

Hürtgenwald - 109th Infantry Regiment during the battles of November 2 - 6, 1944

Introduction



The battles in the Hürtgenwald from October 1944 to February 1945 are among the darkest chapters in American war history. In a terrain where the total American superiority in armor and artillery could not be exploited and at a time of year when the massive American air support had correspondingly poor possibilities of being used at all, they attacked again and again without regard for their own losses. The purpose of the battle seems as incomprehensible today as it must have been for the deployed troops. The fighting cost 23,000 American dead - or 10% of the total American losses in Europe, North Africa and the Far East for the entire war. All for a forest that can hardly be seen on the map of Europe. Precisely for these reasons, the battles in the Hürtgenwald are still discussed by military historians.

This post describes only a small part of the total operation, which ran over five months, but the description covers the inhuman fighting conditions during the entire operation. For the sake of clarity, the post is limited to five days of combat for the 109th American Infantry Regiment - which, both in terms of size and organization, can be roughly compared to a Danish brigade.

It was cold, wet and dark when the soldiers arrived at Hürtgenwald on 29 October 1944.

Hürtgenwald is located approx. 12 km southeast of Aachen in a mountainous terrain. The forest was approx. 20 km long and approx. 8 km wide. Visibility in the forest was a maximum of 150 m, but normally only 8 - 10 m.



28th Infantry Division Badge

The soldiers came from the 109th American Infantry Regiment (109th Infantry Regiment), which together with the 110th Infantry Regiment and the 112th Infantry Regiment made up the 28th US Infantry Division (28. Infantry Division).

When day dawned, no further uplifting sight met them. Rain-soaked clouds hung low over the dense and dark spruce and pine forest. Although the area had been captured by the 9th American Infantry Division barely 14 days earlier, there were still many remnants of the fierce fighting: helmets, gas masks, bloody uniforms and corpses of both American and German soldiers in distorted positions.

The sight greatly affected the young soldiers. Around 3 km of forest had cost approx. 4,500 fallen.

After four days of inactivity in rain, fog and night frost, the order came on 1 November that the regiment should attack the next morning together with the 28th Infantry Division's two other regiments. The enemy force facing the division's well over 10,000 men was not impressive: *"No more than 2,000 men, the enemy's supply situation is critical due to Allied air attacks, and reinforcements consist of unhealed convalescent centers, professional units and civilians," said the division's intelligence officer .*

The apparently very weak enemy had caused the division commander to order an attack in three different directions, with no possibility of mutual support between the units.

The divisional reserve was not, as usual, 1/3 of the attack force. A unit below battalion size was allocated, i.e. that the reserve constituted less than 10% of the attack force. In practice, the division commander had written off the possibility of reacting to unexpected enemy actions. Once the attack was underway, the regiments had to make do as best they could. Such a tactical disposition would have given a failing grade at any officers' school, but the division commander felt sure of his case. Eg. the weakened German battalion opposite the 109th Infantry Regiment with 3,202 men only had a personnel strength of approx. 400 men. In addition, the German privates were newly conscripted civilians who had only three days of military training behind them. On the other hand, the German drivers were well trained and had solid combat experience, including experience in forest combat.

Although the 28th Infantry Division was strong, there were signs of weakness. The division had received no training in forest combat. The 28th Infantry Division had also suffered such heavy losses in September that all personnel, especially group leaders and platoon leaders, were replaced with personnel from "pipeline", anti-tank, anti-aircraft and air force units. All units that had no infantry training. On the other hand, the division's core of original privates were well-educated with between 6 and 12 months of intensive combat training behind them.

Both the attack time and the attack terrain were extremely poorly chosen. Along the entire western front, only the 28th Infantry Division planned to attack on 2 November. This meant that the few reserves the Germans had at their disposal could be freely deployed against the division. Furthermore, the weather forecast showed that fog and low-hanging clouds would effectively prevent the attack from being supported from the air on the day of the attack itself and in the days that followed.

The attacking terrain was a whole chapter in itself. The Americans had no experience in forest fighting, while the Germans had learned the special craft since 1939 during the Polish campaign and especially since 1941 in Russia. In addition, the combat-accustomed Finns were also a source of inspiration for the Germans due to their close cooperation on the northern part of the Eastern Front. Besides the Finns, the Russians were the Germans' biggest source of inspiration.

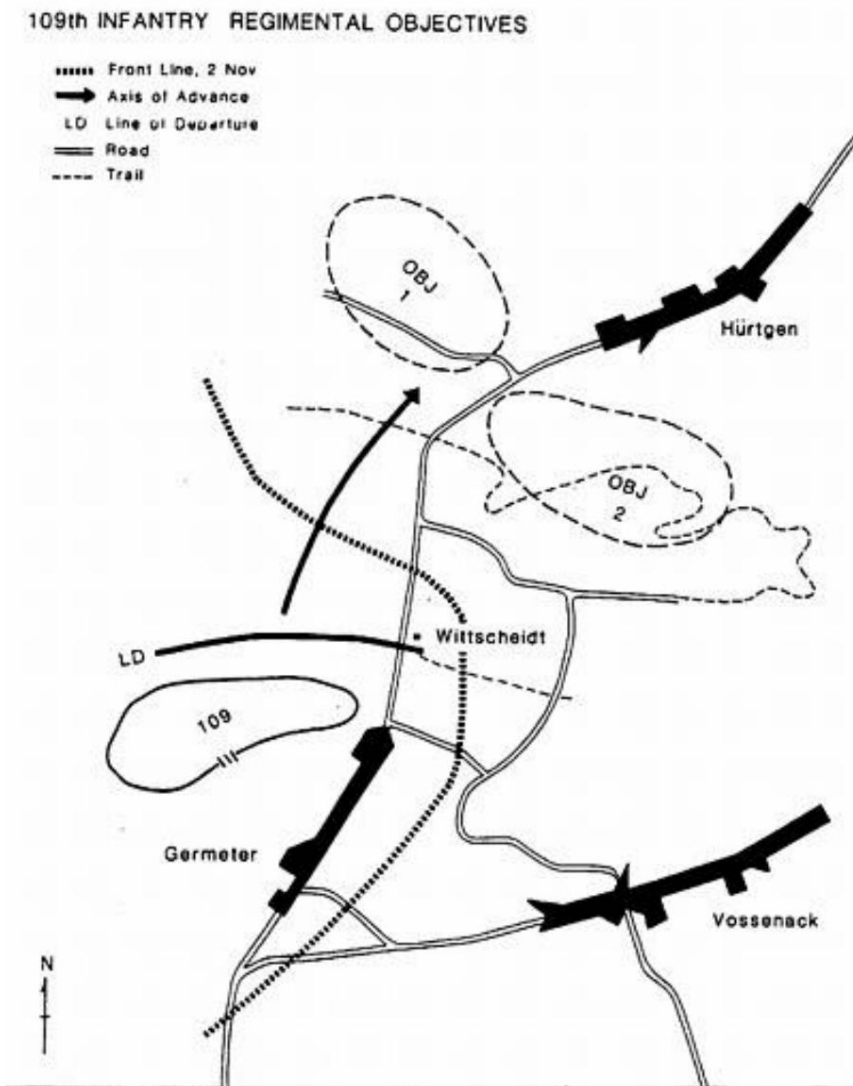
The Russians' forest fighting tactics were not very sophisticated, but a very large part of the Russian soldiers were used to moving in the primeval Russian giant forests. The majority of the German soldiers came from the cities and the few who were used to forests only knew of well-tended "cultural forests" that bore little resemblance to the forests of Russia.

The Russians' success in forest combat was precisely due to the soldiers' forest habitus - it was possible for the Russians to bring even large units silently into storming range and from there overwhelm the positions with a human wave.

To make up for the German army's lack of forest fighting skills, they had gone so far as to create specially trained "Jäger" units that mainly fought in forests and swamps. From here it was ensured that the latest combat experience was spread efficiently and quickly to the other infantry units. The method was to let drivers with front-line experience participate in a rotation system, where they passed on the latest experiences at recruit, commander and officer schools. Overall, the German army at the end of 1944 was still a particularly unpleasant opponent - especially in the woods.

The total American superiority in armor and artillery could not be exploited in the forest - and certainly not in a forest as dense as the Hürtgenwald. In addition, the forest was located in a mountainous and highly hilly area. Not exactly terrain that favors an attacker. The four inactive days, during which the regiment had not received orders to make preparations for the attack, meant that they had not reconnoitered the attack terrain or had a clear picture of where the German positions were. Only when the attack was underway did the Americans discover that the maps were downright wrong and inaccurate.

Attack November 2



The regiment's attack target was a forest edge west of the village of Hürtgen, from which you could see up to the town.

The attack objective was divided into two battalion objectives, objective 1 to 1st Battalion, objective 2 to 3rd Battalion. The 2nd battalion was to secure the regiment's left wing and be a reserve.

The attack targets are shown in the sketch on the right.

The regiment's heavy mortar company was distributed between the battalions, with one heavy mortar platoon per battalion. Similarly, parts of the battalion's heavy company had been distributed between the companies.

Each infantry company had thus been reinforced with a 12.7 mm machine gun section and an 81 mm mortar section. Engineer units were attached to the companies to clear mines and other obstacles.

The attack started with artillery preparation over the suspected German positions from 0800 to 0900. In addition to the 28th Infantry Division's own artillery (which fired 7,313 shells), the V. and VII. Corps.

A total of 34,000 shells were used in support of the three regiments' attack on 2 November. The amount of ammunition is so enormous that it can be difficult to deal with. If you imagine the ammunition loaded on the most used all-terrain truck of the time, 500 trucks were needed to transport the ammunition, just for this one day's attack.

At 0900 the artillery fire eased and the infantry passed the line of departure. Some units went in single column, others in scattered order. Initially, the attacking force was met only by scattered small arms fire, but the German artillery and mortar observers could see the attacking force from the moment it left the starting line.

1st Battalion A Company was suddenly met by heavy machine gun fire from well-obscured positions at the edge of the forest while the company was in open ground. The company had to crash on the spot. After this, 105 mm artillery shells and 81 mm mortar shells began to fall. The Germans had observers at the edge of the forest. When the attacking units reached the forest with great difficulty, they encountered fierce German resistance in the actual battle line, which lay some distance from the edge of the forest

The American artillery fire had systematically blown off the treetops. In many places, fallen trees formed an impenetrable barrier. Fallen branches and fallen trees made the German positions virtually invisible. The American rifle chains were able to pass the German positions without realizing it, whereupon the Germans appeared and engaged the Americans from behind. From the Eastern Front, the Germans knew that artillery in forests must be used sparingly and with care during attacks, unless one wishes to place more obstacles for oneself. Now the American infantrymen paid for their officers' lack of knowledge of forest combat.

The destroyed forest, the short term and inaccurate maps were a bad combination.

Second Lieutenant T. Whitney, 1st Battalion B Company: *"The maps were so wrong that they showed woods where there was open ground... We thought we were close to our objective but weren't sure so we dug down. Later we found out that we were in A Company's area. The forest was so dense that you could see nothing but trees, and it was impossible to recognize terrain objects".*

Major JC Ford Jr, Commander of the 1st Battalion: *"If anybody from private up to me claimed he knew where we were at any time, I'd say he was a damn liar".*



American infantry advancing, November 2, 1944 (From <http://www.olive-drab.com>)

Survivors paint a picture of soldiers who had no idea where they were, but continued to trudge through the devastated forest.

The 3rd Battalion tried to conceal the passage of the line of departure by laying smoke with heavy mortars. But the Germans retaliated with artillery before the starting line could be passed. Several shells landed directly in L Company's exit area, where the huddled soldiers were waiting. Those who tried to advance ran into German crossfire from machine guns and fire from 81 mm mortars.

3rd Battalion K Company tried to get across the open ground by leaps and bounds despite the enemy fire. In the open terrain, a detonation wounded a squad leader and killed others.

The crew judged that it was safer to carry the wounded forward than to try to get back over the open ground again. On the way forward, the forward groups encountered a previously unknown barbed wire fence that stretched across the entire company front. At the same time, the company was heavily shelled with small arms. Only here was it discovered that the detonation that had injured the group leader came from a mine. The company found itself in an almost hopeless situation: between barbed wire and a minefield, held down by enemy fire. In a short time, K-Company lost more than 40 men.

The 3rd Battalion's heavy company did not look on passively. The heavy machine guns fired into the forest ahead of their own forces. The mortars fired on their own initiative at suspected targets, or provided fire support led by the units that were stuck in the open terrain. But the American 81 mm shells, which could not be delayed in detonation, do not seem to have much effect in the dense, broken forest, where the artillery fire had also made the undergrowth even denser due to broken trees and fallen branches. The Germans' equivalent 81 mm grenades were used in open terrain, and here they had a terrible effect against uncovered troops. Although the Americans used 140,000 rounds for the heavy machine guns and over 900 rounds for the mortar sections during the day, the effect of the fire was mostly of a psychological nature.

The situation was almost hopeless for the K company. The losses increased during the day. Attempts to deploy the battalion reserve, I Company, failed, as the company, after approx. 400 m advance entered another minefield, which was also unknown before the attack. After this, I Company was held down by machine gun fire, mortar fire and fire from snipers in trees. Later, German tanks appeared and fired on the trapped soldiers. For the soldiers, the situation was like hell on earth. Only at 1530, when it began to get dark, after six hours of nightmarish conditions, could the few survivors be pulled

back to the exit area where they burrowed.

Only two of the 1st Battalion's companies had reached their objective, but they were fired upon from time to time by artillery, which had violent effect in the woods. Shrapnel from the detonations in the treetops fell almost vertically into the newly dug and thus not fully developed gunnery holes. At the same time, German patrols infiltrated diligently. The companies were forced to establish fighting positions with weight all around the objective. In addition to the enemy, the weather was a major burden. The precipitation and the change between thawing during the day and freezing at night greatly affected the drenched soldiers. Added to this was the constant psychological strain of forest combat and the serious practical problems of fighting in an unfamiliar combat environment. Overall, this meant that battle fatigue and exhaustion set in quickly.

Attempted attack November 3rd

The 1st Battalion held the ground gained, while the 3rd Battalion resumed the attack: K Company was to remain south of the minefield, thereby securing the regiment's right wing. L Company and a platoon from I Company were to try to bypass the minefield by making a complicated maneuver with many changes of direction and take yesterday's attack objective. The 2nd Battalion remained in reserve.

As usual, the American artillery fired from 0800 to 0900. As usual the infantry attacked at 0900. The units advanced in close formation so as not to get away from each other. Downed trees impeded the advance. Where the soldiers could not rush through, they had to zig-zag over, under and past fallen trees and dense piles of branches. Besides the fact that the advance was physically exhausting, the soldiers knew that the enemy could suddenly appear anywhere, wipe out an entire infantry group in a short burst, and then disappear again in this tangle of broken trees. The Americans made an incredible noise when they rushed through the forest in a group. This gave the Germans excellent opportunities to get into an unheard of position.

Overall, there has been an almost limitless physical and psychological strain on the Americans.

During the advance it was difficult to maintain direction, formation and connection. At 1030, just as the last part of the movement towards the attack objective had begun, an order arrived (because the radio link failed in the dense forest) ordering to attack west to relieve the 1st Battalion.

It appeared that the 1st Battalion was in danger of being overrun. The reserve, the 2nd Battalion, could not be deployed because it was tied up by German patrols. This order for a 180-degree turn for the 3rd Battalion's assault force completed the confusion and despondent mood.

The German attack on the 1st Battalion in two waves, each with about two companies. The German attacking force was a battalion (60% value) from the 156th Panzergrenadier Regiment, which had arrived as reinforcements during the night. The attacking force followed so close to their own artillery fire that they suffered losses from their own fire. The Germans knew from the Eastern Front that if they kept a greater distance from their own artillery fire, they would suffer far greater losses from the enemy's small arms fire.

This tactic gave the Americans very short notice, suddenly the Germans were upon them. The Germans pushed around and through the American lines. The Germans succeeded in capturing the commander of the 1st battalion. The German attack was supported by five tanks and self-propelled pamphlets that fired direct fire at the American positions at close range with devastating effect. Again an experience from the Eastern Front, where the Russians had demonstrated the effectiveness of tanks during forest combat.

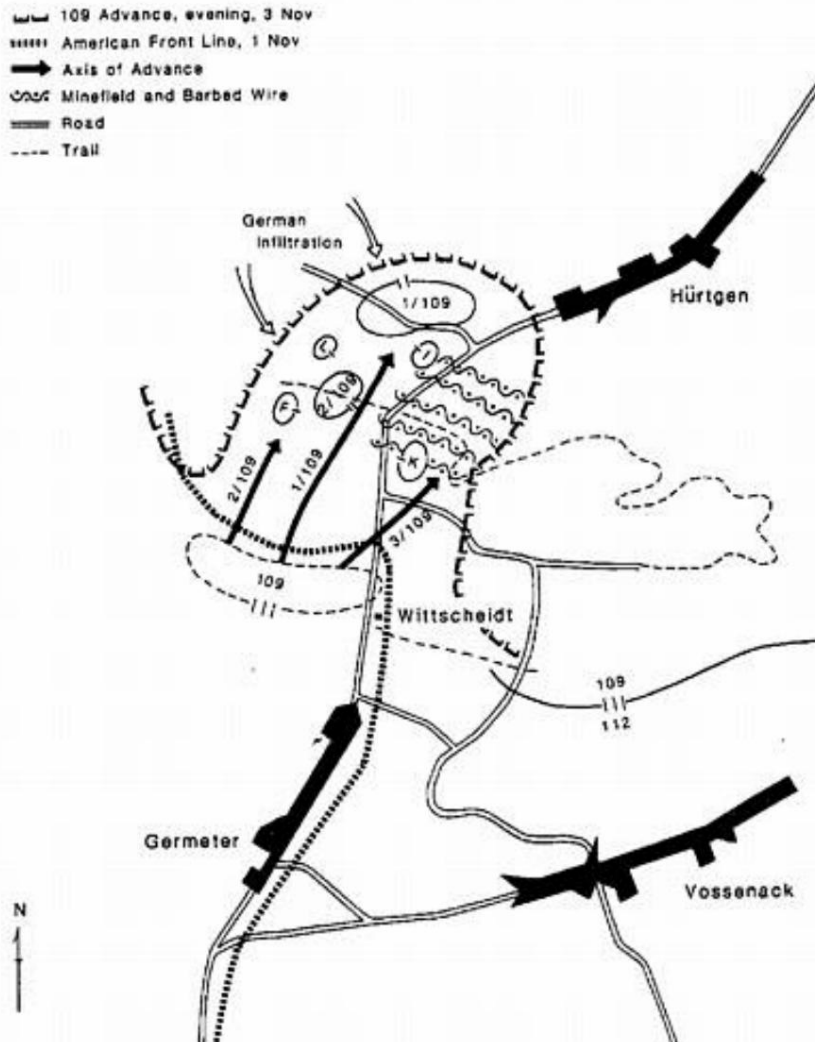
But no Western Ally would dream of deploying tanks in forests.

The 1st Battalion defended itself vigorously. Lieutenant Potter, Staff Company: *"The machine guns only opened fire when the Germans were right in front of them. In this way they killed far more than usual, as the Germans could not see our positions and went straight into them. Some fell within two meters of our positions and the machine gun teams had to constantly move bodies to get free fire. The whole process was very frightening, as there were enemies in front of us, behind us and on both sides. The number of the enemy made it impossible to see where he would attack"*. Some suggest that the Germans used heavy mortars during this attack, although their

ammunition was extremely scarce.

Heavy mortars were particularly effective in forests. In part, the grenades could be delayed in the detonation, i.e. that the grenade was activated by contact with the first branches it encountered on its downward trajectory - the detonation occurred (depending on the height and density of the forest) between the tree trunks at a height of a few meters, partly that each individual mortar could be guided according to the Finnish "tape measure method" . The observer directs the fire via a field telephone, where the cable is marked every 5 metres. If the cable is rolled out in a straight line from the mortar position, the observer simply lays the number of meters of cable laid out for the estimated distance to the enemy's positions.

109th INFANTRY BATTLE AREA



German sources point out that skilled observers were able to place the heavy mortar shells directly into one rifle hole after another. Such precise fire control could cause panic in the enemy 1).

In the afternoon, the 1st Battalion and the rescue force from the 3rd Battalion dug in so that the position could be defended all around. The German attack had stopped, but the Americans had not gained ground. The 2nd Battalion continued to have plenty to do trying to stop the infiltrating German patrols.

The situation for the 109th Infantry Regiment on the evening of 3 November is shown in the sketch on the right.

The games November 4

It rained all night between November 3 and 4. At dawn the Germans attacked. Lieutenant Potter, Staff Company 1st Battalion: "We only stopped them because we stayed in our holes and let them get to 20-25 meters before we opened fire. We killed many and it caused the rest to retreat" .

The German patrols were a serious problem. Lt. Potter: *"I feared we would be surrounded and cut off, for they were still infiltrating behind our positions, where they were giving us great trouble. The teams bringing forward ammunition and supplies could only operate after dark. If they tried in daylight, died too many."*

Losses mounted steadily. Eg. 1st Battalion B-Company started the battle on November 2 fully equipped with 6 officers and 187 privates and commanding officers. On the afternoon of November 4, the company numbered 2 officers and 72 privates and warrant officers, i.e. loss of almost 62%.

Here one should remember that units that have suffered 15 - 20% losses should be immediately taken out of the battle and reorganized, unless one accepts that morale suffers a long-term and serious breakdown.

The games 5 November



German patrol activity was still intense. Several times the patrols reached the American positions. The patrols used artillery and mortar fire to drown out or support their movements. At dawn the Germans attacked the 2nd Battalion in scattered order supported by two tanks. The attack lasted an hour before the Germans retreated.

3rd Battalion I and L Company suffered heavy losses when a German attack at 0900 was repulsed and the enemy pursued some distance. When the Americans returned to their old positions after being gone approx. 45 min, they found them occupied by German combat patrols. The Germans were chased out, only for German artillery to fall on the Americans again 10 minutes later.

Attempted attack November 6

The 3rd Battalion had not yet taken their objective as of 2 November. Now the target was approx. 1,200 m away, and well-developed German fighting positions blocked the way. The American artillery opened fire faithfully at 0800, and the infantry also advanced as usual at 0900. After only 150 m the 3rd Battalion was halted by German artillery and mortar fire.

First Lieutenant E. Peer, 3rd Battalion L-Company: *"While we were away, the Germans moved into our old positions. We had to go around and chase them out. It was noon before we were safe in our holes again".*

While the 3rd Battalion attempted to attack, the Germans continued to press the 2nd Battalion from the south and west.

The division still wanted the regiment to resume attacks, but the battalion commanders believed that

was impossible. Only after a meeting between the divisional commander and the regimental commander were the attack plans cancelled. The 109th Infantry Regiment was relieved on the morning of 7 November.

The losses had been terrifying. Of a total strength of 153 officers and 3,049 enlisted and noncommissioned officers, more than half had fallen. A company usually consisted of 6 officers and 187 privates and warrant officers. Now F Company was at 3 officers and 69 privates and noncommissioned officers (63% loss), E Company at 4 officers and 47 privates and noncommissioned officers (74% loss).

Why attack into the Hürtgenwald?

In the unbearable light of hindsight, an attack into such unmanageable, impenetrable and manpower-demanding terrain seems almost foolish. The forest could have been bypassed by mechanized forces.

After this, one could have calmly waited for the trapped German forces to surrender as supplies ran out. But it has not looked quite that simple for the commander of the US First Army and the commander of VII Corps.

Both commanders were concerned about bypassing Hürtgenwald. They believed that from here the Germans could threaten the army's right flank during the further advance into Germany. The corps commander, who had participated in 1. World War, was convinced that the similarity between the Hürtgenwald and the Forêt D'Argonne was striking. Forêt D'Argonne had then given the Germans serious problems. Up until the Battle of the Marne in 1914, the Germans had pushed through the entire Forêt D'Argonne without a fight, but a brief German retreat after the battle gave the French the opportunity to reoccupy part of the forest. After this, the Germans tried unsuccessfully to drive the French out for the next four years.

Back then, it was up to the military planners to remotely bypass hard-to-reach places and then clear them when the enemy had softened. According to the current concepts, an attack had to be carried out as a straight and unbroken line.

In 1918, the American Expeditionary Force took over an area of responsibility that included the Forêt D'Argonne. During the great American Argonne Offensive in 1918, the Forêt D'Argonne had to be cleared according to the prevailing concepts of the time, because the Germans could threaten the left wing of the American Expeditionary Force.

It is a stroke of fate that the junior staff officer, who in 1918 planned the clearing of the Forêt D'Argonne, should in 1944 be the corps commander of a corps approaching a forest which, both in size and impenetrability, resembled the Forêt D'Argonne. In one fell swoop, the commander's military mindset was back to World War I levels.



The clearing of the Hürtgenwald became almost an obsession for the corps commander. No less than four times the command was given

raid into Hürtgenwald:

- 9th Infantry Division 6 - 16 October
- 28th Infantry Division 2 - 16 November
- Parts of 8th Infantry Division and 5th Panzer Division November - January 1944/45
- 78th Infantry Division January - February 1945

From October 1944 to February 1945, the fighting in Hürtgenwald cost about 23,000 American dead.

If you look at the Hürtgenwald on a world map with the theaters of war in North Africa, Italy, France, Belgium, Germany and the Far East, you cannot spot the inconspicuous German forest at all. But purely in terms of losses, the forest takes up a lot. About 10% of the total American losses in the whole of WWII were in the Hürtgenwald.

Afterplay

28th Infantry Division efforts in the period 2 - 16 November cost at least 6,184 American dead. After the action in Hürtgenwald, the hard-hit division was moved to the quietest sector of the Western Front to recover. The "quiet" sector was the part of the Ardennes that lay right in the main axis of the German Ardennes Offensive a month later. When the fighting stopped in the Ardennes, the division had effectively ceased to exist.

Hürtgenwald today

Hürtgenwald still consists of dense spruce and pine forest. But the original vegetation has either been blown apart by the fierce artillery fire, has become arable land or has been felled as a result of normal forestry. Therefore, it can be extremely difficult to establish starting areas, attack axes and attack targets. But with maps on a scale of 1:25,000 as an aid and by thoroughly studying elevation curves and fixed terrain objects, it can be done. Part of the forest has been replanted, but none of the plots appear to be older than 30 years. Only the numerous soldiers' graves in the area bear witness to the violent events that took place here.

Sources

1. Currey, Cecil B, *Follow me and die. The Destruction of an American Division in World War II.* New York 1984.
2. Lollesgaard & Winkler, *Hürtgen, November 1944*, Hærens Officersskole 1992.
3. *Troop practice no. 1* 1985.

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From Chakoten 2001/6

Notes:

1) During a course at the German infantry school in 1995, a Finnish officer also participated. He was able to state that despite new technology with GPS and small portable shooting computers, the Finnish army still uses the "tape measure method" for fire control of mortars in forests. The method is absolutely the most simple and accurate.