent source book. Charles Whiting's *Ardennes, the Secret War* focused on parts of Operations *Greif* and *Stoesser*. Whiting's personal interviews with Skorzeny, von der Heydte, and Peiper which form the basis for a large part of the book, provided additional key information regarding the operations. The many other books listed in the bibliography provided valuable information and insights regarding the overall campaign.

This study did not explore sources written in German. Several German language accounts and histories of the Ardennes Offensive contain additional information regarding the special operations and the campaign as a whole. These would be worthy of research

when conducting further study of this topic. Additionally, this study does not contain any exclusive primary source interviews or letters from participants. Some of the former members of Operations *Greif* and *Stoesser* are still living, and likely to provide some detailed information for a future researcher.

Overall, the available English language primary and secondary sources, consisting of interrogations, manuscripts, unit histories, and numerous books, yielded sufficient information with which to paint an accurate picture of the circumstances surrounding the two German special operations. Likewise, the sources provided adequate information with which to draw lessons-learned, and base obvious conclusions upon. Current military publications provided the doctrinal framework concerning U. S. Military special operations. Altogether, the sources used provided an effective foundation for the research conducted in this study.

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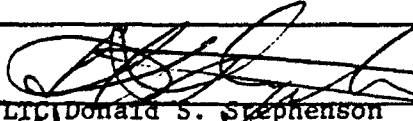
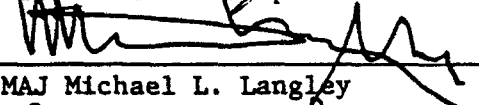
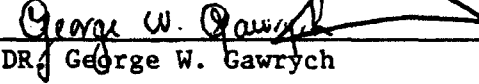
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