

Moments in MI History

Forecasting the Bulge: Third Army G-2 in December 1944

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In mid-December 1944, LTG George S. Patton's Third Army approached the German border. Over the previous 4 months, the Third Army had advanced from Normandy and pursued retreating German forces across France. On 13 December, Patton's forces had captured the fortress town of Metz in Lorraine, clearing the way for an advance to the Rhine River. Six days later, Patton wanted his army to begin its attack toward Frankfurt.

As the end of 1944 drew near, the Third Army's G-2 section had become a smooth-running intelligence organization. The staff routinely provided situational awareness and developed targets for Patton and his headquarters. It also coordinated the intelligence collection efforts within the Army and exchanged tactical information with subordinate and higher headquarters. At the head of this intelligence staff was COL Oscar W. Koch, who had been Patton's intelligence officer in the North African and Sicilian campaigns.

For the Third Army G-2, all sources of information were important. The Army relied on a wide range of intelligence sources from infantry patrols and prisoner interrogations to signals traffic analysis and aerial imagery. One asset's strength would compensate for another's limitations. If poor weather grounded aerial reconnaissance, the G-2 could gather information from prisoners, signal intelligence, and troops in contact. Sources both complemented and supplemented each other. For example, the 118th Signal Radio Intelligence Company obtained radio frequencies and call signs through interrogation and captured document teams. The result of this all-source effort was a balanced and flexible Third Army collection system.

This balanced collection effort helped Koch accurately keep track of the enemy situation. But more important, his thinking was always clear and detached. After racing across France in August and September, the Allies were optimistic the war would soon end; however, Koch remained cautious. At the end of August 1944, he estimated that despite huge losses, the Germans maintained a cohesive front and



COL Oscar W. Koch, a cavalryman, served as LTG Patton's intelligence officer in North Africa, Sicily, and Northwest Europe.

had not been routed. He reported that the enemy were still bringing new units into battle, although this did not give them new offensive power. With weather and terrain on their side, Koch believed the Germans would play for time and wage a last-ditch struggle. For the Third Army G-2, the war wasn't over.

As the Allies approached the German border, German resistance stiffened and the Allied advance slowed to a crawl. Yet optimism remained. Other Allied intelligence officers believed that the heavy fighting was sapping the Germans' strength and that the Germans would not have the force left for an offensive action.

Koch continued to watch throughout the autumn. By the end of October, he noticed the Germans were withdrawing



LTG Patton and his staff during the Battle of the Bulge. COL Koch, on the far right, kept Patton informed of German capabilities.

panzer forces from the front and were building up forces in the Eifel area opposite the First Army, to the north of Patton's Third Army. Because those enemy forces in Eifel could threaten the Third Army's projected offensive southeast toward Frankfurt, Koch paid close attention to them. During November, the Army G-2 planned aerial surveillance of Eifel's railroad marshalling yards and road intersections. Despite poor flying weather, photo interpreters could trace the progress of hundreds of railroad trains carrying armor and vehicles.

During his 9 December 1944 briefing, Koch briefed German strength and capabilities in Eifel. By Koch's estimate, the Germans had nine divisions (four in contact) facing the First Army's VIII Corps. That force was two and a half more divisions in equivalent strength than stood against the entire Third Army. The G-2 concluded that the German divisions could be used to meet threats from the First or Third Armies, divert Allied reinforcements to Eifel, or launch a spoiling or diversionary attack.

Several factors favored the last possibility. The Germans had a tactical reserve of 105 tanks in two panzer divisions in

Eifel. Of the nine divisions, the five in reserve were rested and refitted. To support ground forces, the Germans had marshaled 1,000 fighter planes. While the terrain was unfavorable for Allied winter operations, it was favorable to a German offensive.

Based on Koch's briefing, Patton decided to continue the plans for the Third Army operation toward Frankfurt. However, he directed that limited preparations begin to meet the potential German spoiling attack. Later, Patton would use the outline planning to counter a German threat bigger than even Koch had calculated. On 19 December, Patton had his army shift the attack's direction and rip into the southern flank of a 20-division German counteroffensive. By Christmas, the Third Army had relieved the besieged city of Bastogne, a critical road junction, and had driven a salient into the Germans' exposed flank. The tide had finally swung against the Germans.

Patton did not change his offensive plans because Koch briefed him on a potential threat to the north. However, by telling Patton of the potential threat's capabilities, the G-2 started his commander and staff thinking about how to react to such a situation. As a result, the Third Army's



Armored forces of the Third Army advance into the flank of the German counteroffensive during the Battle of the Bulge.

rapid and unexpected shift of direction broke the back of the Germans' counteroffensive in the south. ✨

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