

The NORDWIND Plan to Destroy the 100th Infantry Division

by Keith E. Bonn

On the last day of 1944, as they quietly oiled their machineguns, rechecked their stick grenades, and drank their last cups of *ersatz* coffee to the roasted barley dregs, the soldiers of Colonel General Johannes Blaskowitz' *Army Group G* received this message from the Supreme Commander of the Western Front, Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt:

Soldiers of the Western Front!

One of the hardest years of this war lies behind us. We have overcome its crises and dangers. The legacy of our fallen comrades will further inspire and oblige us.

The new year will find us to be loyal and combat-proven soldiers of the Führer.

Bold in the attack, steadfast in the defense, invincible in decisive battles, confident and resolute to the end, we cross the threshold of the year 1945.

Our belief in the Führer and in the unified might of our people is unshakable.

We will increase our efforts, never grow weak, never give in, until the enemy is defeated.

Long live the Führer!

Within a very few hours—before the new year even dawned—well over 20,000 infantrymen in the assault echelons of eight German divisions would surge forward across frozen fields and through snow-decked forests in the opening phase of the last German offensive in the West of World War II. Encouraged by the successes of their comrades of *Army Group B* in the Ardennes over the two previous weeks and supported by whole brigades of rocket launchers, battalions of assault guns and tanks, and even by part of a battalion of Hunting Tigers, the heaviest armored vehicles to ever see combat, their mission in Operation NORDWIND was to penetrate the American lines east and west of Bitche and retake the Saverne Gap.

Two German corps, *XIII SS* and *XC*, were to encircle and destroy the American units at the western terminus of the Low Vosges Mountains and drive south and east to Saverne. At the same time, *LXXXIX Corps* was to penetrate the thin mechanized cavalry screen proffered by the Americans in the heart of the Low Vosges to the east to secure and block the few trafficable passes through those mountains from the Saar Plain to the Plain of Alsace. Once these missions were accomplished, two more armored divisions would barrel through the strategically critical Saverne Pass that separated the Low Vosges from the High Vosges range to the south. Subsequently, they were to link up with the attacking forces of *Army Group Upper Rhine*, attacking from across the Rhine River, to destroy the American units on the Plain of Alsace and cut off the US Seventh Army from the French First Army. With most of Alsace back under German control and several American divisions destroyed, the fragile alliance between DeGaulle and the Americans might be damaged or even ruptured. Combined with the cleft in the Anglo-American alliance that might result from the battles still raging in eastern Belgium, it was Hitler's only chance to create a situation by which he might be able to make a separate peace with the western Allies and subsequently focus on his most implacable and dangerous foe, Joseph Stalin and the Soviet Union. Standing in the way of this shrewd, if desperate, plan were the thinly-spread, wet, freezing, tired American soldiers specifically targeted for annihilation by Hitler and his planners.

Those Americans were the men of the 100th Infantry Division.

The Attackers and Their Plans

General Blaskowitz, one of the senior-most German officers on active duty at the end of the war, was one of Hitler's least favorite generals. Although he had commanded the units that invaded Czechoslovakia in 1938 and had brilliantly led a field army in the invasion of Poland, he had incurred Hitler's undying wrath during his tenure as commander of German occupation forces in Poland in 1939-40. During this tour of

duty, Blaskowitz repeatedly complained about the atrocities being conducted against Polish Jews and intelligentsia by the SS throughout his geographic area of responsibility. Although his complaints were never based on moral objections (Blaskowitz simply protested that the sight of repeated massacres was bad for his troops' morale) this not only enraged Himmler, but caused Hitler to doubt his ardor for participation in his plans for the rest of Europe. Thus, despite his repeated requests for reassignment to combat commands (Blaskowitz never allowed his distaste for what the SS was doing in Poland to dull his desire for participation in further aggression on behalf of the *Reich!*), Blaskowitz was sidetracked for the next four years, following his tedious and grim duty in Poland with an assignment to command occupation troops in France. Almost uniquely among German senior officers, like Erwin Rommel, Blaskowitz saw no action whatever on the Eastern Front.

Blaskowitz was commanding *Army Group G* in southern France when the Allies launched Operation DRAGOON, the invasion of the Riviera. Although he managed to save most of his two field armies (*1st* and *19th*), he still lost about 89,000 men to the rapidly-advancing troops of the US VI Corps and I and II French Corps. Hitler relieved him of command on 20 September. As part of the incessant reshuffling of commanders which plagued the German Army at all levels throughout the last year of the war, Hitler personally reinstated Blaskowitz in command of *Army Group G* on Christmas Eve, 1944, specifically to supervise the prosecution of NORDWIND.

The plan for NORDWIND, which had been developed by the staff of *Army Group G* prior to Blaskowitz' reinstatement in command, had been briefed to Hitler earlier that day. The *Führer* had been somewhat disappointed. It called for *Army Group G's 1st Army* to conduct its main attack directly into the Low Vosges from the north with two corps, while a third corps conducted a supporting attack to the west of the mountains. To facilitate a rapid breakthrough and subsequent exploitation by the supporting attack, the plan had assigned the newly-replenished *17th SS-Panzer Grenadier Division "Götz van Berlichingen"* and a lone *Volks-Grenadier* division to the attack west of Bitche. The plan called for the *21st Panzer Division* to lead the main attack to ensure a similarly rapid penetration and breakout from the Low Vosges. A lone, under-strength armored infantry division, the *25th Panzer-Grenadier*, was designated the operational reserve, with the mission of reinforcing or exploiting the success of either of the other two major armored formations participating in NORDWIND.

Hitler disliked the plan because, just as they had done in Operation WACHT AM RHEIN ("WATCH ON THE RHINE") in the Ardennes two weeks earlier, his generals intended to commit the main armored force involved in the attack directly into snow-and ice-choked, labyrinthine mountain trails, where they could be relatively easily bottled up by American infantry and engineers. Subsequently, he knew from the bitter experiences of the last two weeks, as they sat in motionless columns on narrow, twisting mountain paths, the *panzers* could then be destroyed *en masse* by Allied aircraft. Instead, Hitler personally ordered a change to the plan, resulting in the retention of the *21st Panzer Division* with the *25th Panzer-Grenadier Division* as the operational reserve. Although most of his generals refused to admit it, this "meddling" by "the *Führer*" actually allowed much greater flexibility; if the *XIII SS Corps* attack could breach the American lines west of Bitche, then the robust armored reserves could break out to the south, toward Diemeringen, and cut east to Saverne. If the two *Volks-Grenadier* divisions and *6th SS-Mountain Division "Nord"* being committed in the Low Vosges east of Bitche were able to seize and hold the routes to the Plain of Alsace, then the armored exploitation force could alternatively follow them and break out on the Plain of Alsace from any one of the three Low Vosges exits at Niederbronn-les-Bains, Zinswiller, or Ingwiller. They could then seize Saverne from the east.

To maximize the chance for the success of the breakthrough west of Bitche—on the ground most suitable for armor—Blaskowitz further changed the plan he had inherited just a week before its commencement. On Christmas Day, he issued a new order in which he not only announced the changes to task organization ordered by Hitler, but also a new task for two of his three participating corps. Now, *XIII SS Corps*, attacking from the north, was to link up with *XC Corps*, attacking from the northeast, at the village of Rohrbach.

A quick look at the situation of the American forces in the area makes the impact of such a tactic obvious. The three infantry regiments of the 100th Infantry Division were to be attacked on their left

(west) by elements of the full strength *17th SS-Panzer-Grenadier Division*, supported by super heavy Hunting Tiger tank destroyers, mounting 128mm main guns, and two companies of self-propelled armored flamethrowers, all supported by a brigade of rocket launchers. The infantry units of the 100th were to be attacked on the right flank by the *559th Volks-grenadier Division*. To further weight the eastern prong of this intended encirclement, the other division of *XC Corps*, the *257th Volksgrenadiers*, was to break through the thin screen offered by Task Force Hudelson's 117th Cavalry Recon Squadron between the Camp de Bitche and Baerenthal and subsequently throw their full force against the deep right wing of the 100th in the push toward Rohrbach from the east.

Thus, the Century Division was to be surrounded and destroyed by two and half German divisions to create a massive hole through which two more German armored divisions could be launched toward the strategic objective of Saverne.

XIII SS Corps' Attack Toward Rimling

On 30 December, Blaskowitz added even more power to the *XIII SS Corps* for its intended penetration of the American lines to the south. To supplement the already double-strength assault gun battalion (70 full-tracked armored vehicles mounting 75mm guns directly in the hull, without turrets) and tank battalion assigned to the *17th SS*, he added a full company of 17 *Panther* tanks, generally considered the best overall design of WWII. In this way, while the *19th* and *36th Volks-Grenadier Divisions* tied down the bulk of the 44th Infantry Division to the west, the reinforced *17th SS-Panzer-Grenadier Division* would make the *XIII SS Corps*' main effort by attacking southward against the boundary between the 44th Infantry Division's 71st Infantry Regiment on the left (west) and the 3rd Battalion, 397th Infantry Regiment on the right.

XIII SS Corps, which consisted of the *19th* and *36th Volks-Grenadier Divisions* as well as the *17th SS-Panzer-Grenadier Division*, was commanded by a ruthless criminal, *SS-Obergruppenführer* (Lieutenant General) Max Simon. A life-long professional soldier and horse cavalry combat veteran of the First World War, Simon transferred to the SS from the *Reichswehr* (the army of the German Weimar Republic) in 1933 and rocketed to the rank of colonel in just five years. During this time, he became deeply involved in the construction and conceptualization of the Nazi concentration camp system. During his service on the Eastern Front as a regimental commander in the infamous *3rd SS-Panzer Division "Totenkopf"* ("Death's Head," or "Skull"), his men slaughtered Russian prisoners; during his tenure as Commanding General of the *16th SS-Panzer-Grenadier Division* in Italy, men under his command again massacred non-combatants, this time Italian partisans. (Simon served a lengthy sentence for war crimes after his conviction at Nuremberg after the war).

The *XIII SS Corps* unit that Simon was throwing against the 100th, the *17th SS-Panzer-Grenadier Division "Götz von Berlichingen,"* was formed in October of 1943 and fought in more or less continuous combat from the Normandy invasion forward. It was commanded by *SS-Standartenführer* (Colonel) Hans Lingner, a 29 year old veteran of ten years in the *Waffen-SS*. As a junior officer, Lingner had participated in the invasion of Belgium in 1940, the Balkans in 1941, and the Soviet Union later that year. In the summer of 1944—after his fourth combat wound in as many years—Lingner was assigned as a regimental commander in the *17th SS*, and subsequently assumed command of the Division on 30 November. Between that date and the commencement of *NORDWIND*, the *17th SS* had seen extensive action against the US Third Army in Lorraine, but was nevertheless brought up to full strength in the last days of December. In *SS-Panzer-Grenadier Regiments 37* and *38*, this replenishment was largely accomplished by assigning Soviet "volunteers" who had opted to serve the Germans against the capitalist Americans on the western front rather than languish in German PW camps. The other units of the *17th*—such as *SS-Sturmabannführer* (Major) Kurt Wahl's *SS Reconnaissance Battalion 17* (which later attacked Rimling after the initial assaults were repulsed by the elements of the 397th Infantry) received practically all ethnic or actual German replacements to bring them to full T/O strength.

Standartenführer Lingner's plan was to seize the heights just west of Rimling with *SS-Panzer-Grenadier Regiment 37* (one of two such regiments in the *Götz von Berlichingen Division*) and thus protect the advance of his other regiment, *SS-Panzer-Grenadier Regiment 38*, which was attacking past

Rimling to the south, toward Achen and Gros Réderching. Thus the matchup around Rimling would initially pit 1,350 *SS-Panzer-Grenadiers*, supported by armor, artillery, and rocket launchers, against the 539 men of Companies I, K, L, and M of the 3rd Battalion, 397th Infantry who were deployed in and around the town. Once the *XIII SS Corps*' attack opened the seam between the 44th and 100th Infantry Divisions, the highly mobile *Panzer-Grenadiers* would drive in their armored half-tracks quickly on to the linkup point at Rohrbach, behind the 397th's lines.

The XC Corps' Attack on the Right Flank

The enveloping pincer on the other flank of the 100th Infantry Division, the *XC Corps*, was commanded by *General der Infanterie* (Lieutenant General of Infantry) Erich Petersen, an officer recently transferred from the *Luftwaffe*, in which he had served as a paratrooper (in the German armed forces of WWII, the parachute formations belonged to the air force!). Petersen was an experienced combat commander who had led a German airborne division in Russia; his transfer from the *Luftwaffe* to the Army was really a sort of a homecoming, as he had only transferred from the Army to the *Luftwaffe* in 1941 to command paratroops.

Petersen's unit that was directly attacking the 399th's lines was the *559th Volks-Grenadier Division*, commanded by *Generalmajor* (Brigadier General) Kurt *Freiherr* (Baron) von der Mühlen, a Swabian nobleman who had been a professional soldier since joining the *Reichswehr* at the age of 18, in 1923. After service as an infantry regimental commander on the Eastern Front, von der Mühlen had been assigned as the commanding general of the newly-raised *559th* upon its activation in September, 1944. Withdrawn after its rough baptism of fire at the hands of the US Third Army near Metz and Saarlouis, two of the *559th*'s three two-battalion regiments had been brought to nearly full strength in the nine days before the scheduled commencement of *NORDWIND* (the third one remained at extremely low strength). Writing after the war, von der Mühlen remarked that, "Both officers and men had little training for attacks in forest areas," but went on to add that the *559th*'s "lack of training for an attack could not be considered an obstacle especially as the morale and fighting spirit among the troops, due to the course of events [in the Ardennes] was very good."

Along with the divisional *Füsilier* company (a sort of elite reconnaissance/light infantry formation possessed by each *Volks-Grenadier* division), the two replenished regiments of the *559th Volks-Grenadiers* would be able to muster about 2,600 assault troops for the attack on the 399th's positions on the right (eastern) end of the 100th's sector. Here, the 568 men of the 1st Battalion/399th's three line companies and heavy weapons company would attempt to stem the tide of onrushing *Volks-Grenadiers*, but would also have to deal with another threat.

After penetrating the screen posted by Task Force Hudelson's 117th Cavalry Squadron, the *XC Corps*' other division, the *257th Volks-Grenadier*, would circle around the 399th's right flank and drive toward Rohrbach from *behind*, or the southeast. In the three months prior to its commitment to *NORDWIND*, this outfit had been completely reconstituted and reorganized from the remnants of the *257th Infantry Division* (the "*Berlin Bears*"), which had been severely mauled on the Eastern Front. Under its new Commanding General, *Generalmajor* Erich Seidel, the *257th Volks-Grenadiers* had been created in October 1944 from a combination of recently-recovered wounded veterans (40%) and reclassified *Luftwaffe* and naval personnel. The division trained together for about four weeks prior to its transfer to the Warsaw sector, but before the anticipated Russian breakthrough materialized, it was sent across Central Europe again to arrive in western Lorraine in December.

Given that they were breaking through the isolated outposts of a cavalry screen a few kilometers to the east, the *257th*'s initial strength of about 3,800 men in the assault echelons of its three infantry regiments and divisional *Füsilier* company would probably survive essentially unscathed as they attacked to link up with the *17th SS* near Rohrbach. Once they circled behind the 1st/399th, the infantry formations they would encounter were mainly the 544 men of the three line companies and heavy weapons company of the 3rd Battalion, 399th Infantry, which had been deployed in depth in anticipation of just such a possibility. The 399th's "blue" battalion would be assisted by the 125 men of Company K, 398th Infantry, which was attached to the 399th and occupied blocking positions in the 399th's sector.

An Assessment of the Plan

The German plan for destroying the 100th and creating an enormous hole in the Seventh Army line clearly had tactical merit. With 1,350 *SS Panzer-Grenadiers*, supported by tanks and half-tracks, attacking 539 Centurymen on the western end of the 100th's sector, and another 6,400 *Volks-Grenadiers* attacking the 1,237 Centurymen defending the eastern end, Blaskowitz' concept of operations certainly pitted strength against weakness. By massing two and a half divisions against three battalions at opposite ends of the 100th's sector, the Germans hoped to smash decisively and rapidly toward their linkup point at Rohrbach, before General Burress and the Division's staff could react effectively. By destroying three infantry battalions with overwhelming combat power and cutting off the other six, the German plan made great economy of force; they had every reason to hope that the surviving six battalions would be shocked into paralysis or even into capitulation, much as six battalions of the 106th Infantry Division had in the Ardennes just a few weeks before. If *LXXXIX Corps* proved successful in overwhelming Task Force Hudelson's *ad hoc* mixture of armored infantry and mechanized cavalry between the Camp de Bitche and Neunhoffen, *Army Group G* could blow a 25-kilometer hole in the American lines and completely separate the XV and VI Corps. The ambitious strategic objectives of Operation NORDWIND would be within reach.

Despite the soundness of the plan, there were several factors which mitigated against its chances for success. First, in an attempt to maintain tight operational security, the German command only issued the order for the attack to regimental commanders on the night of 30 December. They also forbade advance reconnaissance of the attacking divisions' zones. As a result of the corollary lack of preparation—as many Centurymen are aware—the attackers often blundered into minefields or other obstacles in primitive formations, often standing up, on line, and offering great targets for well-laid machineguns and preplanned, registered artillery.

Second, the state of training of two of the three the enemy formations taking part in the attack left a great deal to be desired. In the case of the *17th SS*, the large numbers of Russian ex-prisoners of war which swelled the ranks of its armored infantry regiments were not trained in German tactics, and in many cases, the soldiers had only a dim understanding of their German leaders' language. With little time for preparation or assimilation into the unit, there was no opportunity for the newly-minted "SS volunteers" to learn how to execute any but the most primitive of infantry tactics. This accounts for the human wave assaults recalled by many of the Centurymen who fought in the Rimling area who looked on with a mixture of fascination and awe at the sight of whole companies of the enemy standing straight up and shouting as they surged across moonlit snowfields.

In the *257th Volks-Grenadiers*, 60% of the rank and file soldiers and junior NCOs had only been trained in infantry tactics for about four weeks prior to their commitment to combat in NORDWIND. As the former ASTP men who transferred into the 100th in the spring of 1944 know, that is hardly adequate time to learn the craft of the ground combat soldier!

The German command also underestimated the impact of the weather on incompletely trained or conditioned assault troops. As most of the German commanders noted by the end of the third day of NORDWIND, living in the open in frigid weather and snow quickly sapped the strength of the attackers. Their plan, which envisioned a sudden penetration of the Americans' lines and a rapid linkup near Rohrbach to complete the encirclement of the 100th's infantry regiments, was vulnerable most of all to the passage of time. The XV Corps counted the entire French 2d Armored Division as its reserve, and coupled with elements of the Seventh Army reserve (the highly experienced 36th Infantry Division), the Americans needed only a little time to organize and forward reinforcements to the threatened area. Coupled with two regiments of the newly arrived Task Force Harris (the infantry regiments of the 63d Infantry Division, deployed to France ahead of their division's headquarters, DIVARTY, and support units), these reinforcements could quickly and effectively plug any holes or shore up any spots in the line which bent, but did not break, under the German onslaught.

Finally, the Germans grossly underestimated the tenacity and resilience of their principal adversary, the 100th Infantry Division. But that is another story . . . in fact, it is the *Story of the Century!*

Sources

American unit strengths from the “present-for duty” totals found in the respective units’ Morning Reports at the National Archives and Records Administration Annex in St. Louis, Missouri.

Information about the German plans, unit strengths, unit commanders, and equipment, as well as the information about other US units’ dispositions based on and documented in the author’s book *When the Odds Were Even: The Vosges Mountains Campaign, October 1944-January 1945* (Presidio Press, 1994).

Information about the 100th Infantry Division’s tactical posture from *The Story of the Century* and *When the Odds Were Even*.

The exhortation by Field Marshal von Rundstedt is from a copy included in the *Kriegstagebuch* (War Journal) of the *17th SS-Panzer-Grenadier Division “Götz von Berlichingen”* (Schild Verlag, Munich, 1993), translated by the author of this article.

LTC Keith E. “Kit” Bonn, son of Keith J. Bonn, a medic in the 397th Infantry Regiment, was a Regular U.S. Army Infantry officer until his retirement in 1997. Author of When the Odds Were Even.

April 2000 Association Newsletter