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THE BATTLE OF ST. VITH

Battle of the Bulge -- December 16th to December 24th, 1944

Prepared by subordinate Commanders and Staff of Combat

Command B of the Seventh Armored Division

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1945

INTRODUCTION

For every combat soldier there is one action which stands prominently etched in his memory. Whenever his thoughts turn to his combat experiences this one action stands out above all the rest. For the 1st Infantry Division it is in all probability "East - Red Beach"; for the 101st Airborne Division "Bastogne"; for the 29th Division "St. Lo"; for the 7th Armored Division "St. Vith". The men of the 7th who participated in this action have a right to be justly proud of their achievements. During the period 17th to 23rd December, 1944, the 7th Armored Division caught the full brunt of Von Rundstedt's Ardennes offensive at the vital road junction of St. Vith, which was a focal point on the main axis of advance. Although outnumbered by more than five to one the 7th for five days denied to the Germans access to this key communication center in a battle which has been described by General Marshall as "The splendid stand of the 7th Armored Division at St. Vith."

1 "The Ardennes battle deserves a prominent place in the history of the U.S. Army. The splendid stand of the 7th Armored Division at St. Vith, the tenacity of the 101st Airborne and elements of the 10th Armored at Bastogne, and the numerous examples of superb fighting qualities shown by the troops of other units were in the finest American tradition."

— Biennial Report of the Chief of Staff of the United States Army, July 1, 1943, to June 30, 1944, to the Secretary of War, p.46

While this action was in progress, General Eisenhower sent the following message to General Hodges, Commanding First Army "Please transmit the following personal message from me to Hasbrouck of the 7th Armored."

"The magnificent job you are doing is having a great beneficial effect on our whole situation. I am personally grateful to you and wish you would let all your people know that if they continue to carry out their mission with the splendid spirit they have so far shown, they will have deserved well of their country."

This report which is prepared by officers who were with CC B of the 7th covers primarily the part played by this Combat Command. It was their specific mission to defend and hold the vital road junction of St. Vith. If this report tends to overlook or play down the part played by the rest of the Division it is because their story is less familiar to us than the CC B action in which we participated. The whole Division was committed and the part played by all the units was no less important and no less heroic than that of CC B.

Much has been written concerning the Battle of the Bulge, some of it documented and accurate and a great deal which is mere hearsay and rumor. Even reputable writers have fallen into the trap of highly colored and inaccurate stories. For example: an article appearing in a popular magazine in November, 1946, concerning the 106th Division, states that the 106th was relieved in St. Vith by the tanks of CC B of the 9th Armored Division. Actually CC B of the 9th was heavily engaged to the southeast of St. Vith in the vicinity of Winterspelt, and it was the tanks of CC B of the 7th under the command of Brigadier General Bruce C. Clarke which

reared into St. Vith on that fateful Sunday afternoon of December 17th just in time to get into position and repulse the initial German effort to take that town. In the newspapers, the defense of Bastogne and the relief of the 101st Airborne Division there overshadowed the defense of St. Vith. Major General Tony Mac Arliffe's dramatic reply to the demand for the surrender of Bastogne in which he sent back the message "Nuts" provided color for the copy writers and played up the picture at Bastogne. Actually the attack on Bastogne, as was learned later from captured German documents, was a secondary effort to block the South shoulder of the penetration. The main axis of advance planned by the Germans was northwest through the vital road junction of St. Vith toward Liege. The backbone of the German offensive was broken at St. Vith by the 7th Armored Division and attached troops. It was broken because the Germans depended heavily on surprise and speed. They counted on reaching their objective before a repositioning could be made of Allied troops. By holding the road junction at St. Vith for six days, the 7th made it possible for troops to be reshuffled and a defensive line established behind them. By the time St. Vith was abandoned and the withdrawal of the 7th ordered, strategically the town was no longer important. The German attack had slowed down and was rapidly spending itself along the whole front. Field Marshall Montgomery summed it up in this message to General Hasbrouck on the 22nd of December: "You have accomplished your mission - a mission well done. It is now time to withdraw."

The defense of St. Vith by the combat command of an armored division may appear a strange mission at first glance. The urgency of the situation and the mobility of the armored division dictated this mission. The 7th Armored moved 65 to 80 miles in 8 to 10 hours to get into position at St.



SITUATION 2000 December 15, 1944

The First United States Army holds a 165 mile front roughly from Aachen to Luxembourg. The Third Army is on the south flank and the new Ninth Army is on the north flank. The First Army has three Corps in line - the VII in the north pushing toward the Roer, the V in the center probing toward the dams that control the waters of the Aar and the VIII Corps commanded by Major General Troy Middleton holding approximately a 90 mile front in the quiet Ardennes sector. The 2nd and 99th Infantry Divisions of the V Corps hold the flank nearest VIII Corps. The 99th Division which had only recently landed in Europe was relatively green and untried in combat. The gap between the V and VIII Corps is held by the 14th Cavalry group (Mechanized) under VIII Corps control. The VIII Corps sector front is being held from north to south by the 106th Division which has just arrived in Europe and has not yet received its baptism of fire. The 38th Division in the center spread thin for 37 miles in front of Bastogne. Part of the 9th Armored and the 4th Infantry Division near Luxembourg complete the Corps picture.

The 7th Armored Division in XVI Corps, Ninth Army is assembled in the Linnich-Gellenkirchen-Heerlen area north of Aachen. Division Headquarters at Risberg castle and Combat Command B Headquarters at Utach. Division has been in the sector since December 2nd. Only a small part of the troops have been in the line, the remainder resting and training for the next mission, which called for the 84th and 103rd Infantry Divisions to establish a bridgehead across the Roer from Linnich and the 7th Armored to pass through that bridgehead and break out onto the Cologne plain. Preparatory to this major mission, Combat Command B has the mission of

taking the town of Bruchelien. The troops of CC B have been briefed, maps have been issued, reconnaissance made, aerial photographs studied and plans to the minutest detail completed for this attack. From December 5th to December 16th most of our time was spent in planning this attack. So thorough had been the preparation that General Clarke remarked that if someone inadvertently stepped on an unmarked stone and stumbled going down into the town the whole plan would probably unravel. Other officers had joked that this attack couldn't possibly take place because we had had too much time to plan and prepare for it. How right they were, little did we know at the time, and how different was it to be than our preparation for our next combat mission.

About 1600 16th December 7th A. D. received orders to prepare to move to First Army, VIII Corps, at Bastogne, and were told that movement would begin at daybreak 17th December. The C.O. CC B and S-3 left immediately to contact C.G. VIII Corps in vicinity of Bastogne to receive orders covering assembly area and mission. At this point no information was available to CC B regarding the situation in the First Army and VIII Corps sector. No maps were available covering sector into which we expected to move. At 2000, Executive Officer CC B received orders from Division Headquarters to be ready to move at 0200 17th December. Executive Officer sent S-3 to Division Headquarters to obtain maps if possible and any information available concerning the situation. We did not know whether we were being sent to First Army sector to exploit a break through or to repel an attack. The manner in which orders were received emphasized the urgency of the situation.

One could not help but be impressed by the attitude of the officers

and men during this period. It is typical of men who have been long in combat to accept sudden changes in orders philosophically and with a certain amount of resignation. There is little of the impatience and the gossip and rumors which prevail among green troops and which was so noticeable in the training camps in the United States, particularly prior to embarkation for overseas. The men seem to accept the fact that there is a job to be done and as soon as the details are available they will be briefed as completely as the situation permits.

The S-3 was unable to obtain any maps at Division Headquarters and very little additional details concerning the mission on which we were about to embark. He talked to the C.G., the Chief of Staff and the G-2 and G-3 but all they had, or were giving out, was the alert order. The urgency was emphasized again when units were alerted for immediate movement.

Instructions were issued establishing an assembly area between Vielsalm and St. Vith. Orders were to prepare to move the Division in multiple columns over two routes (East and West). The west route led through Heerlin, Herve, Verviers, Stavelot, Trois-Points and Vielsalm. The east route, extended through Aachen, Eupen, Halmedy, Lignouville and Recht. The first unit across the I.P. on the west route was the 87th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron at 0430 17th December, followed by CC B, CC A, 814th Tank Destroyer Battalion, Division (Main) Headquarters, 31st Armored Engineer Battalion and Division Trains. Clearances on the east route, however, were delayed until 0800 17th December when CC R led off, followed in turn by Division Tactical Headquarters, Division Artillery and 203rd anti-Aircraft Artillery Battalion. Trouble was encountered from the beginning. German aircraft were active over the Heerlin area, more active than they had been for weeks. They were dropping flares but fortunately no damage

was reported to any of our vehicles which were on the road.

After the march was started, road clearances were cancelled by higher headquarters, and when the final march routes and road clearances did arrive, there was not sufficient time for proper dissemination, and many staff officers and company commanders did not know their destination until their arrival in the St. Vith area. Time also was lacking for posting the routes with guides and in many instances MP.'s arrived just before the lead units passed.

As stated before maps were not available, the mission was not known, the assembly areas and the routes of march were unknown to a large portion of the troops. The 7th was answering another "Fire call" and all that most of the men knew was that they were on the way. We did not know that the Germans were probing in from the east and that less than two hours after we cleared Stavelot the Germans would have Panther and Tiger tanks in that town. The seriousness of the situation was not known by many units until German artillery began to land in their columns. This was particularly true on our east route of march where the routes of advance were cut by German ambush parties. Such was the situation as the 7th moved southward during the early morning hours of 17th December.

Armored spearheads of the Sixth SS Panzer Army were racing westward in a bold attempt to gain control of the vital Malmedy-Bupen highway before re-enforcements could be shifted into the critical area. It was destined to be a close race and the eastern columns of the 7th very narrowly missed being cut off and forced to fight before they even arrived at their destinations. Although no one in the Division was aware that German tanks were so close it was only a matter of minutes between the passing of

CC R and the arrival of Division Artillery but during that time 88 mm fire from German heavy tanks cut the Ligneuville road two miles south of Malmedy. The Artillery was then forced to detour to the west via Stavelot. The "Detour Road" was jammed with vehicles from other units fleeing to the rear with complete disregard of road discipline and soon the Artillery had been slowed to a snail's pace. Hindered by tortuous mountain roads, driving blackout and encountering road jam after road jam, the Artillery crept forward. Throughout the night of 17th - 18th December the Artillery's M 7 's crawled toward the rest of the Division which even then was engaged in combat at St. Vith, although denied its normal artillery support.

#### SITUATION ST VITH 17th December 1944

At 0430 17th December General Clarke had arrived at Bastogne and reported to VIII Corps. For the first time he learned of the situation facing the First Army. General Middleton's orders were for General Clarke to Report to St. Vith after daylight and give the commanding general of the 106th Infantry Division "help if he needed it" as the Germans had been attacking up there all day (The German attack had started at 0530 in the morning of 16th December with an all-out artillery barrage.)

By 171030 General Clarke had arrived at the C.P. of the 106th Division in the school building at St. Vith and learned that the 106th had been holding a 27 mile defensive sector with three combat teams in the line (from north to south; 422nd and 423rd and 424th). The 422nd and 423rd combat teams were cut off about seven or eight miles east of St. Vith in the Schnee-Eifel, South of Schonberg. On the south the 424th was

withdrawing, to the north the 14th Cavalry group which was filling the gap between the V and VIII Corps was withdrawing and liaison with them had been lost and their exact position unknown. Major General Jones, C.G. of the 106th urged an immediate counterattack to the east along the St. Vith-Schonberg road to relieve the surrounded combat teams. The only contact 106th Division headquarters had with these combat teams was by radio and that was sporadic. It was evident that only fast action would save these combat teams, who numbered approximately 8,000 men.

CC B of the 9th Armored Division under the command of Brigadier General Hoge had been attached to the 106th the previous night but was unavailable for help as they were committed to a counterattack to retake Winterspelt, approximately eight miles southeast of St. Vith, in order to regain contact with the 434th on the south. Realizing the urgency of the situation, General Clarke saw that with the mounting fury of the German attack, if any corridor was to be opened up to permit the two surrounded combat teams to withdraw, it would have to be done immediately. Radio message was dispatched to CC B - then approaching Vielsalm, approximately twelve miles to the west, to report to him at St. Vith with all possible speed. Road priority was to be given to the 31st Tank Battalion. It was impossible for the Executive Officer to contact the 31st Tank Battalion Commander by radio, and the Executive Officer sent the S-2 back in a jeep to deliver this message. The message was delivered in Stavelot and the S-2 then proceeded to Vielsalm to contact the Assistant G-3 to obtain maps of the area. The situation was such that units of Combat Command B were to be committed to battle direct from a long and strenuous road march and without having maps of the area, aerial photo-

graphs and reconnaissance, and with hardly time to brief subordinate commanders.

While awaiting the arrival of his troops, General Clarke sent out word for his staff to proceed immediately to his C.P. in St Vith, while he and his S-3 quickly mapped their plans for the counterattack designed to relieve the pressure on the 432nd and 433rd combat teams, and if possible to open up a corridor which would permit their withdrawal. The plan was to attack east along the axis St. Vith-Schenberg with two mixed Armored Infantry and Tank Task forces with a light tank company and one Engineer platoon in CC reserve. The combat command at this time consisted of:

31st Tank Battalion  
23rd Armored Infantry Battalion  
"B" Company, 33rd Armored Engineer Battalion

The road over which the combat command was to pass from Vielsalm to St. Vith was a winding, narrow, black top road on which it was barely possible to accommodate orderly military traffic, but the 31st Tank Battalion coming out on this road and attempting to make all possible speed, as urgently directed by General Clarke, found anything but orderly military traffic on it. They encountered an almost solid mass of combat and service vehicles fleeing wildly in the direction of Vielsalm out of St. Vith. Drivers without helmets, soldiers without arms, giving the impression of a frightened mob, were trying to double column down the road without benefit of road guides and completely without discipline. The tanks striving so desperately to get to St. Vith in time for an attack to be launched before dark found themselves moving at a snail's pace and obtaining road priority only occasionally when the officer at the control post held superior rank. They saw Corps of Army Artillery guns

in position complete with ammunition but from which the prime movers had been detached to be utilized by the officers and men to flee to the rear. Because of this complete lack of discipline and the loss of control of the fleeing men by their own officers a situation was created which made it impossible for the troops of the Combat Command to get into St. Vith in time to launch the proposed attack before dark on the 17th. As described by Major Boyer, S-3 of the 38th Armored Infantry Battalion, the situation was this: "As we watched this stream of traffic dashing to the rear, sometimes moving at a steady pace, other times crawling; as we watched some driver pull out to the left and run double-banked down the column with his horn blaring in an effort to get ahead of the vehicles before him - I realized that this was not a convoy moving to the rear; it was a case of "every dog for himself"; it was a retreat!

"Here would come an empty 3-1/2, then another 3-1/2 but this time with two or three men in it (most of them bareheaded and in various states of undress) in the rear, next perhaps an engineer crane truck or an armored car, then several artillery prime-mover tractors - perhaps one of them towing a gun, command cars with officers (up to and including several full colonels) in them, 1/4 tons -- anything which would run and which would get the driver and the few others he might have with him away from the front. It wasn't orderly; it wasn't military; it wasn't a pretty sight-- we were seeing American soldiers running away. . . . ."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Personal Report, "Traffic Conditions, St. Vith-Vielvaux Road, 17th December 1944, submitted by Major Boyer, S-3 38th Arm. Inf. Bn.

After approximately two hours on the road from Villesalm to St. Vith the Executive Officer and S-2 were able to join General Clarke and the S-3.

SITUATION C. P. 106th DIVISION 171500

CC B established their C.P. in a school building in the southeast corner of St. Vith, in the same building that housed the C.P. of the 106th Division. The staff members of CC B immediately went to work to try to obtain a relatively accurate picture from the 106th Division Officers of what was taking place. It was obvious that the shock of the initial German blow had unnerved many of the Staff Officers of the 106th and this coupled with their lack of combat experience caused staff functioning to break down. All kinds of rumors were being spread, and men and officers who had fled from the front, apparently seeking to justify their action, gave an exaggerated and inaccurate picture of what was taking place. The situation most certainly was bad, but the impression that the Officers of CC B got was that the Staff of the 106th had abandoned all hope. As our staff sections began to arrive, and were carrying their equipment and bedrolls into the building, they met a continuous stream of Officers and enlisted men from the 106th headquarters who were carrying out their equipment, loading it on vehicles and moving to the rear. One Sergeant of the 106th, bedroll over his shoulder remarked to the intelligence sergeant of CC B that he met coming up the stairs "what in the Hell do you guys think you are going to do. Don't you know the Germans are right on the edge of the town and they are firing into this place?" "I suppose so" said Sergeant Jean "but we didn't march 85 miles to turn around and go back, and by God our guns are loaded too."

The Germans had opened their attack at 16500 with an artillery attack; then they had sent out two spearheads, one led by the First <sup>SS</sup> "Adolph

"Adolf Hitler" Panzer Division south of St. Vith, the other by the 12th <sup>SS</sup> "Hitler Jugend" Panzer Division north of St. Vith. These were heavily armed combat teams designed to hit a terrific punch on a narrow front and go as far as they could. The Germans call them "Reconnaissance in force." These combat teams had met with unexpected success and had burst through the thin American defenses. In the first 24 hours the spearhead to the north had rolled back the 14th Cavalry group and made a salient approximately 10 miles wide and 6 miles deep. The 106th had lost contact with the 14th Cavalry group and it had apparently ceased to exist as a fighting organization.

The German combat team operating to the south of St. Vith was executing a pincers movement to the north and had penetrated approximately 5 miles on a five mile front. It was this force that had cut off and isolated the two combat teams of the 106th Division. So close were these troops to St. Vith that in the C.P. small arms fire could be heard and the fighting observed in the woods approximately 3,000 yards to the East. The staff of the 106th seemed relieved to turn this desperate situation over to General Clarke. Dusk was beginning to settle and it was obvious that no attack could be made that day.

The main battle at this time was still taking place behind St. Vith for priorities on the road. The tanks and half tracks moving up to the front were caught in the jam of vehicles fleeing to the rear and it finally slowed and stalled. One Major used a thirty ton tank to clear the way for the advancing reserves but it was almost a futile gesture. The Major finally ordered all columns to "force their way on the road, even if they had to wreck or run over fleeing vehicles and their drivers, and to pay

no attention to the rank of anyone who might be fleeing and attempt to prevent them."

While the main column of CC B was being held up by the traffic jam, the 57th Cavalry Squadron had arrived at Recht, northwest of St. Vith. General Clarke immediately added the squadron to his command and gave its C.O. the mission of covering the north flank of CC B. "B" Troop was attached directly to CC B and pushed out to the night ground about 2,000 yards east of St. Vith. "B" Troop quickly established contact with the Germans. As they reached the high ground they were brought under semi-automatic weapons' fire from the woods to their right front. The C.O. quickly moved his men to the north of the road and began to set up a defensive position with his right flank anchored on a Provisional Engineer Company which was digging in South of the road. This Provisional Company of less than 200 men was all that remained of the 168th Combat Engineer Battalion which had fought a desperate delaying action all morning between Heuss, 6 miles east of St. Vith and the high ground where they were digging in for a final "last ditch" stand.

By 1600 the responsibility for the defense of St. Vith had formally been turned over to General Clarke and those troops of the 106th which were still available were attached to CC B. Besides the Provisional Engineer Company of the 168th these included headquarters and Service Company 81st Combat Engineer (commanded by 106th Division Engineer Lt. Col. Riggs (and an Infantry Platoon from "F" Company of the 423rd. A welcome addition to CC B was the 275th Amored Field Artillery Battalion of the VIII Corps Artillery which was in position near Ober-Bumala. This Battalion was destined to constitute the entire artillery support of CC B for the next two days until the organic artillery of the 7th was able to

come up into position.

The 87th Cavalry Squadron reported that Medall and Wallerode, northeast of St. Vith were occupied by German infantry and tanks. The C. O. had established road blocks across the Obr-Bussels-St. Vith road at Rinningen and across the Ambleve-St. Vith road at the overpass over the railroad. The intervening ground was covered with a screen made up of "C" and "A" Troops and "J" Troop in the squadron reserve.

Only one tank company and one armored infantry company of CC B had been able to reach St. Vith by 1630 and then only by physically pushing fleeing vehicles off the road. The Armored Infantry Company, "B" Company 28th A. I. B. was dispatched south of the town to establish a defensive position between Weisenbach, contact point with CC B, 9th Armored Division, and the Engineers on the north. The medium tank company "A" Company 31st Tank Battalion was ordered to move east of town and re-enforce the Engineer positions. This company was the first CC B unit to draw real blood in this action. When they rounded the bend in the road 2,000 miles east of St. Vith they sighted about 800 yards to their front two MK IV's and one A.G. with about a company of infantry headed toward St. Vith. In four quick rounds the two MK IV's and the A.G. were destroyed and a number of the "Kraut" infantry were killed as they madly scrambled for safety in the woods south of the road.

The Headquarters Company of CC B had set up their C.P. in Recht. Their position had been infiltrated by a German Patrol and the company set up a road block and held off the Patrol until help arrived from the 17th Tank Battalion of CC B. The 39th Armored Infantry which had assembled at Redt (less "C" and Service Companies, then cut off from

the Battalion) was attached to CC B. The Company of the 38th A.I.R. was directed to place one Company northeast of St. Vith between "B" Troops and the railroad block of the 87th and to take command of the troops already in the line between the Asbleve-St. Vith road and the St. Vith-Winterspelt road.

All night CC B worked feverishly to bring their troops up and to clear the congestion on the road between St. Vith and Vielsalm. By 180700 the Combat Command extended in a "U" shaped arc from Hunningen on the north to Welschbach on the south, with the line manned in order by:

C/87  
A/87  
A/38  
B/87  
Provisional Engineer Company  
B/23

The line was re-enforced by A/31 placed in position just east of St. Vith. The remainder of CC B including 31st Tank Battalion (minus "A"), 23rd Armored Infantry (minus "B") and "B" Company 31st Armored Engineers were assembled on the high ground west of the town ready to launch counter-attacks.

During the night the officers and men of the 106th Headquarters kept pulling out, until on the morning of the 18th only a skeleton staff remained.

#### THE SECOND DAY, 18th December, 1944

Final plans for the counterattack were prepared during the early morning hours of the 18th, with the attack scheduled for 0800. Task Force Rhea was to attack dismounted through the line held by "B" Troop of the 87th and "B" Company of the 38th, with two companies of the 23rd, supported by a medium company from the 31st.

Rehearsed in depth behind Rhea was to be Task Force Hiesbach with

two medium companies of the 31st (one of them being "A" Company) and a mounted armored infantry company of the 33rd. When the 38th had been passed through, Task Force Fuller was to follow the attack mounted with "A" and "B" Companies of the 38th and "B" Troop. The Engineers and "B" Company of the 23rd were to remain in position on the Southern flank while the 87th would secure the northern flank.

The morning had dawned cold and misty, with a light fog swirling over the northern flank, and just before 0800 the fog lifted slightly to disclose about 100 German infantry supported by 5 MK IV's moving against "C" Troop at Hunningen. At the same time "B" Company of the 38th was hit by an infantry attack supported by 2 MK IV's and 1 AG. This latter attack was particularly demoralizing, for the "Krant" tanks were firing into the trees which surrounded the 38th position thereby obtaining air bursts.

"C" Troop was forced out of Hunningen and withdrew about 600 yards south along the St. Vith road to a new defensive position. CC B Headquarters organized an immediate counter-attack to restore the northern flank, using 2 medium companies from the 14th Tank Battalion and "A" Company of the 31th Tank Destroyer Battalion, all from CC B of the 9th Armored. At the same time "B" Company of the 31st attacked due north from its assembly area near Rodt. This counterattack was successful and by 1100, Hunningen had been retaken and 3 MK IV's had been destroyed with 2 others disabled.

On the east front an initial penetration had been secured by the "Jerries", but most of the attackers had been killed by 1100 after fierce

hand-to-hand fighting. "A" Company of the 31st helped stop this attack by destroying the AG and 1 of the MK IV's, and disabling the remaining tank. At 1130 a second attack was launched against the eastern front at the junction between B/38 and the Engineers, but when a tank section from A/31 destroyed the Ferdinand supporting this attack, the infantry assault soon weakened and died under the merciless hail of small arms fire being poured into it at close range.

While northern and eastern flanks had been heavily engaged, the northeastern sector (A/87, A/38, and B/87) had been rather quiet. The only excitement there had been when an M8 armored car from "B" Troop destroyed a Tiger tank. The armored car had been in a concealed position near the boundary of A/38 and B/87, when the Tiger approached the lines at right angles to run along a trail in front of the MLR. As it passed the armored car, the M8 slipped out of position and started up the trail behind the Tiger, accelerating in an attempt to close. At the same moment the German Tank Commander saw the M8, and started traversing his gun to bear on the armored car. It was a race between the Americans who were attempting to close so that their puny 37-mm gun would be effective in the Tiger's "Achilles heel" (its thin rear armor), and the Germans who were desperately striving to bring their '88 to bear so as to blast these "fools" who dared to attempt to fight a 60-ton tank with their little "runabout" and its "pop gun". Suddenly the M8 had closed to 25 yards, and quickly pumped in 3 rounds... the lumbering Tiger stopped, shuddered; there was a muffled explosion, followed by flames which billowed out of the turret and engine ports, after which the armored car returned to its position.

At about 1000, during the fighting on the north and east flanks, the 31st Tank Battalion received the disturbing news that its Trains, together

with those of the 23rd Armored Infantry, were separated from the rest of the Battalion, and fighting a desperate action against strong combat patrols pushing west from Poteau. The two Service Companies had spent the night near Petit-Thier and were preparing to move up and join their Battalions when they were attacked. Using cooks, mechanics, clerks, and a few casualties as infantry and 3 tanks which had just been repaired, the Trains successfully disengaged and moved to the rear, then south, and finally into position at Krombach, about 4 miles southwest of St. Vith.

This information indicated that the same tank and infantry forces which had forced CC R and the 17th Tank Battalion out of Recht during the early morning hours had pushed on to the southwest and were in danger of isolating CC B from the rest of the Division. To counter this threat, "D" Company of the 1st was placed astride the St. Vith-Poteau road about 1000 yards west of Recht. Meanwhile Division ordered CC A from Beno, where it was in reserve, with the orders:

"It is imperative that you retake Poteau and hold it!" After 6 hours of stubborn and costly fighting, CC A had occupied the vital crossroads by dark and removed the immediate threat, but only after annihilating the SS troops who stood their ground until they were killed. The stand put up by the units of the 1st SS Panzer ("Adolph Hitler") Division who had seized Poteau was an excellent index of the caliber of troops involved in the St. Vith operation. Vigorous, well-trained, in splendid physical condition, superbly equipped, and imbued with the idea that nothing could stop them, these SS veterans displayed initiative and skill that stamped them as among the best divisions Germany had employed at any time since 1939.

By noon it was apparent that although Von Rundstedt had not gained St.

Vith in his first drive, he was determined to take the town. Through St. Vith ran the only east-west railroad between the Rhine and the Ardennes, and it was learned later that the entire counteroffensive was based upon utilizing the town as the advance rail depot for both the Fifth Panzer and the Sixth SS Panzer Armies. Also the network of roads was needed for deploying the advancing columns of the Fifth Panzer Army towards the north-west so as to support the Sixth SS Panzer Army in its drive towards Liege and Antwerp.

Having failed in their initial attempts to take St. Vith, armored spearheads were sliding by on the north and south and preparing to cut into the rear, isolating the 7th Armored as they were to do to Bastogne and the 101st Airborne Division, several days later. To the north Stavelot had been occupied in force, and on the south Gouvy (a large supply depot) and Cheren were reported to be occupied. It was no longer a question of relieving the surrounded 422nd and 433rd Combat Teams; it was a question of denying St. Vith to the Germans and of keeping the Division from being cut off to the rear. If the two Combat Teams were to save themselves, they would have to fight their way westward to St. Vith; one fateful decision, however, was made: The high ground east of St. Vith would be held so that the 422nd and 433rd would not have to fight their way through the town. Although this lengthened CC B's lines when CC B could have denied St. Vith to the Germans simply by holding the high ground west of the town, it was felt that the two combat Teams could make it to lines east of town; that from there a local counterattack could be launched to relieve the Combat Teams when they had approached to within fighting distance of St. Vith.

With the change in plans, certain changes were made in CC B's troop dispositions. "D" Troop of the 37th was detached and placed under control

of CC A, while at the same time "A" Company of the 814th Tank Destroyer Battalion had arrived. The ED Company, less 1 Platoon, was placed on the north flank while the detached Platoon was sent to B/23 to reinforce Britton's vulnerable south flank. "A" Company of the 23rd relieved "B" Troop in the line east of town, but as the relief was being completed, "B" Company of the 38th and the Engineers were hit simultaneously by 2 battalions of "Jerry" infantry backed up by direct fire from 4 tanks and 8 AG's. While 2 of the tanks and 2 of the AG's attacked with the infantry, the other 2 tanks and 6 AG's fired into the positions from the direction of Wallerode.

"C" Company of the 31st was quickly dispatched to the threatened sector, where it backed up "A" Company of the 31st by placing heavy enfilade fire on the attackers' ranks and the support weapons in Wallerode. As fast as one assault wave was kicked back, another slashed into the lines, and for almost 3 hours it was "touch and go". "B" Troop was rushed back into the line to plug a gap between "B" Company of the 38th and the Engineers, while "C" Company of the 23rd was pushed forward to positions just east of town from whence it could launch a counterattack if a breakthrough were secured. Just as dusk came on, the "Krauts" withdrew and contact was broken; the lines were still holding.

On the north flank, the three companies from CC B of the 9th Armored were withdrawn, being replaced by "B" and "C" Companies of the 31st, plus "D" Company of the 33rd Armored Engineers. A/67 sustained 2 local infantry-tank attacks at 2130 and at 2230, but both attacks were repulsed successfully. Throughout the rest of the night, noises of heavy troop movements, including tanks and half-tracks, could be heard on the northern and eastern

fronts, but no further attacks developed. The 275th Artillery was called on to fire numerous missions in these areas during the remainder of the night.

By now it was known that immediately opposing CC B was a German Corps with the 18th and 62nd Volke Grenadier Divisions, while northeast of CC B in the Recht-Potau area was at least a Combat Command from the 1st SS Panzer Division. Also in the area of the afternoon assault on "D" Company of the 38th, 19 dead paratroopers wearing the insignia of the "Gross-Deutschland" Division had been identified.

The following was the "box total" of known casualties inflicted on the Germans by CC B, after 1 and one half days of combat:

<u>Destroyed</u>	<u>Repaired</u>	<u>Killed</u>
1 MK VI ("King Tiger")	2 AG-75mm	330
9 MK IV	1 MK IV	
1 AG-88mm ("Ferdinand")		
2 AG-75mm		
8 ARND Cars		

By 181000 the 106th Division had pulled out of the school building with the announced intention of moving their C.P. back to Moldingen. However, this decision must have been changed en route, as they moved their C.P. all the way back to Vidsalm. Before leaving St. Vith, their G-3 had their cryptographic machine destroyed and their G-4 turned over the supplies in their depot at St. Vith to the S-4 of CC B. These supplies were particularly welcome and included coffee, fruit juices, fresh meat, cigarettes and other items which CC B had not had for several weeks. There were approximately fifty cases of cigarettes, and in addition to passing out cartons to the men in the line there was enough left over to supply the headquarters and troops for weeks.

In the afternoon of the 18th General Clarke decided that St. Vith was

was no longer tenable for the Combat Command C.P. and ordered it moved to Krambach to the southwest. This was accomplished just before dark.

General Clarke and the S-S had remained in St. Vith during the movement of the C.P. to Krambach. He arrived at the new C.P. around 18100. The C.O. of the 38th moved his C.P. to the school building in St. Vith formerly occupied by the Combat Command. Communications and liaison were established with troops in the line from the new C.P. and with CC B of the 9th on the right flank. After the attack at 2230, which was repulsed, continued noises and troop movements were heard, but no further developments occurred.

#### THIRD DAY - December 19, 1944

At 0930 19 December an attack developed against CC B north of Hunningen. The attack moved west and then turned south. Difficulty was experienced in firing, due to the haze, but by 1300 the situation had quieted. The position of the 375th Field Artillery Battalion at Hdr-Broels was considered precarious, and General Clarke ordered them to displace to the vicinity of Hinderhausen, which was well within the protection of our lines. This displacement was made expeditiously and so efficiently that the front line troops did not know that for a short period of time they were without artillery support. At 1355 the 17th Tank Battalion with Company "C" 38th A.I.B., which still remained west-east of Recht, were attached to CC B. At the same time CC B was ordered to defend the sector between the 9th Armored Division CC B on the right and the Recht Rodt road inclusive on the left. At 1510 the 434th Armored Field Artillery Battalion and two batteries 965th Field Artillery Battalion were attached to CC B and placed in position. Prior to this attachment the only artillery support which the Combat Command had received was from the

375th, which did a magnificent job in supporting the front line troops and in a counter-battery fire. The battalion had only its organic forward observers, as the Corps artillery observers had left for the rear during the night of the 17th-18th December. During the afternoon of the 19th the C G Combat Command "B" 9th Armored Division visited our C.P. in Krombach. During their meeting General Clarke pointed out to General Hoge the vulnerability of his position on the forward side of the stream and the railroad which ran south from St. Vith. Should St. Vith be lost, CC B of the 9th would have been isolated and cut off as there was no way for them to withdraw their vehicles across the stream and railroad tracks except through St. Vith. It was agreed that CC B of the 9th should dismount their troops during the night of the 19th and 20th December and dig in in their present position while the vehicles were withdrawn through St. Vith and placed in position to the west of and under cover of the railroad tracks. This movement was accomplished without difficulty. Close liaison and excellent cooperation was maintained between the two Combat Commands during the whole period in the vicinity of St. Vith. At 1900 unit Commanders meeting was held to complete the coordination of the defense. All of the artillery was placed under the control of C.O. 434th F.A. Battalion, and a fire direction center established to coordinate mass firing. 17th Tank Battalion reported some infiltration during the night and movement of tanks was heard in the vicinity of Wallerode and Hdr-Busels. These locations were covered by artillery fire.

#### THE NINTH DAY - December 20, 1944

The general situation by the morning of the 20th was not yet desperate but was becoming increasingly difficult. Everyone realized by this time that we were not facing a local counterattack but a full scale offensive

and that we were catching a heavy portion of it in our sector. Through intelligence reports from higher headquarters, and captured prisoners, we knew that we were meeting the cream of the German troops. At this time troops had been identified from the 18th Volks-Grenadier, 62nd Volks-Grenadier, 12th S.S. Panzer Division, 1st S.S. Panzer (Adolph Hitler Division), Gross Deutschland Brigade, 2nd Panzer Division, all in our immediate sector. All manner of reports were received, indicating that the enemy were by-passing our positions on the north and were rolling up the flank on the southeast, making our position comparable to a thumb protruding into the enemies mouth, and for all we knew he could bite us off when he pleased. The enemy was reported to be in strength at Houffalize, La Roche and Saurée, all to our west, and at Trois-Points to the northwest. In order to protect our flank, Division Headquarters, on the 19th had ordered the 40th Tank Battalion and "A" Company 33rd Armored Engineers Battalion to outpost Cheram and Gouvy. At Gouvy these troops found an army ration dump, containing 50,000 rations, which had just been set on fire by Army Quartermaster Personnel to prevent its capture by the enemy who were already threatening with small arms fire. "D" Company of the 40th Tank Battalion drove off the enemy and extinguished the fire, which had done little damage, and began the issuance of rations to all units of the Division. They also found at Gouvy an abandoned Army Prisoner of War enclosure, containing over 700 German Prisoners of War, guarded by one Officer and eight Military Police. These Prisoners were successfully evacuated by the Division. Division Headquarters created other task forces out of the remnants of the 14th Cavalry Group and assigned them the mission of screening and protecting the southeast flank of the Division. "D" Troop 87th Cavalry reconnaissance

Squadron was directed to proceed to Salmstatten and given the mission of screening the northern flank of the Division rear.

The most significant change that occurred in the disposition and composition of troops on the 20th was the formation of Task Force Jones, commanded by the C.O. of the 814th T.D. Bn., and its disposition on the southern and southwestern flank of the Division. Centered at Rovigny with outposts at Cheran, Gouvy, Ourthe and Deifeld. The force consisted of part of the 17th Tank Bn, 440th Field Artillery Bn, part of the 814th T.D. Bn, and parts of the 38th A.I.B. 31st Tank Bn, 40th Tank Bn. 33rd Engineers and a detachment of the 14th Cavalry Group. The strength of the enemy and the seriousness of the situation on the South, leading to the formation of Task Force Jones, was obtained in part from a Lieutenant Colonel Stone, with whom the Division had been in touch about two days. This officer was located at Gouvy with an assortment of about 250 stragglers, including officers, quartermasters, engineers and signal personnel whom he had collected. He had established a defensive position and said, "By God the others may run but I am staying here and will hold at all costs." Stone's force was incorporated into Task Force Jones. The Force was in position by about 1600 and immediately became engaged at Cheran and Gouvy. By 1800 it was receiving a strong German attack which it successfully repulsed.

CC B had a relatively quiet day. Enemy concentrations of tanks and infantry collected in Wallerode and Nor-Emels. Heavy artillery concentrations quieted these threats. During the afternoon enemy columns were reported moving from Medell to Born and at 1630 enemy tanks moved into Ohr-Emels and forced out a light tank Platoon on outpost there, but the forces on the high ground to the south held firmly. During the night of the 20th - 21st December approximately 68 men and two officers led by Lieutenant Long

of the I and R Platoon 423rd regiment (one of the surrounded regiments of the 106th Infantry) infiltrated back through our lines. When interviewed Lieutenant Long stated that the commanding officers had told them that the two regiments were preparing to surrender, and that orders were being given for the destruction of their arms and equipment. The troops had been told that any personnel wishing to attempt to infiltrate to friendly lines rather than surrender were authorized to take off. These men were some of those who had chosen to risk returning and fighting again to laying down their arms and surrendering. CC B established an assembly point in the school house at St. Vith, and these men were given rations and such other supplies as they needed and a well deserved rest. During the night of 21st - 22nd December, when the situation became critical, these men were put back into the line. When they were told that they were going back into the line, their enthusiasm was high, and subsequent reports obtained from the troops with whom they fought indicated that without exception these men discharged their duty in the highest military manner.

During the day Combat Command A on the left was under considerable pressure in the vicinity of Potom. Division Headquarters had sent them a message at 0925 that it was imperative that they command the road leading into Potom from Recht. Although CC B did not know it at the time, the situation to the rear and northern flank was critical. Heavy Infantry was moving towards Sereze and had captured a supply depot there containing 50,000 gallons of Gasoline.

A unit Commanders' meeting was held at the CC B C.P. just after dark. The 3-4 reported on the supply situation, and in view of the vague information which we had regarding the situation at our supply dumps General Clarke emphasized the necessity of conserving supplies of Ammunition and

Rations. Instructions were given to issue only two-thirds of a ration daily, and that Artillery missions be fired sparingly and only where the situation appeared critical.

THE FIFTH DAY - December 21, 1944

At 210400 December 1944 outposts of CC B reported indications that a German Tank and Infantry attack was massing in the vicinity of Ndr-Breda. Continued noise of movement was heard in Ndr-Breda and Obr-Breda during the remainder of the early morning. An attack at 1100 was repulsed at 1115. German Artillery was extremely active during the day, and at St. Vith received two heavy barrages in the afternoon, at around 1400 and 1700. This fire was coming from the woods in the vicinity of Wallerode and for the first time included Nebelwefer fire. An attack at 1610 East of St. Vith was repulsed at 1710. Continued pressure was exerted by the enemy on all sections of the line, with the main effort being Southeast of St. Vith. A coordinated Tank Infantry drive finally penetrated in at least three places. The battle continued until approximately 2200 at which time the order was issued to withdraw the center of the line to the high ground west of St. Vith. Those elements which were cut off east of town were ordered to attack through the town or north of it to join the forces which were establishing a new defensive line. Officers were established at control points west of the town to collect stragglers and place units in a defensive position as they got back within the friendly screen. It was planned to anchor a defense west of St. Vith on the still substantial north flank. The center of the defensive line from Runningen to St. Vith was to swing back to the west of St. Vith and establish a line for the elements south of St. Vith to fall back through. This was accomplished. All through the night of 21st-

22nd December stragglers were coming back from the troops which had been overrun east of St. Vith.

About 213000 the 275th Field Artillery Battalion reported that enemy infantry were infiltrating their positions near Hinderhausen from across the Recht-Rote road. This enemy force estimated 25-30 men were driven off after damaging one of the M 7's and were driven into a house on the edge of Hinderhausen. The CC B A-3 took a light tank Platoon and surrounded and burned the house. Not one of the enemy infantry escaped. The Division Commander advised the C.G. CC B that he would be re-enforced with the 17th Tank Bn in the morning if needed.

The situation on our right flank deteriorated and became critical during the 21st. The C.G. of CC B 9th Armored requested assistance, and Task Force Lindsay, which had been held in reserve, was ordered to Gillehausen to re-enforce CC B 9th A.D. This assistance was sufficient to restore the situation, and Task Force Lindsay was returned to its former mission of reserve at 211000. On the left flank CC A maintained its position in and around Potesu throughout the day. A strong attack, which included tanks and artillery, was successfully repulsed around 1330. Strong patrols were active during the day on both sides, with the enemy and CC A probing each others positions. The enemy established an effective ambush in some thick woods southeast of Potesu on the St. Vith-Potesu road. Before the ambush was discovered, the enemy was successful in capturing the occupants of eight jeeps and one light tank which had been knocked out. Personnel included such key officers as the Executive Officer CC A, Liaison Officer CC A, Executive Officer and Adjutant 48th A. I.R. and others. Upon discovery, the enemy abandoned its ambush, and the key road was again opened for friendly traffic. At the close of the day another strong hostile

attack, supported by heavy mortar, and machine gun, and artillery fire, was repulsed at 2000.

To our rear the troop of the 87th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, which had been in the vicinity of Samree, was sent to join the defense of the critical cross roads between Samree and Vielsalm. This cross road defense had been established several days earlier by the Executive Officer of the Corps Field Artillery Battalion, who had dug in the only three 105mm howitzers left from this battalion at the cross roads for direct fire purposes. He had continuously augmented his defenses by collecting stragglers, and the 7th A.D. had sent him two sections of Ask-Ask from Battery D 203rd A.A.A. Battalion. Because of the importance of this cross road, the Third Armored Division C.G. had dispatched two companies of medium tanks to add to the defense. The 82nd Airborne Division sent a Battalion of Infantry which was sorely needed. During the 21st and 22nd this force beat off repeated attacks. These defenders were finally overwhelmed at noon December 23rd.

At 2200 the C.G. CC B reported to the C.G. 7th A.D. that it was impossible to restore the line east of St. Vith and hence was necessary to withdraw to a new defensive position. It was obvious that the Division as a whole might at any moment find itself in a very serious position, and it appeared necessary to pull all elements into a tighter circle. Consequently Task Force Jones was sent the following message by Division Headquarters at 2230:

"Hold on fast and pivot around on Reifeld. Delay enemy, drop back on Courvy and hold like grim death towns of Behe and Bovigny. We must have the road. Make liberal use of mines and know where they are. Corps Commander was informed of the urgency of the situation."

Anticipating the possibility of our being unable to hold our present position, General Clarke had initiated reconnaissance on the road leading to the west, through Hinderhausen and Commanster to Vielsalm, as a possible avenue of withdrawal. This road was not in first class condition and he had put the engineers to work on critical and impassable spots. At 212300 as the Germans broke through our lines in the vicinity of St. Vith, General Clarke ordered the C.P. of CC B moved from Krombach to Commanster. General Clarke and the S-3 remained at an advanced C.P. at Krombach to direct the establishing of the new defense position. The S-2 was dispatched to Vielsalm to pick up the Corps order for the establishment of the new defense positions (See Map # \_\_\_\_\_).

#### THE SIXTH DAY - December 22, 1944

At 0153 the following order was received by the 7th Armored Division Commander from the Commanding General XVIII Corps:

"General Ridgway feels that the enemy forces identified in the vicinity of Linerale is second SS Panzer Division. In view of the loss of St. Vith, he does not consider it safe to hold the 434th and the 112th Infantry regiments in their present positions. He directs a withdrawal under cover of darkness, in the order 106th Infantry Division, 7th Armored Division to positions along the general line Bovigny, Meldingen railroad. The exact positions on the terrain as agreed upon between the C.G. 106th and C.G. 7th Armored Division. The following towns are to be cleared of friendly troops by 0700 this morning for an air mission; Sterpigny, Chorn, Bettigny, Gouvy, Linerale, St. Vith. Covering force along this line (generally to the East of Gouvy) is to be left in place to cover the withdrawal."

Between the 17th - 22nd December, inclusive, no air missions and not even sub planes had been available to the defenders of St. Vith. On the

23rd the pressure of the German attack was increasing. Enemy infantry, re-enforced by tanks, attacked Rodt from the west and turned the left flank of CC B. This required that the left flank fall back to clean out this force, and protect Hinderhausen, which was the emergency exit route to Gannster and Vielsalm. This was done, and the whole CC B line was adjusted to conform. Company "C", 214th Tank Destroyer Battalion, was attached to CC B and impleaced to support the left of the line, where contact with CC A had been lost. By dark the CC B position was re-established and strengthened by the addition of the 17th Tank Battalion, (-) whose previous position was to tie in with the 9th Armored Division on the south. During the day all unessential vehicles were ordered to the rear. At 1845 enemy tanks and infantry attacked along the railroad towards Krombach. Infantry broke through and occupied the town, forcing the withdrawal of headquarters, 31st Tank Battalion and headquarters, 87th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron to Braunlauf. During the night an effort was made to obtain a company of infantry from the 424th Infantry Battalion, then attached to CC B 9th Armored Division, to counterattack Krombach, but this effort was unsuccessful.

The pressure of the enemy was relentless. On our left flank CC A was carrying out its mission of controlling the road of Potesau at all costs. They were suffering heavy attacks, and at 1100 Company "A" and one Platoon of Company "B" of the 40th Tank Battalion were heavily engaged with 16 enemy tanks. At about the same time enemy Infantry infiltrated into the vehicle part of the 48th A.I.B. and managed to destroy several of their vehicles. Hostile tanks gained control of Rodt. Beginning at about 1645, the Combat Command A units were re-established, and a shorter line extended generally north and south and anchored at the left at Potesau. Contact with

CC B on the right had been lost. At 2310 another attack by tanks and infantry with bazookas was launched from the east on Poteau, resulting in the loss of two tanks. On the south and southwest Task Force Jones and the 434th regiment and the 113th regimental Combat Team moved into their new defense positions. CC B of the 9th drew back slightly and tied in with the right flank of CC B 7th Armored Division and the left flank of the 434th Infantry regiment. Task Force Lindsay withdrew from positions, at Thonon to vicinity of Behe. Throughout the latter part of the day, there was strong enemy pressure against this force in their new position. During the late afternoon and night of the 32nd, the enemy pressure continued strongly on all positions. It was also definitely confirmed that the enemy was established along the high ground south of the highway running west from Salmchateau. This meant that the remainder of the 106th Infantry Division, CC B of the 9th Armored Division, the 113th Regimental Combat Team, remnants of the 14th Cavalry Group, some corps troops, including artillery which had been attached to the 7th Armored Division, and the entire 7th Armored Division with attachments less Trains, were left east of the Salm river, low on supplies and completely fatigued by five or more days and nights of continuous fighting with only one sure exit route, a secondary road running west from Viebsalm, and one probable alternate route, the road Salmchateau-Joubieval-Liernieux. As the position was obviously untenable, on orders from Field Marshall Montgomery a withdrawal was ordered. All unessential vehicles were withdrawn at once, followed by part of the Artillery, which began displacing rearward about midnight. CC B of the 9th Armored was scheduled to be the first unit to withdraw, but their C.O. advised the Commanding General that they were so furiously

engaged with the enemy that an immediate withdrawal would be unfeasible. It was necessary to postpone the initial time for withdrawal, as CC B of the 7th was also heavily engaged with the enemy. At the same time the enemy was building up strong forces in front of the 82nd Airborne Division west of Salchaton. In view of the enemy's relentless pressure, the Division Commander, General Hasbrouck radioed Generals Clarke and Hoge of the two Combat Commands B that:

"The situation is such on the west of the river south of the 82nd that, if we don't join them soon, the opportunity will be gone. It will be necessary to disengage, whether circumstances are favorable or not, if we are to carry out any kind of withdrawal with equipment. Inform me of your situation at once, particularly with regard to the possibility of disengagement and execution of withdrawal."

THE SIXTEEN DAY - December 22nd, 1944

The enemy's pressure from the east eased slightly, and H-hour (operation for plan of withdrawal) was announced as 0600. CC B of the 9th Armored Division, having received the announcement late, actually initiated the movement at about 0700. General Clarke issued the order that CC B would bring out all vehicles and troops at Krosbach and southwest thereof through Beho to Vielsalm. The infantry Company of the 424th Regiment at Braunlauf accompanied them. North of Krosbach all troops and vehicles were to come out through Hinderhausen to Commenster, hence to Vielsalm. A covering force, consisting of a medium tank company, a tank destroyer company, and an infantry company, were ordered to hold Hinderhausen until all other troops had left and then fall back with maximum delay. Wounded were to be brought out on their vehicles. This was a narrow road, and in the event of vehicle failure, vehicles were to be dumped to the side of

the road and destroyed with a minimum of delay, so that the column would not be held up. The 956th and 275th Artillery Battalions were withdrawn the night of the 22nd. The 434th Armored Field Artillery Battalion came out just ahead of the covering forces, displacing battery by battery in order to give fire support to the covering forces which withdrew under heavy pressure. Fortunately the secondary road froze during the night of the 22nd-23rd, facilitating the withdrawal and practically all vehicles were evacuated. So far as is known, no men were left behind. Originally the Combat Command was to withdraw through the lines of the 82nd Airborne Division, who were dug in west of the Salm River, to Liernieux, but later the assembly area was changed to Xhorus. CC A withdrew through CC R and assembled in the vicinity of Herse. Then CC R withdrew almost without incident.

Meanwhile, on the south, after CC B of the 9th, CC B of the 7th and the 434th Infantry Regiment cleared, only a portion of the 14th Cavalry Group and Task Force Jones remained on the East side of the Salm river. Their plan for withdrawal consisted of leap-frogging from defense positions at Behe crossroads, Bouvigny, and Carreux. One Battalion of the 113th Infantry Regiment was to cover the east flank. The withdrawal of Task Force Jones started at 1430, after all miscellaneous elements had previously been withdrawn. An enemy column, including tanks, was reported moving from Linerals towards Gouvy, and hence west. The 440th Armored Field Artillery Battalion fired on the column. Successfully disengaging by leap-frogging the several blocks, Task Force Jones proceeded north towards Salchateau along the exit route. A few hundred yards south of that town an enemy ambush destroyed one light tank, and in Salchateau two light tanks were

destroyed by enemy artillery fire. The enemy was also contacted at Cherreux where Company B 814th Tank Destroyer Battalion destroyed two Mark VI tanks. The column withdrew to one and one-half miles south of Salmchateau, and the 112th Infantry Regiment attempted to clean out the town with an attack at 1930. Meanwhile a reconnaissance for an alternate route in the vicinity of St. Marie was completed. Simultaneously the rear of the column was attacked by tanks from the south and east which destroyed four M-35 Tank Destroyers, a medium tank, two towed guns, and two other vehicles. Six of the enemy tanks were destroyed. The majority of our personnel escaped on foot. As the enemy was pressing strongly, the alternate route was taken. In the creeks west of St. Marie another enemy ambush destroyed two Armored cars and three jeeps. Part of the column attempted to move toward Provedreux and met an enemy column of unknown strength, losing one armored car. The balance of the vehicles negotiated the creeks and moved on the road north from St. Marie until they made contact with the outpost line of the 82nd Airborne Division. From there the force proceeded safely to its assigned assembly area.

#### DISCUSSION

Looking back, it is difficult to understand how it was possible to hold St. Vith with the forces at General Clarke's disposal against the overwhelming power and superiority in numbers possessed by the Germans. Their attack was well-organized and the build-up of strength had been achieved with great secrecy, and apparently without the knowledge of allied intelligence. The Germans gambled everything on striking a lightning blow and achieving surprise, so that they could knife through while our troops were disorgan-

ized and before they could be reshifted and an effective defense line set up. During the period we were in St. Vith, the weather was a strong ally of the Germans, and our planes were grounded for this entire period. One factor that probably caused the Germans to proceed more cautiously was the fact that elements of the 7th Armored were in St. Vith at all on the 17th when their intelligence had identified them in the Linnich area on the 16th. It is supposition, but they must have been surprised, and felt that if these troops could be moved such a distance and be in the thick of the fighting so quickly other dispositions could be effected as expeditiously.

Another factor that gave them pause was the aggressiveness and tenacity of our defense. General Clarke was not content to dig in and merely try to hold the Germans when they attacked. Our patrols were aggressive, and wherever a weakness was sensed, probing attack was made. Our counterattacks were quick and effective. Had the Germans realized the limited artillery we had at our disposal and the disorganization and loss of morale of some of the allied troops caused by their initial attack, they could have closed the pincers and annihilated our forces at their choosing if they were willing to pay the price. However, instead of committing their forces to a major blow, they dissipated their strength and lost valuable time in making limited objective and probing attacks.

We were puzzled at the time as to why the Germans did not pour more artillery fire into St. Vith. It was only after the third or fourth day that they began laying down anything that resembled an American barrage. Undoubtedly they counted on a quick capture of the town and did not want to destroy it or make the streets impassable. As we learned afterwards that in this offensive they were counting heavily on using St. Vith as a

forward well head.

"The Kick of Time" is a well worn expression but the arrival of CG B in St. With on the afternoon of the 17th was certainly in the nick of time. Advance patrols of the Germans were on the Shornberg-St. With road and, since the only forces to stop them were the Provisional Engineer Company, there is no doubt that the Germans could have and probably would have been in St. With on the night of the 17th, had our forces not arrived and been placed in position when they were.

General Clarke stated later that the attack, which had been planned to open the corridor to the two regiments and which was cancelled due to the impossibility of the troops getting up to St. With in time, could probably not have achieved its objective. As it worked out, it was probably better that the attack was not launched.

It would be very interesting indeed to have a transcript of the conversations between the various echelons of command of the Germans after their failure to take St. With on schedule. From Von Rundstedt on down the commanders must have caught an awful lot of Hell; particularly when they discovered the size of the small force that was denying it to them.

#### UNEXPECTED HELP

Every officer and man of the 7th who participated in the St. With action sing the praises of the 275th Field Artillery Battalion. This battalion, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Clay, alone of all the artillery originally in the area chose to stay and fight. The coolness and the poise of the officers and men in this organization were the subject of admiration on the part of all who came in contact with them. The battalion showed the excellent training that it had received, and the missions that they

were called upon to fire were always done on schedule, accurately and effectively.

Although CC B had never worked with them before, their forward observers did an outstanding job in the cooperation with our line commanders. They lost six forward observers in this action, and inasmuch as they were detached from us after the attack was over we never found out how many of these eventually got back to the battalion. General Clarke in appreciation of their splendid work wrote a glowing commendation of the part that the Battalion played in this action.

#### DEVOTION TO DUTY

One of the more critical moments in the defense of St. Vith occurred on the night of December 20th - 21st, when the Germans finally penetrated our defense and isolated some of our troops. These troops had been constantly engaged since their commitment on the 17th, and the nervous tension and fatigue produced by the constant pressure under which they were operating was beginning to tell. Combat fatigue casualties up to this time had been light, but with the Germans pouring through, the Men were rapidly being separated from the Boys. One of the Men was First Sgt. L.H. Ladd of Troop "B" 87th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron. This troop had gone into the line on December 17th, with six officers and 136 men. When it was cut off to the east of St. Vith on the night of the 21st, Sgt. Ladd brought back about thirty-five men, which was all that remained of the troop. Unshaven, lines of fatigue showing on his face, his eyes bloodshot, he nevertheless demanded to see General Clarke. Staff Officers tried to discourage him and told him to get what little rest he could before the remainder of the troop was committed again. Sgt. Ladd would have none of this and repeated his demand to

see General Clarke. Along about midnight he found the General and said "I want to get it from you personally that Troop "B" was ordered out of the position that we were holding. He and my men had decided that we were not leaving and I just want to get it straight that we were ordered out by you." When General Clarke assured Sgt. Ladd that he had issued the order, the Sgt. was satisfied and moved out into the darkness and rain to occupy a new position in the defense line just west of St. Vith.

#### SPECIAL DELIVERY

When the Germans broke through our lines in the vicinity of St. Vith on the night of December 30th - 31st, General Clarke ordered the C.P. moved back to Commanster. The Executive Officer was in command of this march; General Clarke and the S-3 stayed in Krombach to organize the new defensive line. The Executive Officer had never been over the road and it was only after a trip over a circuitous route that the C.P. group finally arrived in Commanster. It was about 2 o'clock in the morning, cold and snowing, and the Executive Officer was busy setting up the new C.P. when word came from the 965th Field Artillery Battalion, who had the only wire layed to the C.P. that General Clarke was on the phone. The S-3 went to take the message. The General stated that it would be necessary for either the Executive Officer or the S-3 to go back to Vielsalm to Division Headquarters and receive a new order of employment which had just been issued by XVIII Corps. The road from Commanster to Vielsalm cut through the woods for 2 or 3 miles and since the Germans were infiltrating through our lines General Clarke suggested that a light tank be used to make this trip. The Executive Officer was busy setting up the C.P. so that there was no alternative but for the S-3 to volunteer for this trip. The only light tank, of

the G.I. group available for the trip was General Clarke's own task.

The Germans had cut through in the vicinity of St. Vith and along the north flank; small arms fire could be heard from almost any direction. It was pitch dark and snowing, and in order to see where they were going blackout, the hatches of the tank were opened and all eyes were straining to pick up the road in front of the tank. Finally, after taking about an hour and a half to negotiate the five or six mile journey, the S-2 arrived at Division Headquarters in Vidsala. Looking wet and chilled to the bone he was ushered in immediately to General Hasbrouck. General Hasbrouck took one look at him and told him to have a cup of hot coffee and a sandwich which were accepted with alacrity. "I don't know what this damned order is supposed to mean, but it looks like Ouster's last stand to me" General Hasbrouck commented.

The plan called for pulling all the various task forces into a tight circle east of the Salm river and it didn't take a great deal of imagination to visualize what would happen to our troops if this plan was put into effect. There were no supply routes indicated, and it would just be a question of time until the troops were cut to ribbons and annihilated. "Tell General Clarke" said General Hasbrouck, "that I am not accepting this plan lying down and if necessary I am going to get in touch with Hooty to get it changed." "However, for the moment these are our orders." The S-2 got the plan and started to leave when the General stopped him. "By the way", said the General, "How did you get back here?" "In General Clarke's light tank, sir" was the reply. "That's good" said General Hasbrouck, "at least you have some protection. Be careful on your return trip, because these woods are probably lousy with Germans." "Yes Sir", replied the S-2. He neglected

to tell General Hasbrouck that General Clarke's light tank was a special one from which the 37 mm gun had been removed to convert the inside of the tank into a field G.P. for General Clarke. The only gun on the tank was a wooden one which was placed there for deception only, but which wouldn't have been very effective on that dark night.

#### SUPPLY SITUATION

No report on the defense of St. Vith would be complete without a special paragraph on the splendid job done by all supply personnel to get the necessary supplies to the fighting troops. The full story of the heroic efforts put forth by these people will never be known. In a situation as fluid as this report indicates, rumors are always prevalent concerning break-throughs, enemy road blocks, etc. The supply personnel never hesitated and where there was any doubt whether or not a route was open they took the chance to get the supplies through. Major Evan Gurnill, as S-4 of the Combat Command was responsible for organizing the movement of supplies. Captain Barth, Headquarters Commandant, assisted him greatly in this work. Captain Barth with the tanks lost his life in the vicinity of Semree trying to run a German road block in a light tank in order to open up a supply route. It would have been impossible to hold St. Vith without efforts beyond the call of duty by the supply personnel.