Modern popular culture largely depicts the Battle of the Bulge as an American victory against the German Ardennes offensive in the winter of 1944. But British ground forces played their part in defeating the Nazi hordes, as Richard Doherty points out.

Monty’s Men

The ‘Lions of England’, the Duke of Lancaster’s Regiment, bear the battle honour ‘Ourthe’ on their Queen’s Colour. The Ourthe, a Belgian river, tributary of the better-known Meuse, or Maas, is today promoted as a holiday destination. It was altogether different as 1944 became 1945. Along the Ourthe, between January 3 and 14, 1945, British soldiers fought in support of their American comrades in bitter, little-known battles that cost many lives. Their stubborn courage led to the battle honour being awarded to no fewer than 15 regiments.

Those units represent the almost-forgotten, but significant, British contribution to defeating the German Ardennes offensive and launching the subsequent Allied counter-attack, in a series of actions known popularly as the ‘Battle of the Bulge’. Five cavalry units received the battle honour: 23rd Hussars and the East Riding, Derbyshire, Fife and Forfar, and Northamptonshire Yeomanry regiments. Ten infantry groups also received it: Royal Welsh Fusiliers, East Lancashires, Black Watch, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry, Manchesters, Highland Light Infantry.
Seaforth Highlanders, Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, Parachute Regiment and Monmouthshires. The five cavalry regiments chose to carry the honour on their standards, but only two infantry units – the East Lancashires and Monmouths did likewise. And it’s because of the East Lancs that ‘Ourthe’ is seen today on the Queen’s Colour of the Duke of Lancaster’s Regiment.

Into Battle
British involvement in the Ardennes began almost immediately after three German armies smashed into the thin American line in that region on December 16, 1944. Lieutenant-General Sir Brian Horrocks, commanding XXX Corps, was on leave in Brussels when he was called to the phone. “Then the incredible happened”, he wrote. A staff officer from Second Army HQ informed Horrocks that Field Marshal Montgomery wanted XXX Corps, “the only reserve readily available”, to deploy to protect Brussels. Horrocks was to return immediately. The German armies had overrun many American positions and swept around others. Their objectives, as defined by Hitler’s overall plan, were to split the Americans and British, and capture Antwerp. In the meantime, confusion reigned. VIII US Corps was in disarray, as was HQ of its parent formation, First US Army.

As well as deploying XXX Corps to cover possible German exits from the Meuse area, ‘Monty’ also ordered 11th Armoured Division’s 29th Armoured Brigade to defend bridges over the Meuse at Givet, Dinant and Namur. The brigade, placed under XXX Corps’ command, had handed in its Shermans and was re-equipping with the new British Comet tanks. But all three regiments, not yet familiar with the Comets, were ordered to recover their old Shermans. Those regiments were 23rd Hussars, 3rd Royal Tanks and 2nd Fife and Forfarshire Yeomanry.

Montgomery Takes The Lead
With General Omar Bradley’s 12th Army Group’s HQ in Luxembourg City cut off from the armies on the northern flank by the German advance, the Allied supreme commander, General Eisenhower, ‘Ike’, decided to put both First and Ninth US Armies under the command of Montgomery’s 21st Army Group. Bradley was not pleased; the decision led to a rift between him and Eisenhower – even to the extent of Bradley threatening to resign – and between him and Montgomery.

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The Ardennes Offensive

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The suggestion that Montgomery be given command of those armies was first made to Ike’s chief of staff, Walter Bedell ‘Beetle’ Smith, by two staff officers at Eisenhower’s HQ. That both were British – Major-Generals Kenneth Strong, chief of intelligence, and ‘Jock’ Whiteley – didn’t go down well with Beetle at first, but he, and Ike, soon saw the wisdom of their suggestion.

As well as giving Montgomery control of First and Ninth Armies, Eisenhower ordered 6th Airborne Division from England to join XXX Corps under Horrocks’ command. Also brought over from England was the 17th US Airborne Division. Monty acted quickly, using his team of liaison officers to ensure his orders were received and understood within his expanded command.

Thus, on December 19, 29th Armoured Brigade, reinforced by various rear-echelon troops, was ordered to secure the Meuse bridges. Horrocks’ XXX Corps was reinforced: it also included 33rd Armoured and 34th Tank Brigades; its main strength lay in 51st (Highland), 53rd (Welsh) and 6th Airborne Divisions.

Smith, Strong and Whiteley quickly identified the German lines of advance and noted that St Vith and Bastogne, both transport nodes, were essential to German exploitation. They also reasoned the enemy aimed to split the British and American forces.

Of course, it took time to arrest the German advance and the courage of the GIs in the path of that advance, many untried in combat, can never be gainsaid. Hitler’s men crossed the Ourthe at Ourtheville on the 21st and by Christmas Eve had made their deepest penetration at Foy-Nôtre-Dame, not far from Dinant, in sight of the Meuse. There they made their first contact with a largely British Allied blocking force.

**Beefing Up The Defences**

Along the 25-mile (40km) line assigned to 29th Armoured Brigade, Dinant was the responsibility of 3rd Royal Tank Regiment (3 RTR), supported by ‘G’ Company, 8th Rifle Brigade. Major Noel Bell, commanding ‘G’ Company, had reached the bridge to find a scratch defence force, including 20 US military policemen, already there. He added them to his riflemen until 3 RTR arrived in sufficient strength to allow their relief.
Also in the general area was Murrayforce, comprising some Shermans, 17Pdr anti-tank guns and Royal Engineers. Before long, 3 RTR reached Dinant with ‘A’ Squadron staying in the town and ‘B’ and ‘C’ Squadrons laagering at Onhaye. Between Namur and Dinant the road followed the Meuse and some of the regiment stopped near one of the many hotels for a brief maintenance halt. Surprised to be approached by the hotelier who offered brandy, they learned that they were the first British troops to be seen in the area.

Next day the CO, Lt-Col Alan Ward Brown DSO MC, and his squadron leaders, carried out a recce across the river as far as Marche. There they found an American battalion, although its officers had no further information on the situation. However, the regiment deployed ‘A’ and ‘C’ Squadrons across the river, ‘B’ remaining at the bridge with Bell’s riflemen. Following the precious day’s recce, ‘C’ and ‘A’ moved to Achêne and Sorinnes, respectively.

Further contacts were made with American units in the area. A liaison officer sent to Ciney to contact HQ of 2nd US Armoured Division found only an engineer sergeant with an armoured bulldozer, although the divisional HQ did arrive subsequently.

Friend Or Foe?
Riflemen at Dinant attempted to stop an American jeep but the driver carried on, prompting the NCO in charge of the guard, Sgt Baldwin, to fire a Very pistol. That signal told the soldiers manning the backstop farther along the road to pull a line of Hawkins grenades onto the road. Seeing the light signal, they did just that. There was a vicious explosion as the jeep ran onto the mines. The vehicle was blown up, its three occupants dead or dying. All were wearing American greatcoats and helmets over German uniforms. In one man’s pocket, Baldwin found written details of the local British defences. The Germans had been on an audacious but fatally unsuccessful reconnaissance mission.

The discovery of that patrol led Major Bell to contact Lt-Col Brown to advise him of what had happened. Brown suspected that his regiment might be in the path of an oncoming panzer division. However, he had the local knowledge of a Belgian officer, Lt le Hardy who, with another Belgian, Captain Jacques de Villenfagne, volunteered to reconnoitre the area between the river and the Hotton-Marche line. Clad in snow camouflage suits, the pair set off in freezing conditions to return seven hours later with details of every German position on 3 RTR’s front to a depth of 3.2 miles (5km).

On Christmas Eve, Brown and his men knew that they had 2nd (Vienna) Panzer Division to their front. At least they had time to prepare. Nonetheless, he told his men to fight “to the last man and the last round”.

Shermans Engage The Panzers
The first clash came at 9am when a Sherman Firefly of ‘C’ Squadron knocked out a Panzer IV at Achêne. Then came news that the Achêne-Sorrines road had been cut by German infantry. ‘C’ Squadron was withdrawn to the northwest. At Boisselle, ‘A’ Squadron knocked out two enemy vehicles, one of them a halftrack. Advanced elements of 2nd Panzer were probing towards Dinant under cover of poor visibility. As the mist cleared, ‘A’ Squadron engaged and destroyed two Panthers approaching Sorinnes. However, it seemed that help was at hand. The regiment was visited by
Brigadier ‘Roscoe’ Harvey, 29th Brigade’s commander, a man who had already earned the DSO three times. Harvey was among the outstanding armoured commanders of the war; some believed that one of his DSOs should have been a Victoria Cross. Major-General Eric Bols, the new GOC of 6th Airborne Division, also visited and the regiment learned that an airborne brigade would be in position on the 27th.

Further positive news was that two medium guns would be available for support. Some adjustments were made to dispositions with Brown ordering his men to assume defensive positions in a semi-circle to guard the bridge, while deploying ‘A’ Squadron behind the river to deal with any enemy paratroopers who might drop in.

Turning The Tide
Then came an unexpected change. Roscoe Harvey ordered 3 RTR to be ready to advance next day, as it was believed that the Germans were running out of fuel. So, at first light on Christmas Day, 1944, ‘B’ Squadron began an advance north towards Sorinnes and ‘C’ Squadron south to Boisselle, each with a platoon of 8th Rifle Brigade attached; ‘C’ also had a section of the Recce Troop with Honeys, the British name for the M3/ M5 Stuart light tank.

Sorinnes was occupied quickly by ‘B’ Squadron, but ‘C’ had a different story, as one of the Recce Troop’s Honeys was hit. Its crew escaped as Boisselle was relieved, although four enemy tanks, including a Panther, were on a hill overlooking the village. Under fire from a Firefly, the Panther withdrew. The squadron then came under attack from USAAF P-38 Lightnings, some of which bombed the German positions while the others strafed ‘C’ Squadron and its Green Jackets, injuring one of the latter.

Further progress saw ‘B’ Squadron enter Foy-Nôtre-Dame, where Major Jack Dunlop MC, ‘C’ Squadron leader, was wounded by a sniper while travelling in a scout car to a conference at regimental HQ in Sorinnes. However, by the end of the day, the village was in Allied hands; it was also a smoking ruin.

“The vehicle was blown up, its three occupants dead or dying. All were wearing American greatcoats and helmets over German uniforms.”
The Ardennes Offensive

Next day brought perfect weather and a further advance. Air support was called for and RAF Typhoons engaged Nazi tanks on the Celles road in spite of a German ruse to have them engage a group of beleaguered Americans close to Celles. On the 27th, ‘B’ Squadron was again in action, while ‘A’, moving into Celles, reported many enemy armoured fighting vehicles, guns and other motorised transports destroyed or abandoned near Foy-Notre-Dame. Major-General Ernest Harmon, commanding US 2nd Armoured Division – ‘Hell on Wheels’ – later visited Lt-Col Brown at his HQ. Harmon’s tanks had attacked across the Regiment’s left flank from Achêne towards Celles on the morning of Boxing Day, an operation that excited the praise and admiration of those men of 3 RTR who witnessed it. Although 29th Armoured Brigade remained in the area for some time, its role in the battle was all but over and, on the 28th, it moved south to concentrate near Finnevaux. Not until the end of January did training on Comets resume. By then the German offensive had been defeated and the Allies had counter-attacked in strength.

Defensive Turns To Offensive

The Allied counter-attack involved Horrocks’ XXX Corps. Perhaps tongue-in-cheek, he had suggested allowing the Germans to cross the Meuse before engaging them at Waterloo. Instead, his formations crossed the Meuse to take the fight to the enemy. Among those formations was 53rd (Welsh) Division which had in its order of battle some non-Welsh units. The machine gun battalion was 1st Manchester Regiment; it also included two other English line battalions, 1st East Lancashires and 1st Ox and Bucks, both of whom had joined the division in October 1943, as had 1st Highland Light Infantry. By Christmas Eve, the division was ready for any action, whether defensive or offensive, having received substantial artillery reinforcements – a field regiment, two anti-tank regiments and a light anti-aircraft (AA) regiment. In addition, 5 Army Group Royal Artillery (5 AGRA) was to support it; the latter included a heavy and two medium regiments, plus a heavy AA regiment. Also under command of 53rd Division’s GOC, Major-General Bobby Ross, was 33rd Armoured Brigade, as was 29th Armoured Brigade.

The first element of 53rd Division to deploy for offensive action included Ross’s HQ, 71st Brigade and 53rd Reconnaissance Regiment (53 Recce). In the small hours of Christmas Day, they were despatched to hold the line of the Meuse between Namur and Givet. However, 71st Brigade was relieved by units of 6th Airlanding Brigade on Boxing Day. Various moves followed before the division, less 71st Brigade, 158th Brigade and 53rd Recce, relieved US 2nd Armoured Division along a 13-mile front.

Major-General ‘Lightning Joe’ Collins’ US VII Corps opened its attack on January 3. The Welsh Division struck the following day on the right of the Americans. To their front was 116th Panzer Division, believed to have fewer than 2,000 men. At 8am on the 4th, the battalions of 158th Brigade advanced in a heavy snowstorm that would...
The Ardennes Offensive

It wasn’t linear but almost circular, with British troops to the front and rear of German positions. Before long, it had all the adverse qualities of a ruck. Small groups of infantry sought to slay each other for the possession of a slit trench. Lt Tuffnell’s platoon knocked out four German posts while Lt Langham’s, stalking a StuG with a PIAT, destroyed the assault gun. The battle went on all afternoon but, finally, the doughty East Lancs had reached their objective, the top of the ridge. There they prepared to deal with any German counter-attack. One was almost inevitable.

The soldiers were cold and hungry as they awaited enemy retaliation but, in the village of Verdenne, the battalion cooks had been preparing hot food. Packed in insulated (with hay) containers the food was taken forward in carriers, many of which broke tracks on the difficult surfaces of forest trails. Finally, the Quartermaster, John Moore, called for volunteers to carry the rations forward. Those helpers reached the top with their heavy burdens. Although the food was cold by then, it was a welcome boost to morale - and energy.

Panzer’s forward positions unnoticed until then, in spite of their khaki uniforms – no snow camouflage kit was available. East Lancs and their foes were equally surprised. The firefight that ensued didn’t follow any pattern taught at battle school.

Every Man For Himself

After about 1,000 yards (900m) a German machine gun opened up. But the weapon was in the midst of the East Lancs. They had penetrated 116th
And there was more. Soon afterwards, John Moore struggled up again with a warming cargo of rum, which he had carried all the way from Verdenne, like some great St Bernard dog. Eventually German retaliation arrived in the form of an intensive artillery bombardment that heralded another round of fighting.

Against The Odds
The units of 53rd Division had not been equipped for winter offensive operations – no snow camouflage suits, special clothing or boots. Nor was suitable transport available, although some American M-29 Weasels were obtained which could travel more easily over the snowscape. Their advance continued, the Welsh, English and Scottish soldiers of the Division persevering. On the 7th, the East Lancs went forward again, but without tank support; ground conditions had prevented their supporting tanks reaching the start line. The battalion had also lost its adjutant and intelligence sergeant – killed when a shell landed on the HQ’s command group. Nonetheless, the infantry did what was asked of them and by 2.20pm Grimbiémont was in their hands, but ‘A’ and ‘D’ companies were reduced to about 25 men each.

Shortly afterwards, some tanks reached the village to assist in defending against counter-attack. In total that day, 1st East Lancs lost 18 dead and 71 wounded, bringing losses since New Year’s Day to 243. Next day, 51st (Highland) Division took over 53rd’s front. The Welsh moved to near Liège, assuming a counter-attack role on First US Army’s front from the 14th, a duty for which they were not required.

By mid-January the Germans had lost 120,000 men and 600 tanks and, when the Allied counter-offensive, ended their losses amounted to 220,000 men, about half of whom had been captured. British casualties numbered about 1,400 killed, wounded or missing, against more than 75,000 Americans – one reason why British involvement in the battles is less well known. However, Monty’s men had paid for their battle honours in blood.

“Lt Tuffnell’s platoon knocked out four German posts while Lt Langham’s, stalking a StuG with a PIAT, destroyed the assault gun”