



Ardenne 1944: The Battle of the Bulge

By Antony Beevor

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The Battle of the Bulge, known to the Wehrmacht as Operation Autumn Mist, was the Germans' final major offensive of the Second World War. Hitler himself planned an operation intended to seize the port of Antwerp and cleave the Allied Western Front in two. The German divisions were able to achieve complete surprise and penetrate more than 40 miles into the Allied front before they were halted just short of the River Meuse in what became their "last gasp." In his new book *Ardenne 1944: The Battle of the Bulge*, Antony Beevor narrates the story of the battle from all perspectives — general, private, German, and American. The book is a masterwork and a must read for anyone who has interest in the battle itself or World War II. Beevor again proves himself a master of the operational-level saga, a treat for the reader from start to finish.

Ardenne 1944 is Beevor's ninth book and a worthy inheritor of his legacy of prize-winning World War II writing. Beevor has won major awards for almost all of his previous works. He shows us again that he can take a well-known story, Hitler's desperate gamble over the Christmas of 1944, and make well-researched history page turning. The book lacks a little of the cataclysmic nature inherent to some of his previous work like *Stalingrad: The Fateful Siege: 1942-1943* and *The Fall of Berlin 1945*, but Beevor keeps the reader from noticing.

Emboldened by success on the Western Front, the Allies moved quickly across northern France to the German border after breaking out of Normandy. Allied intelligence predicted little to no possibility of a German offensive; in late August of 1944, the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force G-2 published an analysis that said, "The August battles have done it, and the enemy in the West has had it." Hitler had other plans, however. In September, he summoned his top generals to brief them on an upcoming offensive. The plan was to smash the Allied lines in the Ardennes sector in order to break through to Antwerp. He predicted the ensuing disaster would create "another Dunkirk" and strain the Anglo-American alliance to the breaking point. Preparations were made in almost total secret and went undetected by the Allies. Most German officers were not briefed on the plan or even the objectives until hours before the offensive was to begin.

The offensive achieved nearly complete surprise at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels. The initial thrust threw some Army units into headlong retreat south toward the River Meuse. But slowed by weather, poor roads, and lack of fuel, the German divisions were unable to exploit their initial success. The Americans were able to use their immense logistics capacity and herculean motor-lift capacity to shift forces on the battlefield and blunt the offensive.

Beevor is the guide as he takes the reader on a journey through the battle, expertly wielding the experiences of combatants on both sides and noncombatants to sculpt his narrative, and even here he is able to keep the text wonderfully free of footnotes. When the occasional voice of hindsight speaks, it is during moments of consequence

where it is most valuable. He shows the reader the humor of war when General Bradley is nearly arrested by nervous MPs on the suspicion that he is a German spy and in narrating the romantic and adventurous exploits of a young Ernst Hemingway. But he also shows the darkness of the massacres of civilians and soldiers alike behind the lines. Like the Piper Cub reconnaissance planes that the Allies employ as artillery spotters, the narrative dives in and out, crisscrossing the battlefield. Still, he never loses sight of the overall picture, giving the reader daily and incessant casualty tallies in men and equipment and placing the battle in the context of the war as a whole. The Battle of the Bulge critically depleted the Wehrmacht, particularly the Panzer divisions that were needed to stop the Soviet advance on the Eastern Front, which probably shortened the overall length of the war by many months if not a year.