

U.S. ARMY MILITARY HISTORY INSTITUTE

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Approved: Henry B. Parker

Frank L. Andrews
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depended upon the enemy's ability to seize the few primary roads through the rugged Ardennes, to achieve freedom of movement for the armored units, and to gain important objectives, particularly the Meuse River bridges, before the Allies could rally to seal off the attack.

Taking most American troops completely by surprise in the early hours of December 16, 1944, the offensive achieved important gains at once, and along the entire front on the first

Introduction

In December, 1944 the German Armies in the West, with twenty divisions of 250,000 men and about 800 tanks and assault guns, launched a surprise offensive through the hilly, wooded Belgian Ardennes, a sector defended by four American divisions spread thinly over an eighty-five mile front. The principal objective of the offensive, conceived by Hitler himself, was to trap the Allied armies concentrated in Holland where they were poised for an attack into Germany's industrial heartland. The offensive was to be another blitzkrieg in the territory where Hitler's invaders had won such spectacular success in 1940.

Given the means available, the time of year and the difficult terrain, it was a daring gamble, in which the German armies risked everything by coming out from behind their West Wall, the Siegfried Line. The success of the entire operation depended upon the enemy's ability to seize the few primary roads through the rugged Ardennes, to achieve freedom of movement for the armored units, and to gain important objectives, particularly the Meuse River bridges, before the Allies could rally to seal off the attack.

Taking most American troops completely by surprise in the early hours of December 16, 1944, the offensive achieved important gains at many points along the attack front on the first day. But at certain points, the Americans defended their pos-

itions fiercely. By the second day, important centers of resistance had formed, and at these points the German attack began to falter, despite continued gains generally. As the attack moved westward, more slowly than anticipated, other centers of resistance, in fact many of them, were formed to block the advance. By Christmas, 1944, the Germans had made their furthest westward penetration, and the offensive had been brought to a halt, although another month of bitter fighting lay ahead before the enemy had again been driven back into Germany.

This is an account of the American defense of St. Vith, Belgium, one of the most important centers of resistance in the Battle of the Ardennes, or as it is popularly called "The Battle of the Bulge." In the course of the narrative I shall include brief details of important developments elsewhere in the Bulge. Finally I shall attempt to evaluate the defense of St. Vith in the general defeat of the German offensive.

This work is based mainly on unit After Action Reports and the Personal Reports of commanders of forces at St. Vith. I occasionally cite important secondary works, including several unit histories, and I use information from letters of participants with whom I have corresponded, from my interviews with former commanders, and, in several instances, from my own personal notes.

A great battle is composed of innumerable little battles fought by small units or even individuals, sometimes in lonely

outposts. Such was the case at St. Vith, and many of these so-called "little battles" go unmentioned in this narrative. In some instances they were known only to the men involved, and in other cases I lacked sufficient documentation to include them here. of Major Donald F. Boyer, Jr. and the splendid account by My interest in this subject springs primarily from the fact that I took part in the defense of St. Vith. However, during the battle, my view of the action was entirely subjective, and I was captured when the town fell to the enemy. Upon my release from a German prison camp in the spring of 1945, I determined to try to find out what had actually taken place at St. Vith and in the Battle of the Bulge as a whole. The groundwork for this thesis was begun when, on my return to America, my family presented me with a sheaf of news clippings about the Battle of the Bulge. In the summer of 1952, I returned to St. Vith and roamed the battlefield where I found numerous mementoes: helmets, wire, shells, an American rocket launcher, and in particular, the foxhole that I had dug. Incidentally, the Ardennes, so bleak in that winter of the War, is lovely country in summertime. I owe a great debt of gratitude to a number of people who made this whole project an exciting undertaking, who were wonderfully helpful in providing me with source material and specific information. General Robert W. Hasbrouck, the commander of the 7th Armored Division at St. Vith, invited me to his home Mrs. V. Caroline Moore for their kindly direction in the work.

in Washington for a fascinating interview. He generously loaned me several fine maps, his own Personal Report on the defense of St. Vith, and the Personal Reports of his unit commanders. Among the latter, special mention should be given to the superb report of Major Donald F. Boyer, Jr. and the splendid account by Colonel Robert C. Erlenbusch. Both commanders were in the thick of action, yet as thorough professionals, they found time during lulls in the battle to make extensive log entries.

General Bruce Clarke, commander of the 7th Armored Division's Combat Command B at St. Vith and until April 1962 commander of the U.S. Army in Europe, sent me his Personal Report, as did General William M. Hoge, commander of the 9th Armored Division's Combat Command B at St. Vith. General Hoge graciously answered many specific questions. A key figure in the defense of St. Vith, Colonel Thomas J. Riggs, gave me three hours of his time during his stopover between flights at Idlewild Airport. He too answered numerous questions and loaned me his personal notes.

From the German side, General Hasso von Kantueffel, commander of 5 Panzer Army, located for me by CBS radio in Bonn, Germany, replied to many questions. He generously sent me a copy in German of his own account of the Battle of the Ardennes.

Many veterans of St. Vith responded to my appeal for information in the VFW Magazine.

Finally, I would like to thank Mrs. Lois C. Aldridge and Mrs. V. Caroline Moore for their kindly direction in the row-

The Quiet Front

upon-row of files in the World War II Records Division, in Arlington, Virginia.

On the evening of December 15, 1944, Colonel Mark Devine's 14th Cavalry Reconnaissance Group (Mechanized), a force of about 600 men attached to the U.S. 106th Infantry Division, was deployed broadly over a seven-mile front on the Belgian-German border with the 15th Squadron in the line and the 32nd Squadron in reserve at Vielsalm. Since December 11, when it had entered the line, 14th Cavalry had maintained contact by armored patrol between the 106th on the Cavalry's right (south), and the U.S. 99th Infantry Division to the left (north).¹

The 14th Cavalry had been given the mission of guarding the Loosheim Gap, an historic corridor through which German invaders had poured into Belgium in 1870, 1914 and 1940. Although they were not equipped for defensive fighting, the Cavalrymen held a line of tiny villages in the Loosheim area. Dismounting their automatic weapons, the troopers had made fortified strongpoints of the villages, each a cluster of houses at a crossroads. Lying in terrain depressions surrounded by high ground, the villages - and there were many like them in eastern Belgium - were called "sugar bowls" because, the Cavalrymen said, the villages would be like sugar to an attacking enemy.²

¹ John Toland, *Battle: The Story of the Bulge* (New York, 1957), 67; Col. W.H. Dwyer, *The Fifth Arm in the West, the 106th Infantry Division in World War II* (Washington, D.C., 1947), 3, 12.

² After Action Report: 14th Cavalry Group in the German Counter-Offensive, 13. World War II Records Division, National Archives and Records Service, Alexandria, Virginia, hereafter cited as Toland, *op. cit.*, 61; Dwyer, *op. cit.*, 12.

The Quiet Front

Except for patrol activity, artillery and mortar fire, there had not been much action in 14th Cavalry's sector. On the evening of December 15, 1944, Colonel Mark Devine's 14th Cavalry Reconnaissance Group (Mechanized), a force of about 600 men attached to the U.S. 106th Infantry Division, was deployed loosely over a seven-mile front on the Belgian-German border with the 18th Squadron in the line and the 32nd Squadron in reserve at Vielsalm. Since December 11, when it had entered the line, 14th Cavalry had maintained contact by armored patrol between the 106th, on the Cavalry's right (south), and the U.S. 99th Infantry Division to the left (north).¹

The 14th Cavalry had been given the mission of guarding the Losheim Gap, an historic corridor through which German invaders had poured into Belgium in 1870, 1914 and 1940. Although they were not equipped for defensive fighting, the Cavalrymen held a line of tiny villages in the Losheim area. Dismounting their automatic weapons, the troopers had made fortified strongpoints of the villages, each a cluster of houses at a crossroads. Lying in terrain depressions surrounded by high ground, the villages - and there were many like them in eastern Belgium - were called "sugar bowls", because, the Cavalrymen said, the villages would be like sugar to an attacking enemy.²

¹ John Toland, Battle: The Story of the Bulge (New York, 1959), 6,7; Col. R.E. Dupuy, St. Vith, Lion in the Way, the 106th Infantry Division in World War II (Washington, D.C. 1949), 3, 13, 26.

² After Action Report: 14th Cavalry Group in the German Counter-Offensive, 13. World War II Records Division, National Archives and Records Service, Alexandria, Virginia, hereafter cited as N.A.R.S.; Toland, op. cit., 6; Dupuy, op. cit., 17, 25, 26.

Except for patrol activity, artillery and mortar fire, there had not been much action in 14th Cavalry's sector, though for the past several days the enemy had grown increasingly restive - particularly at night. From beyond the German hill mass to the east had come flares: red, green, amber, an occasional parachute flare. A searchlight beam had probed the American positions. From the east too had come strange sounds: vehicular movement, booby trap and trip wire explosions set off by enemy patrols feeling their way through the gaps, and once, unaccountably, cries of "Help! Help!"³ Also to the troopers had come the report of a Polish "impressed" soldier, who had filtered through Hitler's Siegfried Line to surrender, that German troops were massed in the deep-cut draws behind the Siegfried.⁴

South of 14th Cavalry Group on the evening of December 15 two regiments of Major General Alan W. Jones' 106th Infantry Division, the 422nd and 423rd, north to south respectively, were perched atop the Schnee Eifel, a curving wooded ridge ten miles long and two miles wide. The regiments were astride Siegfried Line fortifications seized by the 4th Infantry Division on September 13 and occupied by 2nd Infantry Division until December 11, when the 106th took over. The third regiment of the 106th, the 424th, was entrenched further south in good defensive positions, although the regiment's back was to the Our River,

³ 14th Cavalry Group Journal, for Dec. 11, 12, 13, 14.
(H.A.R.B.)

⁴ After Action Report, 14th Cav., loc. cit., 14.

⁵ Stanley Frank, "The Glorious Collapse of the 106th Infantry Division", The Saturday Evening Post, (November 2, 1961), 87; ibid., 88-89.

about 5000 yards west of the Siegfried Line. 424th maintained contact by patrol on its right with the 112th regiment of the 28th Infantry Division. Overall, with seven battalions of infantry in the line, the 106th Division was responsible for a front of twenty-two miles, compared to the five mile front recommended in military manuals.⁵

General Jones had set up his command post (CP) in a gloomy stone schoolhouse, St. Joseph Klosters, in the somber town of St. Vith, twelve miles west of the Schnee Eifel. Jones was concerned about his over-extended front, about the situation of his regiments on the Eifel - his son, Lt. Alan Jones, Jr. was with one of the regiments - and tomorrow Gen. Jones planned to make some changes in disposition of guns and ammunition dumps. From the 2nd Division, in accordance with VIII Corps orders, Jones' 422nd and 423rd regiments had inherited a salient that jutted eight miles into enemy territory. In fixed positions with no opportunity for a mobile defense, the regiments were vulnerable to encirclement, and the men were without combat experience.⁶

Jones' untried 106th had landed at Le Havre from England on December 6. The Division had come directly by truck to the snow-covered hills and forests of the Ardennes. On arrival, the men, whose average age was twenty-two, had been assured by veterans of the 2nd Division that the 106th was in for a "good deal." "It has been very quiet up here, and your men will

⁵ Dupuy, *op. cit.*, 13-15; "With the 106th Infantry Division in Belgium, Jan. 22, 1945," (Associated Press).

⁶ Stanley Frank, "The Glorious Collapse of the 106th Infantry Division", *The Saturday Evening Post*, (November 9, 1946), 67; Dupuy, *op. cit.*, 13.

learn the easy way," remarked Col. Francis H. Boos, commanding the 2nd Division's 38th Regiment, to Col. Cavender, commander of 423rd.⁷ Two weak Volksgrenadier divisions⁸ opposed the 106th, and for ten weeks there had been only light patrol activity in the area.⁹ VIII Corps, to which 106th belonged, was commanded by Major General Troy H. Middleton, with headquarters at Bastogne, Belgium, about thirty miles southwest of St. Vith and twenty-five miles behind the front. As the right flank of General Courtney Hodges' U.S. First Army, VIII Corps was responsible for a front of eighty miles, and in the line, Middleton had, in addition to the 106th, the 4th and 28th Infantry Divisions, which together had suffered 9000 casualties in the Hurtgen Forest, and one armored division, the 9th, which was comparatively inexperienced. To protect his 80-mile front, Middleton had been obliged to commit most units to the line, so he had very little in reserve. However, there were wide gaps between his strongpoints, and German patrols roamed freely - sometimes days on end - behind American lines.¹⁰

VIII Corps held the sector in which Allied High Command

7 Ibid., 16.

8 A Volksgrenadier division, with about 6000 men and horse-drawn artillery, was the 1944 version of the German infantry division.

9 Frank, loc. cit., 70.

10 Chester Wilmot, The Struggle for Europe, (New York, 1952), 581-582; Robert E. Merriam, Dark December, (Chicago, 1947), 79.

had decided to take a "calculated risk". In order to give American forces elsewhere on the 625-mile Western Front sufficient manpower for offensive action, it had been necessary to hold one sector thinly. The Ardennes region, with its rolling hills, deep forests, deeply etched gorges and paucity of good roads, was deemed better suited for defensive action and was selected as the zone in which new divisions would gain experience and battle-weary units would be rested. The belief was that the Germans themselves were using the front for this identical purpose.¹¹

This then was the Quiet Front on the dark, frosty evening of December 15. Despite prisoner-of-war reports of a German buildup of strength in the area, there seemed no cause for alarm. First Army Intelligence Officer Col. Dickson, in his daily report for Dec. 15 said, "It is possible that a limited scale offensive will be launched by the enemy for the purpose of achieving a Christmas morale 'victory' for civilian consumption."¹²

¹¹ Ibid., 75.

¹² G-2 Report of 15 December, 1944, First U.S. Army, Report of Operations, 1 August, 1944 - 22 February, 1945. (N.A.R.S.)

The First Dark Day

At 5:50 A.M. on the cold, foggy morning of December 16, the 106th front erupted in flame. The artillery barrage started in the north against the strongpoints of 14th Cavalry and crept southward along the line. Medium and heavy artillery, railway guns and Nebelwerfer¹ fire pounded all front-line positions, then concentrated against the 589th Field Artillery Battalion, supporting the 422nd Infantry. By 6:20 A.M. more than 100 rounds had fallen among the artillerymen and communications wires had been cut by the blasts. At St. Vith, where German sympathizers among the civilians had taken to their cellars, 14-inch shells began to hit the town at 5:55 A.M.²

After twenty minutes the barrage was lifted in the 14th Cavalry area. It was not yet dawn and the Germans bounced huge searchlight beams off the low-hanging clouds in an attempt to light up the American positions. German infantry in white snow suits emerged from the ghostly mist and advanced toward the forward positions of the Cavalry. Whooping and screaming as if they were drugged, troops of German storm battalions surged through the gaps in the cavalry line. Between 7:50 and 8:10 all front-line positions were attacked

¹ Nebelwerfer: six-barreled rocket launchers, called "Screaming Meemies" by American troops.

² Report After Action Against Enemy, Headquarters, 106th Infantry Division, Jan. 27, 1945. (H.A.R.S.); "With the 106th Infantry Division", loc. cit. The subject of pro-German sentiment among civilians at St. Vith will be dealt with in a subsequent chapter.

by enemy infantry supported by tanks or self-propelled guns. Almost immediately contact was lost with the neighboring 99th Division.³

"When they begin to drop 14-inch shells, it's the real thing," remarked General Jones, whose headquarters at the schoolhouse in St. Vith was being rocked by explosions.⁴ Apparently sensing the danger to his north flank, Jones had released 32nd Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, in reserve at Vielsalm, to bolster the reeling 18th. But by 11 A.M. when the advance party of 32nd came rolling into the "sugar bowl" village of Manderfeld, Devine's 14th Cavalry Headquarters, the situation was bad. The commander of the cavalry troop in Roth, under pressure from enemy tanks and infantry, had messaged that his unit was pulling out of the village. Thus, with Roth in enemy hands, the road to Auw was opened, threatening the rear of 422nd Infantry from the north, and before noon German tanks were clattering through Auw.⁵

South of 422nd, the enemy was driving a wedge aimed in a northwesterly direction toward Schonberg, just west of the Eifel, between 423rd and 424th.⁶

³ Ibid.; After Action Report: 14th Cavalry Group, loc. cit., 14. It was the opinion of the Group Surgeon, Captain Benson, that the attacking troops had been treated with some sort of benzedrine derivative.; After/After Action Report, Headquarters, 14th Cavalry Group, Jan. 10, 1945, 1. (N.A.R.S.); Toland, op. cit., 38.

⁴ Dupuy, op. cit., 21.

⁵ Report After Action: 106th, loc. cit., Dec. 16.; Dupuy, op. cit., 22, 27, 29, 32.

⁶ Report After Action: 106th, loc. cit., Dec. 16.

Clearly now the enemy's intentions on the immediate front could be divined. A pair of giant tongs was closing around the regiments of the Eifel. At the same time another wedge was pushing up from Fronsfield on the road to Winterspelt, hub of the southern road approach to St. Vith. East of Winterspelt 424th had been hit hard, so its reserve battalion was committed at 11:44 A.M. to protect the village.⁷

Enemy pressure increased in fury along the whole Division front, and into St. Vith came reports that 99th Division to the north and 28th Division to the south were receiving heavy attacks and that the enemy had made some penetrations. By noon tanks of the elite 1 SS Panzer Division, "Liebstandarte Adolf Hitler," were pouring through the Losheim Gap, and feeling their way west.⁸

When at 5 P.M. the 2nd Battalion, 423rd Infantry, in Division reserve, was committed to protect the exposed flank of 422nd, Devine's 14th having pulled back, General Jones no longer had an organic unit with which to influence the action. However, at 11:30 A.M. VIII Corps had released to the 106th, Combat Command B (CCB)⁹, 9th Armored Division, scheduled to arrive at St. Vith early next morning. This was heartening

⁷ Merriam, op. cit., 111; Report After Action: 106th, loc. cit., Dec. 16.

⁸ Ibid.; Merriam, op. cit., 109.

⁹ A combat command generally contained a battalion of tanks, a battalion of infantry and supporting artillery.

news, and so was the message from Middleton in the early evening that CCB, 7th Armored Division, 70 miles north with U.S. 9th Army, would also be moving in next morning.¹⁰

In the meantime, with enemy prongs closing in from north and south on Schonberg, only six miles to the east, with Winterspelt threatened six miles to the south, St. Vith itself was in peril, so at 5 P.M. another VIII Corps unit, the 168th Engineer Combat Battalion, was attached to 106th. A few minutes later 168th was ordered to form a perimeter defense of St. Vith by setting up (but not emplacing) obstacles on all roads leading into town, and by preparing bridges for demolition.¹¹

The 168th Engineers, 358 men commanded by Lt. Col. W.L. Nungesser, knew the St. Vith area well. Since early October the engineers had maintained roads and bridges, manned rock quarries and sawmills in support of 2nd Division and, after December 11, the 106th. For two months A, B, and C companies, each backing up a regiment on the line, had been snugly encamped in crude log cabins built by the engineers. The road work had been tedious, the weather atrocious, and except for occasional robot bombs buzzing overhead toward Antwerp or Brussels, the engineers had seen few signs of the enemy -

¹⁰ Report After Action: 106th, loc. cit., Dec. 16; Dupuy, op. cit., 22.

¹¹ After Action Report: 168th Engineer Combat Battalion, 13 January, 1945 (N.A.R.S.).

until the rude awakening of the morning, when like so many others, the 168th had been taken completely by surprise.¹²

By 8 P.M. on December 16, 168th had security patrols out on all roads leading into St. Vith. During the morning the Battalion Reconnaissance Officer, Lt. Balch, had lost a weapons carrier when he ran into fire from a German patrol at Bleialf in the rear of 423rd Infantry, just three miles southeast of Schonberg. With Schonberg in enemy hands, the trap would be sprung on the Schnee Eifel regiments, and the Germans would have a good highway to St. Vith, six miles west of Schonberg.¹³

Such an event would not come to pass until the next day at the earliest, for as the 168th patrols stood guard on the roads leading into St. Vith during the night of December 16, firing ceased throughout the 106th Division sector. Quiet came again to the Schnee Eifel, where the men of the

¹² Ibid.; Unit History for October, 1944, 168th Engineer Combat Battalion, 3 Nov., 1944 (N.A.R.S.); Unit History for November, 1944, 168th Engineer Combat Battalion, 5 Dec., 1944 (N.A.R.S.). The designation "Unit History" rather than "After Action Report" was used for the reports submitted to the Adjutant General's Office, Washington, D.C. for the months of October and November. The 168th had not been engaged in direct action against the enemy during that period.

I was a member of the 168th Engineer Battalion, and occasionally in the course of this narrative I shall include details based on personal recollection confirmed by other members of the unit with whom I have checked either in person or by correspondence. No mention of log cabins is included in official reports, of course. However, I lived in one of the cabins, and incidentally they were still intact when I revisited the St. Vith area in the summer of 1952.

¹³ Captain K.W. Hechler, VIII Corps Historical Service, interview with 168th staff officers, German Breakthrough, 168th Engineer Combat Battalion, 16-21 December, 1944, p. 1 (N.A.R.S.).

422nd and 423rd sat shivering on their wooded ridge. Earlier in the day General Jones, confident that the combat commands of the 7th and 9th Armored Divisions would come rolling in next morning, had ordered the regiments to hold in place.¹⁴

Of real concern to the 106th on the night of December 16 was the wide open left flank, where the 14th Cavalry Group had withdrawn to the line Andler-Herresbach-Wereth. Elements of two Volksgrenadier divisions, in addition to the 1 SS Panzer, had overwhelmed Devine's sector. Another Volksgrenadier division, the 62nd, was pummeling the 424th before Winterspelt and pouring up behind 423rd on the Eifel from the south. Except for that wide-open flank, where the cavalrymen had suffered an estimated 300 casualties during the day, Jones' forward positions were intact, although the 106th had suffered an estimated 400 casualties since the dawn attack.¹⁵

Thirty miles to the rear at Bastogne, reports received during the day by VIII Corps had been scanty and confused. Early in the morning most of the telephone line immediately behind the front had been cut by the German barrage or by saboteurs in American uniforms who had infiltrated through the lines in captured American jeeps. Like most people on his eighty-mile front, General Middleton had been taken by surprise, and not until the next day did he realize the extent of the attack. But by dark VIII Corps' few reserves

¹⁴ After Action Report: 168th, loc. cit., Dec. 16; Toland, op. cit., 36, 41.

¹⁵ Report After Action: 106th, loc. cit., Dec 16; After Action Report: 14th Cavalry, loc. cit., 13; G-3 Report, 16000-16230, 106th Division Journal (N.A.R.S.).

had been committed or were about to be.¹⁶

Many miles behind the front at Eisenhower's Headquarters (SHAEF) in Versailles, France, an important meeting took place at dusk on December 16. Eisenhower, his staff, and General Bradley, U.S. 12th Army Group commander, were present, and when word of the German attack arrived, Eisenhower reacted instantly and with vigor. For a week it had been clear to Supreme Headquarters that the Germans were up to something, and Eisenhower knew that his was no local attack. Immediately he ordered that two armored divisions, the 7th and the 10th, be sent to the threatened area.¹⁷

By midnight of December 16th, ten Volksgranadier divisions, five panzer divisions and one parachute division had been identified and located on the map at Supreme Headquarters. This indeed was no local attack. It was in fact Hitler's last great gamble.¹⁸

¹⁶ Wilmot, op. cit., 583; Merriam, op. cit., 106.

¹⁷ Toland, op. cit., 32, 33; General Walter Bedell Smith, Eisenhower's Six Great Decisions (New York, 1956), 89, 90, 92.

¹⁸ Ibid., 94; B.H. Liddell Hart, The German Generals Talk (New York, 1948), 227.



NORTH
SEA

B E L G I U M

F R A N C E

1ST
CANADIAN
ARMY

2ND
BRITISH
ARMY

9TH
U.S. ARMY

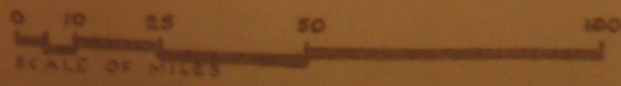
1ST
U.S. ARMY

3RD
U.S. ARMY

20 GERMAN
DIVISIONS
LAUNCH
OFFENSIVE
DEC. 16,
1944

BATTLE LINE
DEC. 15

LINE OF GREATEST
PENETRATION



Reproduced in Part from Life Magazine, Jan. 8, 1945

Hitler's "Preservation of the Fatherland" Offensive

"Soldiers of the Western Front, your great hour has struck!" read the Order of Battle of Field Marshall von Rundstedt, commander of the German armed in the West, to the assault troops set to jump off in the eerie dawn of December 16. In a similar vein, the commander of 5 and 6 Panzer Armies, Field Marshall Model proclaimed, "We will not disappoint the Fuhrer and the Fatherland who created the sword of retribution ... No soldier in the world must be better than we soldiers of the Eifel..."¹

Later in the day, from captured orders and prisoners, the main plan of the enemy attack became apparent. "It was a plan that was daring, clever, and executed with every deception at the enemy's command."²

The scheme for a bold counter-stroke had germinated in the brain of Hitler himself in August, 1944 as his armies in the West were retreating toward German soil. The detailed planning by Oberkommando der Wehrmacht went on through the fall, and on December 12 at his new headquarters at Ziegenberg, one hundred miles behind the Western Front, Hitler addressed his generals and high staff officers in a final conference. The Fuhrer declared that

¹ Milton Shulman, Defeat in the West (London, 1947), 222.

² C.C. Wertenbaker, "Americans Battle the German Big Push," Life, (January 8, 1945), 20.

his armies must break out of Fortress Germany by making a decisive attack from both sides of the Eifel mountains across the River Meuse to the port of Antwerp, the Allied base of supply. The main goal was to be the encirclement of the mass of English troops, Montgomery's 21st Army Group, in Holland, and the northern wing of the Americans in the area east of Aachen and north of the Albert Canal.³

The entire operation was to be a turning movement commencing in the thinly defended Ardennes region, then wheeling in a northwesterly direction. Sepp Dietrich's 6 SS Panzer Army⁴ was assigned the principal role and the main strength along a fifteen mile front of the northern flank of the attack. 1 SS Panzer Corps of 6 SS Panzer Army was to make a breakthrough toward Malmedy, and when this had been achieved, 2 SS Panzer Corps was to pass through 1 SS Panzer Corps and exploit toward Liege. In the middle of the seventy-five mile attack front, Manteuffel's 5 Panzer Army,⁵ attacking on a thirty mile front, would launch a

³ General Guenther Blumentritt, "Field Marshall von Rundstedt's Own Story of the Battle of the Bulge," Collier's, (January 3, 1953), 16, 17.

⁴ Ibid. 6 SS Panzer Army had, in addition to an infantry corps of five divisions, two SS Panzer Corps, each containing two SS Panzer divisions. SS Panzer divisions contained between 15,000 and 18,000 men and about 100 armored vehicles.

⁵ Ibid. 5 Panzer Army consisted of one infantry corps of two divisions, and two Panzer Corps totaling three Panzer and two infantry divisions. Army Panzer divisions also had 100 armored vehicles, but only between 11,000 and 13,000 men.

two-prong thrust to seize St. Vith, Houffalize, and Bastogne, then cross the Meuse between Namur and Dinant and push toward Brussels. General Brandenberger's 7th Army, with three infantry corps, would guard the southern flank of the attack. This array of power pitted against the weakly held VIII Corps front would give the Germans a better than 2 - 1 superiority in manpower and 3 - 1 superiority in tanks in the zone of attack.⁶

Close behind the advance columns of 6 SS Panzer Army, 2,000 men of the 150 Panzer Brigade under SS Lieutenant Colonel Otto Skorzeny, counter-espionage expert, would break into the open in small groups: four or five specially trained English-speaking Germans in American uniforms, each team travelling in a captured American vehicle. Part of the brigade was intended to spread confusion behind American lines by disrupting communications, misguiding convoys, and spreading disorder. A second force in this Operation Greif was ordered to seize several bridges over the Meuse in advance of the onrushing Panzers.⁷

According to the German timetable, the River Meuse, which flows in a deep valley through Sedan, Charleville, Givet, Dinant, and Liege and thence across the Dutch border, was to be reached on the second day of the attack. The

⁶ Hart, op. cit., 229; Directorate of Tactical Investigation, British War Office, The German Counteroffensive in the Ardennes, (London, 1946), 7 (A special report, not a published account); Blumentritt, loc. cit., 18.

⁷ Merriam, op. cit., 30-33; Georges Blond, The Death of Hitler's Germany, (New York, 1954), 84-87.

important road centers of St. Vith and Bastogne were to be seized in the first twenty-four hours. Antwerp, the ultimate objective, ninety-five miles from the start line, was to be in German hands in fourteen days.⁸

A closer look at the topography of eastern Belgium shows that the Meuse forms the western side of a quadrilateral bounded by rivers that contains the region in which the Battle of the Bulge was fought. The River Our, with its headwaters in the Schnee Eifel, is the eastern side of the area. In its northern courses, the Our forms the frontier between Belgium and Germany. The River flows south to meet the Sauer River in the vicinity of Echternach. With its tributaries, the Ambleve River flows through the towns of Malmedy, Stavelot and Staumont, and forms the northern side of the quadrilateral. On the southern side the Rivers Sauer, Sure and Semoy form the boundary.⁹

The topography within this area consists mainly of a series of parallel ridges and valleys running from northeast to southwest. Heights do not generally exceed 500 feet (1,500 above sea level) above the valley bottoms, but deep gorges occur, especially where the north-south flowing rivers cut the ridges. Forests, which are largely coniferous, cover about one-third of the area and where they occur, movement of vehicles is restricted to the roads.¹⁰

⁸ Merriam, *op. cit.*, 154; Blond, *op. cit.*, 90.

⁹ Directorate of Tactical Investigation, *loc. cit.*, 6.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

In 1944 there were few good roads in the Ardennes and most of them followed the lines of the valleys, passing through narrow, awkward defiles where they crossed the rivers. The main roads of the Ardennes were frequently built into steep hillsides and contained many hairpin bends. "The best routes run south-west and, in seeking to drive west and north-west, the Germans would find themselves advancing against the grain of the country."¹¹

There was a good system of secondary roads, and these the Germans would make full use of in their offensive. But on the secondary roads also, traffic in certain places was canalized in deep river valleys and it would be necessary for the attackers to struggle from village to village across the ridges and through the woods. However, it was entirely possible for tracked vehicles to move crosscountry, particularly in the plateau extending about ten miles from St. Vith west to Vielsalm. Field Marshall Model had been convinced that the campaign would be a battle for roads and particularly road junctions. Therefore, the two most important road centers of the area, St. Vith and Bastogne, became key objectives for Manteuffel's 5 Panzer Army.¹²

St. Vith was situated on a low hill surrounded by

¹¹ Wilmot, op. cit., 580; Seymour Freiden and William Richardson, eds., The Fatal Decisions (London, 1956), 235.

¹² Directorate of Tactical Investigation, loc. cit., 6; Dupuy, op. cit., 11; Freiden and Richardson, op. cit., 236.

higher hills that were sparsely wooded, except for those one mile to the east. With about three thousand people,¹³ predominantly German-speaking, St. Vith was in the disputed province of Limburg which had been seized by Germany after the fall of Napoleon. Returned to Belgium after World War I, Limburg was reannexed by the Reich after the conquest of 1940. Many young men of St. Vith had enlisted in the German Army during World War II.¹³

As the most important road center of the northern Ardennes, St. Vith was the focal point of six highways. From the northeast came the Bullingen-Ambleve highway; from the east the Manderfeld-Andler-Schonberg highway; the Prum-Sellerich-Bleialf-Schonberg road entered St. Vith from the southeast, and below it lay the Fronsfield-Winterspelt-Steinebruck road. Another good highway connected St. Vith with Bastogne; the Poteau-Vielsalm highway was the key to every road west to the Meuse, and running north from St. Vith was the Ligneuville-Malmedy highway.¹⁴

Four of these highways provided access to St. Vith from German territory. Moreover, Fronsfield in Germany was linked by railroad to St. Vith, where the line formed main branches to the south, west, and north. St. Vith provided the only rail depot, vital for the supply of an attacking army, between the Rhine River and the Ardennes. Therefore, as a rail center and a road hub, St. Vith was vitally im-

¹³ Merriam, op. cit., 149, 150.

¹⁴ Ibid., 149; Dupuy, op. cit., 12.

portant from both the offensive and defensive viewpoints. For the Americans, it was a town to be held at all costs.¹⁵

To obtain their objectives in difficult terrain, according to a demanding timetable, Hitler's planners called for total surprise at the outset, and they cloaked their entire operation in an extraordinary veil of secrecy. The German forces concentrated for the offensive without using radio messages and throughout the buildup period telephone discipline was excellent. A radio station was established at Cologne and broadcast repeated false reports to mislead the Allies. In assembling their forces the Germans took advantage of thick weather forecast by their meteorologists up to and beyond the attack date.¹⁶

The divisions of 5 Panzer Army were assembled between Trier and Krefeld but kept widely spaced. The troops were told that they were being readied to meet the Allied attack on Cologne. 6 SS Panzer Army was marshalled still further back between Hanover and the Weser River.¹⁷

Most of the divisional commanders had only a few days notice of the impending offensive. Troops were moved into the attack area three or four nights before the offensive

¹⁵ Ibid.; General Robert W. Hasbrouck, The Seventh Armored Division in the Battle of St. Vith (Washington, D.C., 1948), 12. Prior to publication, this account was General Hasbrouck's Personal Report submitted to the Adjutant General as a recommendation for a unit citation.

¹⁶ Blumentritt, loc. cit., 20; Wertebaker, loc. cit., 20.

¹⁷ Hart, op. cit., 231.

began, but these movements were described as defensive. The sound of moving vehicles was drowned out for the most part by German planes hedgehopping along the front at night. With Teutonic thoroughness the Germans muffled the sound of their transport horses' hooves by binding them with straw.¹⁸

When all units had assembled at the attack line, the 5 Panzer Army commander employed a tactical device that he had learned from the Russians. In the night of December 15, Manteuffel sent specially-picked storm battalions trickling silently through the draws between the American forward positions. With the opening barrage in the morning the storm units would be ready to engulf the exposed Americans from the rear.¹⁹

Manteuffel reported that the morale of his troops was excellent on the eve of attack. Hitler's "Preservation of the Fatherland Offensive" was underway.²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid.; Blumentritt, loc. cit., 20; Freiden and Richardson, op. cit., 236.

¹⁹ Hart, op. cit., 233-34, 239.

²⁰ Freiden and Richardson, op. cit., 235.

Enemy Armor on the Schonberg Road

Enemy flares and searchlights pierced the darkness all along the VIII Corps front on the cold night of December 16-17, as the Germans continued to move up armor and troops. 6 SS Panzer Army's lead column, Kampfgruppe Peiper,¹ having scattered the 14th Cavalry in the Losheim Gap, was in the vicinity of Honsfeld. By dawn that village would be Peiper's, and the Kampfgruppe would push toward Bullingen, the next objective on the route to the Meuse. South of Peiper, 5 Panzer Army was ready to exploit its success against the 106th and 28th Divisions through which big holes had been punched during the first day.²

Several hours before dawn of Sunday, December 17, about 800 German paratroopers, commanded by Colonel von der Heydte, dropped in the area Eupen-Malmedy in an attempt to seize a crossroads and create a flank block to delay Allied reinforcements from the north as 6 SS Panzer Army's drive was moving west. A mere third of the enemy transport planes had reached the correct drop zone, and a strong wind dispersed the paratroopers widely. On landing von der Heydte could muster only about 200 men. For several days he would harass roads with small raiding parties, but his mission of capturing the crossroads was

¹ A battle group of tanks and armored infantry led by Obersturmbannfuhrer (SS Lieutenant Colonel) Jochen Peiper.

² Report of the VIII Corps After Action: for the Period 1-31 Dec., 1944 (N.A.R.S.), 7; Toland, *op. cit.*, 50; Dupuy, *op. cit.*, 63; Merriam, *op. cit.*, 113, 114.

a failure.³ While von der Heydte's force was making its abortive drop, American reinforcements were moving toward the battle area. The 1st Infantry Division was coming to the aid of the 2nd and 99th Divisions, holding the vital northern shoulder of the penetration near Monschau. The 7th Armored Division was rolling south over two routes toward the hard-hit VIII Corps front, while the 10th Armored Division was preparing to move north to the Ardennes from General Patton's Third Army.⁴

By dawn aid was sorely needed in the 106th Division sector. On the north flank, 14th Cavalry Group was being hacked to pieces. Troop A, 32nd Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, was surrounded by German tanks and infantry at Honsfeld. All vehicles of the Troop were lost, but forty-three enlisted men and one officer made their way on foot to safety. At 7 A.M. enemy tank-infantry teams attacked the Troop B positions at Andler. The 37 mm. guns of the armored cars were like cap pistols against the enemy tanks. Two reconnaissance teams were surrounded and captured, and during the morning the remaining troopers withdrew by way of Schonberg. By early afternoon they were in new positions along the high ground from Wallerode north in the direction of Born.⁵

³ Directorate of Tactical Investigation, loc. cit., 8; Hart, op. cit., 237, 238.

⁴ Toland, op. cit., 48, 49.

⁵ After Action Report: 14th Cavalry Group, loc. cit., 2; After Action Report: 32nd Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron (Mechanized), 1 January 1945 (N.A.R.S.), 1.

During the night communications between the 422nd and 423rd Regiments and subordinate units on the Schnee Eifel had begun to fail. As the German penetrations increased, wires were cut and the situation of the Eifel regiments became more obscure. By 6:30 A.M. the enemy had knifed through Bleialf in the 423rd sector. The Germans pushed a force north from Bleialf while another spearhead was driving south from Andler to complete a double envelopment. The pincers were about to close.⁶

By 8:30 A.M. the 18 Volkgrenadier Division had captured Schonberg at the western base of the Eifel. As a result, communication by road and wire between the units east of the Bleialf-Schonberg road and the remainder of the 106th Division was cut. The Eifel regiments with their artillery (part of 589th and the 590th Field Artillery Battalions), Company B, 81st Engineer Combat Battalion and other supporting units were isolated. Radio contact with them would continue until late December 18. However, effective supply from the air was impossible, due to bad weather.⁷

Meanwhile, on the morning of the 17th, the 62 Volkgrenadier Division renewed its attack in the sector of the 424th Regiment, driving back the 1st Battalion. By 8:30 A.M. the Germans had seized Winterspelt and pushed

⁶ Report of the VIII Corps, loc. cit., 7; After Action Report: 106th Division, loc. cit., 1.

⁷ Freiden and Richardson, op. cit., 236; Dupuy, op. cit., 65; After Action Report: 106th Division, loc. cit., 1.

northwest over the hill mass toward Steinebruck, on the Our River just five miles southeast of St. Vith. 424th's neighbor to the south, the 112th Regiment of the 28th Division, was the victim of a flank attack; the regimental command post was under fire from tanks and infantry at 9:20 A.M. By evening both regiments would be forced to withdraw to the west bank of the Our.⁸ Back in St. Vith the scene was one of wildest confusion. Throughout the night of the 16th the streets had been clogged with traffic -- jeeps, trucks, guns, huge Corps artillery vehicles and streams of refugees -- trying to move westward. Rumors and false reports were rife; facts were scarce. At 106th Division Headquarters in the schoolhouse, the situation appeared to be deteriorating fast in the early hours of the 17th. Though information had been vague, the 14th Cavalry, or what remained of it, was again on the move. By afternoon the tattered Group would be on a line that ran roughly north from St. Vith. The enemy had taken Schonberg to the east, and he was pouring up from Winterspelt in the south. With St. Vith itself threatened, General Jones and his staff chafed at the tardiness of the 7th Armored Division. Scheduled to arrive at St. Vith by 7 A.M., the 7th had not yet reached Vielsalm.⁹

⁸ Ibid., 2; Report of the VIII Corps, loc. cit., 10.

⁹ Research and Evaluation Division, the Armored School, The Defense of St. Vith, Belgium, 17-23 December, 1944: An Historical Example of Armor in the Defense (Fort Knox, Kentucky, 1948), 11; Dupuy, op. cit., 63, 72, 73; Merriam, op. cit., 113.

Another armored force had arrived in the early morning, however. Brigadier General William H. Hoge's CCB, 9th Armored Division, came rumbling through the crooked streets of St. Vith on its way to Steinebruck.

Hoge's CCB had been supporting the 2nd Infantry Division in its attempt to seize the Roer Dam reservoirs near Monschau. The attack had made little progress by the morning of the 16th, when at daybreak German artillery fire began to fall along the entire 2nd Division front. At 11 A.M. Hoge received word from General Gerow, V Corps commander, that CCB, 9th Armored, had been released from V Corps and attached to the 106th Division of VIII Corps. After alerting his command, General Hoge proceeded ahead to St. Vith.¹⁰

At the 106th Division CP, Hoge found "considerable confusion among the command and staff, and no one seemed to have a very clear idea what was happening. Men were sitting about in the halls of the building, none of the staff sections seemed to be functioning." In a talk with the 14th Cavalry Group commander, Colonel Devine, Hoge gained little coherent information.

Jones' initial instructions were for Hoge to attack toward Schonberg to make contact with the surrounding regiments, but before Hoge had left the CP, Jones changed his directive: Hoge's CCB could capture Winterspelt, southeast of St. Vith,

¹⁰ General William H. Hoge, Personal Report, Combat Command B, 9th Armored Division in the Defense of St. Vith, 16-23 December 1944. The material in this and the following five paragraphs are from the Personal Report loaned to the author by General Hoge.

and the 7th Armored Division would be given the mission of attacking toward Schonberg.

Hoge then hurried north to Faymonville, Belgium where his staff and unit commanders had assembled for instructions. He ordered Troop D, 89th Reconnaissance Battalion to proceed quickly to St. Vith in order to gain the high ground beyond Steinebruck in preparation for CCB's attack on Winterspelt. Chandallier flares illumined the night north and northeast of the route as the remainder of CCB motored toward St. Vith in the first hours of December 17. Flank guards were posted east of the line of march, and the journey was without incident except for the maintenance company, the rear element of the convoy, which was struck by a German tank force at Ligneuville. It was later reported that several men and trucks were captured in the skirmish and the captives were later massacred at Malmedy.

When Hoge reached Steinebruck during the morning, he encountered about 100 stragglers, including several officers, from the 106th Division. The group was instructed to move to the rear where they were to reorganize and serve as CCB reserve. But the stragglers disappeared and Hoge never saw them again.

CCB's 27th Armored Infantry Battalion was deployed, preparatory to the attack, on the high ground east of the Our River, and astride the Winterspelt road. Other units of the Command took positions west of the River in the vicinity of Steinebruck.

Soon after crossing the Our, the 27th Armored Infantry, with tank support, launched a counter-attack. By late after-

noon CCB succeeded in driving the enemy force of about ten tanks and supporting infantry back up the hill mass to the northern edge of Winterspelt.¹¹

With Schonberg in German hands and advance enemy elements feeling their way west along the Schonberg-St. Vith highway, the chief threat to St. Vith came now from the east. Jones ordered the meagre forces available - A Company and Headquarters and Service Company, 81st Engineer Combat Battalion (Divisional Engineers); A and B Companies, 168th Engineers; the 106th Division Defense Platoon, and one platoon of the 820th Tank Destroyer Battalion - to prepare the defense of the town itself.¹²

At 10:30 Division Headquarters had ordered the 168th Engineers to take up defensive positions astride the St. Vith-Schonberg highway in the vicinity of Heuem, a village halfway between St. Vith and Schonberg. Lt. Balch, the 168th Reconnaissance Officer, sent to reconnoiter the area, met elements of the 32nd Cavalry Squadron retreating toward St. Vith. "I talked to the Lt. Colonel in charge of this outfit," said Lt. Balch, "and he insisted he could not make a stand because he had been ordered back to Meyerode. He said the enemy was just around the corner and pursuing, and sure enough he was. But nobody appeared to be doing much about the enemy."¹³

On the strength of information obtained by Balch, it was decided that the 168th would take up positions along the edge of a woods on the high ground overlooking the highway

¹¹ After Action Report: 106th Division, loc. cit., 2.

¹² Ibid.; Dupuy, op. cit., 73.

¹³ Interview by Captain K. W. Hechler, loc. cit., 1.

near the hamlet of Prumerberg to prevent the enemy from putting tanks and guns into position and firing down into St. Vith, one mile to the west.¹⁴

At 11:55 A.M. the 168th men were joined by sixty-five men of A Company and fifty-five men of Headquarters and Service Company, 81st Engineers, commanded by Lt. Col. Thomas J. Riggs. The engineer forces were combined under Riggs, a former football lineman at the University of Illinois. The men of the 81st had no overcoats and entrenching tools were scarce. They had only two bazookas (single-barreled rocket launchers) and no automatic weapons. The 168th was under strength because its headquarters staff and H & S Company had been ordered to defend Vielsalm, while members of C Company were scattered about on various assignments. The 168th had more weapons than the 81st at Prumerberg, but the men of the 168th lacked practice in the firing of bazookas and machine guns. To augment the manpower in this weak deployment, musicians of the 106th Division Band were issued rifles, and marched out to Prumerberg, where they were positioned at the roadblock.¹⁵

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.; After Action Report: Captain Harold M. Harmon, Headquarters 81st Engineers Combat Battalion, Narrative of the Defense of St. Vith by Companies A and H. & S., 6 January 1945 (N.A.R.S.); Frank, loc. cit., 76; The information on the participation of the 106th Division Band was obtained in July 1962 during a Personal Interview with James Thomas, a former member of the 168th Engineer Combat Battalion. The information was confirmed during the author's Personal Interview on December 26, 1962 with Thomas Riggs, commander of 81st Engineer Combat Battalion at St. Vith.

Under orders to hold until the 7th Armored Division arrived, the engineers had set up telephone communication with the advanced 106th Division CP in St. Vith. The men were still digging their rifle pits ("foxholes"), about five yards apart along the edge of a clean pine forest free of underbrush, when at 12:25 P.M. an enemy patrol had contact at two points of the 168th line, and an hour-long exchange of rifle and machine gun fire ensued. Twenty-four hours late, according to the German timetable, the siege of St. Vith had begun.¹⁶

At 1:30 an outpost of the 168th reported that three enemy tanks accompanied by foottroops were moving up the highway toward St. Vith. The lead tank swung cautiously into a snow-covered field in front of the engineer line. Its crew dismounted and set up smoke pots near the tank. Lt. William E. Holland of B Company seized one of the four 50 calibre machine guns on the 168th line and wiped out the dismounted crew. A second tank, which advanced up the road to within 150 yards of the Battalion CP, was knocked out by the bazooka team of Sergeant James L. Hill firing and Private First Class Martin Connelly loading. The third tank scuttled to safety. Using woods roads and firebreaks, the enemy was sifting into the forest, building up his strength opposite the engineers' line. Where was the 7th Armored?¹⁷

¹⁶ After Action Report: 168th, loc. cit., 2; Interview: Hechler, loc. cit., 2.

¹⁷ Ibid.

The Division Defense Platoon and B Company, 820th Tank Destroyer Battalion, with new guns lacking sights, their own weapons lost to the enemy the day before, got into action, with the tank destroyers guarding the flanks as more tanks approached. For a brief interval there was a break in the weather, and with the timely aid of a flight of F-47 fighter planes that happened to be in the area, the enemy armor withdrew when one of the tanks was set afire by strafing.¹⁸

While the engineers astride the Schonberg road were embroiled with the enemy, about the same time a different scene was enacted at the bridge over the railroad yards between St. Vith and Frumerberg. Sgt. Piscatelli and his squad of the 168th had prepared the bridge for demolition in case the enemy broke through the defense line. Under instructions not to blow the bridge unless directed to do so by Lt. Colonels Riggs or Nungesser, Sgt. Piscatelli and his men were standing by awaiting orders when a brigadier general approached.

"Blow that bridge!" commanded the general.

"No, Sir, not without orders from Col. Riggs or my battalion commander."

"I say blow that g___ d___ bridge now!"

"But, General, our troops are over there defending on the hill."

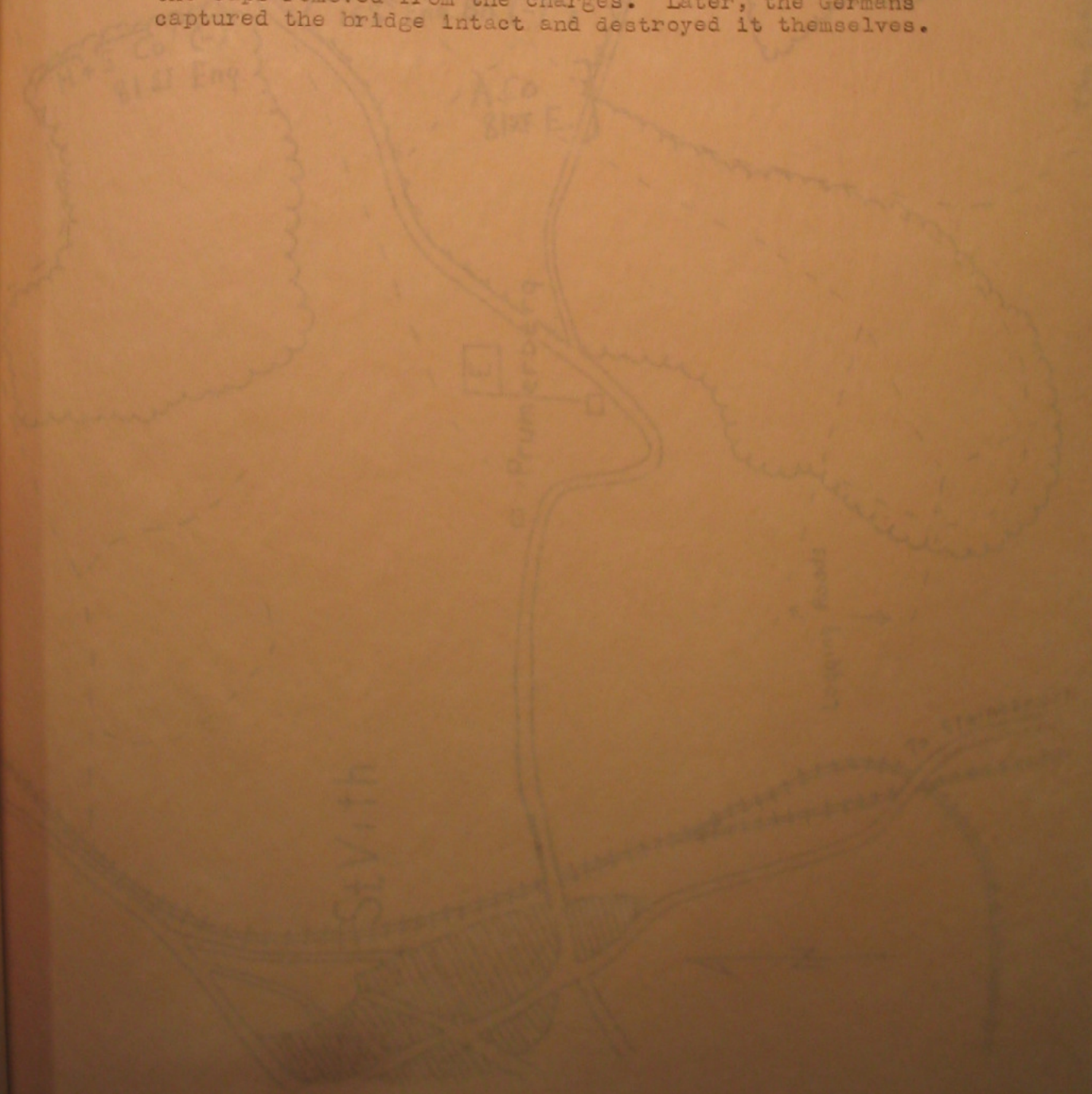
"That's nonsense. Any troops up there are either killed or captured by now. Blow that bridge, I say!"

¹⁸ After Action Report: 168th, loc. cit., 2; Dupuy, op. cit., 73.

"General, you can go _____."

Without another word the general hopped into his car and drove away.¹⁹

¹⁹ Interview: Hechler, loc. cit., 2. Lt. Balch and the members of Sgt. Piscatelli's squad witnessed this scene. When Col. Riggs received news of this incident he ordered the caps removed from the charges. Later, the Germans captured the bridge intact and destroyed it themselves.





The Engineer Roadblock: 17 Dec.

Traced from map with Atlas. Adam Report 9111 Engineer Combat Co. (NARS)

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The Arrival of the 7th Armored

By dusk of Sunday, the 17th, the enemy had a semi-circle of tanks and infantry pressing in upon the thinly-held engineer positions astride the Schonberg highway. North of town Devine had again pulled back his cavalrymen, this time to a line along the Recht-Poteau-Rodt-St. Vith road with troop headquarters at Poteau. Earlier in the day an armored task force of Hoge's Combat Command had moved north of town under orders from Jones to a position guarding the Ambleve-St. Vith highway in the vicinity of Wallerode. Here the task force turned aside a flank probe of 1 SS Panzer Division. About twelve miles east of St. Vith, the 422nd and 423rd regiments, at bay on the Eifel, awaited supplies to be air dropped during the night. Communication with the regiments by radio was sporadic. South of St. Vith, after driving the enemy back to the edge of Winterspelt, Hoge's CCB, 9th Armored Division, had been ordered by Jones at 4 P.M. to pull back to defensive positions on the high ground along the west bank of the Our. In this new CCB alignment, D Company, 14th Tank Battalion covered the left flank linking with elements of CCB 7th Armored at St. Vith, 27th Armored Infantry held the center while on the south flank, Company D, 89th Reconnaissance Battalion was groping for contact with the 106th Division's 424th Infantry which had received a similar withdrawal order. Contact with the 112th Infantry, cut off from the remainder of the 28th Division, was almost non-existent. During the

night, 112th would also withdraw to the west side of the Our.¹

At dusk enemy rifle fire from the wooded hills at Prumberg was falling near the 106th Division Headquarters at the schoolhouse in the southeastern corner of St. Vith. German tanks could be heard to the east.²

The commander of 7th Armored Division's Combat Command B, Brigadier General Bruce C. Clarke, had reached St. Vith and reported to General Jones during the morning. Jones ordered Clarke, pending the arrival of his Combat Command, to attack Schonberg in order to open an escape corridor for the isolated regiments. But afternoon came and still Clarke's armor had not arrived. In the space of twenty-four hours Jones had seen his Division badly mauled. With two regiments surrounded, the 106th was no longer an effective fighting force, and now St. Vith itself was in immediate danger of attack. At about 2:30 P.M. Jones directed Clarke to take charge of the defense of St. Vith. A West Pointer, Bruce Clarke was one of the men who had spearheaded Lt. General George S. Patton's remarkable dash across France in August, 1944.³

1 Tom Marborough, "With the 7th Armored Division," Dec. 30, 1944, (Associated Press); G-3 Periodic Report, 17110 Dec.-172400 Dec., G-3 Journal, Part III, 106th Infantry Division, (N.A.R.S.); Dupuy, op. cit., 100; After Action Report: 14th Cavalry Group, loc. cit., 2; Research and Evaluation Division, loc. cit., 11; Report of the VIII Corps After Action, loc. cit., 10; Hoge, loc. cit., 6.

2 Research and Evaluation Division, loc. cit., 13; Hasbrouck, op. cit., 11, 12.

3 Research and Evaluation Division, loc. cit., 11, 13; Marborough, loc. cit.

Clarke's first unit to arrive was B Troop, 87th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, six officers and 136 enlisted men commanded by Captain Robert J. Stewart. B Troop reached St. Vith during the afternoon, and Clarke hustled them dismounted into position on the north side of the engineers' roadblock.⁴

In the fading light of late afternoon as enemy tanks again approached the frail defense line, a roar from the west came in on the chill wind. Medium tanks of A Company, 31st Tank Battalion, 7th Armored Division, rumbled into St. Vith where they were waved on to the eastern side of town. To reconnoiter for positions, Lt. Dunn, commander of 1st Platoon, A Company, led the column in a radio car. About 1500 yards from St. Vith, upon rounding a bend in the road, Dunn spotted three German tanks and a company of infantry advancing toward St. Vith. Dunn turned his vehicle around, issued orders by radio, climbed aboard the first tank, and led his platoon to the enemy. The fight was brief and at point-blank range. The three enemy tanks were destroyed, and about 50 Germans were killed or wounded. There were no American casualties.⁵

A Company, 31st Tank Battalion had been instructed by Clarke to attack in the direction of Schonberg, but at 4 P.M. the Commander of the 7th Armored, Brigadier General Robert

⁴ Research and Evaluation Division, loc. cit., 13.

⁵ Lt. Colonel Robert C. Erlenbusch, Commanding Officer, 31st Tank Battalion, 7th Armored Division, Personal Report to General Hasbrouck (March 23, 1946). Personal Reports are the property of General Robert W. Hasbrouck (ret.), Washington, D.C. and are hereafter cited as Hasbrouck Papers. Pages in the Erlenbusch report are not numbered.

W. Hasbrouck, arrived in St. Vith. Lacking sufficient strength at this time to mount an attack, Hasbrouck postponed the Schonberg drive. Within an hour it would be dark, and it was apparent now that unless a solid defense was quickly formed east of St. Vith, the Germans would gain this important road center. Using part of each tank crew as infantry, the 31st Tank Battalion's A Company was ordered to take its place in the defense line north of the Schonberg road along the ridge about 2000 yards east of St. Vith. For the encircled Eifel regiments there would be no escape corridor now: the 7th Armored had reached St. Vith too late to undertake Jones' relief mission.⁶ over the East Route.

Abc * an * * * * * 38th * * * * * Infantry * * * * * Battalion.
lead unit of COB, Major Don Boyer and his jeep driver made
During the night of December 16th near Heerlen, Holland and Ubach, Germany, as the 7th Armored prepared to leave Ninth Army for the First Army's VIII Corps area, Major Donald P. Boyer, Jr., S-3, 38th Armored Infantry Battalion, 7th Armored Division, tried to guess the reason for his unit's transfer. Ninth Army orders had been laconic: 7th Armored was to move south over two routes to VIII Corps, First Army. Perhaps, Boyer thought, General Patton had scored a breakthrough and was in need of additional armor for his race to the Rhine.⁷ However, General Hasbrouck had no knowledge of the mission

⁶ Ibid.; Hasbrouck, op. cit., 11, 12.

⁷ Major Donald P. Boyer, Jr., S-3, 38th Armored Infantry Battalion, 7th Armored Division, Narrative Account of Action of 38th Armored Infantry Battalion at St. Vith 17-22 December, 1944, Hasbrouck Papers, 1.

for which his 7th Armored was destined. As T-4 Swantack of the 17th Tank Battalion expressed it: "There were all sorts of rumors flying around. Nobody knew anything about the breakthrough, and the report got around that the outfit was being pulled back and was going to be sent home and then to the Pacific."⁸

At 4:30 A.M. over the West Route, with 87th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron leading the way followed by CCB, CCA and Division Trains (supply vehicles), the 7th Armored began its trek southward. Combat Command Reserve, followed at a short interval by Division Artillery, departed at 8 A.M. over the East Route.⁹

About an hour ahead of 38th Armored Infantry Battalion, lead unit of CCR, Major Don Boyer and his jeep driver made good time until at 12:30 P.M. they reached the road junction at Poteau where a sight they could not at first comprehend met their eyes. A constant stream of traffic was rolling west: hardly a vehicle moved toward the front. Along would come a 2 1/2 ton truck with only a driver; next perhaps an engineer crane or an armored car; then several prime movers, perhaps one of them towing a gun; command cars hurried by crowded with officers. Major Boyer realized that this was no convoy moving to the rear. "It was a case of every dog for himself; it was a retreat, a rout. It was not orderly;

⁸ Author's notes from interview with General Hasbrouck, March, 1962; Lt. R. E. Merriam, 4th Information and Historical Section, Combat Interview: Narrative Report of Action 17th Tank Battalion, 17-23 December, 1944, Hasbrouck Papers.

⁹ Hasbrouck, op. cit., 9, 10.

it was not military; it was not a pretty sight. We were seeing American soldiers running away." It was then that Boyer knew that a serious emergency faced the American Army in the St. Vith area.¹⁰

At the little town of Petit-Thier about a mile further east, Boyer and his driver found that traffic had ground to a standstill in a horrendous road jam. Vehicles streaming to the rear on a road barely wide enough for two-way traffic had attempted to pass each other in the spaces between the tanks of 31st Tank Battalion, lead element of CCB, moving toward St. Vith where General Clarke was waiting for them to launch the attack on Schonberg.¹¹

Major Boyer, Corporal Cox, the jeep driver, and Lt. Colonel Fuller, Commander of the 38th Armored Infantry Battalion, assumed the task of clearing the way for the tanks by directing vehicles to the roadside. Slowly a path was opened and the tanks began to roll, with halts every 50 or 100 feet. Several times Boyer or Fuller waved the 30-ton lead tank forward at full speed to persuade retreating personnel to move their vehicles aside. When senior officers in command cars attempted to pull out of line into an open space, Boyer warned them that he didn't care who they were: nothing would be permitted to block the path of the armor moving to the front.

¹⁰ Major Donald P. Boyer, Jr., Personal Report, Traffic Conditions, Vielsalm-St. Vith Road, 17 December, 1944, contained in Research and Evaluation Division Study, loc. cit., 9, 10, 11. The description of traffic conditions that follows in the next two paragraphs has been condensed from Major Boyer's report.

Following close on CCR's heels back on the East Route, Division Artillery led by Headquarters Company approached Malmedy where two miles north of town they were confronted by a large sign which proclaimed in red letters: "This road under enemy fire." The column crept into Malmedy where to their astonishment the men of the 7th Armored found a scene of frenzied panic. Trucks crammed with American soldiers in all states of dress, civilians in captured German cars, and frightened foot soldiers, bareheaded and clutching personal belongings, were fleeing to the west in the direction of Stavelot. Many of the vehicles were coming from secondary roads, east, southeast, and south of Malmedy.¹¹

Rushing along in columns on both sides of the road, troops of a replacement depot tried to hitch rides on westward-bound vehicles. A truck carrying nurses from a nearby field hospital careened through the town. There, leaning from windows, civilian women wrung their hands while their townsmen of combat age were hurriedly leaving, hoping to avoid the approaching German Panzers.¹²

¹¹ After Action Report: Headquarters 7th Armored Division Artillery, 16-23 December, 1944 (N.A.R.S.). With one exception which will be noted shortly, it is extremely difficult to identify the American units that were involved in the retreat during the first days of the German breakthrough. The After Action Reports abound in descriptions of the retreat, but the authors were reluctant to indict specific units, which is understandable. Undoubtedly many of the personnel caught up in the flight were on legitimate missions to supply depots, etc. It is probably safe to assume that few front line troops, who were heavily involved with the enemy, attempted to escape the battle zone.

¹² Ibid. . . .

Upon learning that elements of 1 SS Panzer Division had cut the highway south of Malmedy, 7th Armored Division Artillery was forced to make a tedious detour to the West Route where the convoy placed itself in the rear of the units already moving south on that road. This delay meant that the 7th Armored Division would be without its own artillery until late the next day.¹³

* * * * *

At a crossroads a few hundred yards west of St. Vith in the afternoon of December 17th, a traffic control officer of the 7th Armored was pushed aside by senior officers hurrying from the front. To restore some semblance of traffic order it was necessary for the Commander of CGO, 7th Armored Division to take personal charge at the crossroads. General Bruce Clarke assumed the duties of a traffic cop.¹⁴

Finally, in the gathering darkness, the mud-spattered, overheated tanks of Colonel Robert Erlenbusch's 31st Tank

¹³ Research and Evaluation Division, loc. cit., 9. Note: When the enemy cut this route, Battery B, 205th Field Artillery Observation Battalion, which had worked its way into the 7th Armored Division march column, was ambushed, and the men were herded into a field where they were shot (although not all were killed) by SS troops. This was the infamous Malmedy Massacre. Perhaps the best account of the incident is contained in an article by Sergeant Ed Cunningham, "Massacre at Malmedy", Continental Edition of Yank, the Army Weekly, Jan. 14, 1945. Sergeant Cunningham based his account on interviews with survivors soon after the incident occurred.

¹⁴ Ibid., 11.

Buildup of the Defensive Cordon. The defenses with the remnants of the 61st and 106th Engineer Forces already in place south of the Suhlberg Highway. At 9 P.M. Lt. Colonel William H. G. Fuller and Major Boyer reported to the big schoolhouse in St. Vith at 4:30. Headquarters for 106th, St. Joseph Klosters had also become the CP for Clarke's CCB. Wasting not a moment, General Clarke ordered: "Boyer, go and get B/23rd (Captain Dudley J. Britton's armored infantry company) which you'll find on the main street. Have them take up positions here." On a map, Clarke pointed out the location, covering the southeastern approach to St. Vith.¹ When Boyer asked who would be on the left and right, he received the only answer possible at the moment: "We don't know about the right; CCB, 9th Armored is down there somewhere; on the left, some engineers of a corps battalion; further to the left, a recon troop of the 87th."² Boyer relayed the command to Britton who led his men out to the woods, where the troops dug in on the high ground covering the road about 1500 yards southeast of St. Vith.³ In this manner Clarke was building up his line, taking units as they arrived - usually a company at a time - committing them piecemeal to the defensive cordon.⁴

1 Boyer Narrative, loc. cit., 2,3.

2 Ibid., 3.

3 Erlenbusch: Personal Report, loc. cit.

4 Boyer Narrative, loc. cit., 3.

He ordered Colonel Fuller to coordinate the defenses with the commanders of the 81st and 168th Engineer forces already in place south of the Schonberg highway. At 9 P.M. at the engineer CP in Prumerberg, Fuller conferred with Colonels Riggs and Nungesser, and it was decided that 38th Armored Infantry Battalion, portions of which were still bucking traffic west of St. Vith, would set up a new line a short distance behind the engineer positions. The engineers, who at 8 P.M. had become embroiled in fire fight in which one platoon of the 168th was badly blooded, would remain in place until the infantrymen of B/38 had entrenched. Then the engineers would withdraw through the new line, reorganize and take up new positions on the south between B/38 and B/23rd. This maneuver was completed during the night without mishap. The 81st and 168th Engineer forces were attached to 38th Armored Infantry as were B/87, A/31 and B/23rd. Colonel Fuller was placed in command of the eastern defense sector.⁵

A Company, 31st Tank Battalion, as noted, was in place north of the Schonberg highway. By 11 P.M. the remainder of the 31st had closed into position northwest of Rodt (Sartles-St. Vith) near which the uncommitted elements of OCB were placed in an assembly area.⁶

A/31st was in contact on its left with B Troop, 87th Cavalry, which extended the line north along the woods to

⁵ After Action Report: 168th, loc. cit.

⁶ Erlenbusch, Personal Report, loc. cit.

a sector held by the 38th Armored Infantry's A Company. General Clarke had ordered the 87th (minus Troop B) to form a screen, from the Schonberg road up to the Ambleve-St. Vith highway, pushing out to include the villages of Wallerode, Meyerode and Heuem. Troops A and D moved east until they encountered elements of retreating American units. Finding Germans in the village of Wallerode, Troops A and D fell back. A Troop joined Troop C which had been sent north of St. Vith to high ground along the road extending east from Hunnange. At a roadblock on the Ambleve highway 87th tied in with A Company, 38th Armored Infantry.⁷

When at 4 P.M. Combat Command Reserve reached Recht, about five miles northwest of St. Vith, information was received that the enemy had occupied Ligneuville, less than five miles to the north, about thirty minutes after the column had cleared it on the motor march. CCR set up its command post at Recht, and at 5 P.M. all infantry was detached from the command. However, because Recht was an important road net, CCR elected to try to hold the village.⁸

During the night a report came that the enemy was approaching Recht in force. CCR headquarters was moved to Poteau, three miles to the southwest. Company C, a Medium

⁷ Lt. Col. Vincent Boylan, CO, 87th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, 7th Armored Division, Personal Report to General R.W. Hasbrouck, Hasbrouck Papers; Headquarters 87th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, After Action Report for December, 1944, 8 January, 1945 (N.A.R.S.).

⁸ Lt. Col. Fred M. Warren, CO, Combat Command Reserve, Letter to General Hasbrouck, March 28, 1946, Hasbrouck Papers.

Tank Company of 17th Tank Battalion, the only force remaining under CCR, moved without infantry support through rain and mud to the threatened village. C Company had barely reached Recht when it was attacked by an estimated company of infantry and three tanks. In a night battle heavy with pyrotechnics, the Germans used flares to silhouette the American tanks and blind the gunners. The village was set ablaze and C Company was forced to withdraw to a line south of Recht where, with Companies A and D, Company C set up an effective defense facing a railroad embankment and an underpass, through which attacking enemy tanks would be forced to pass.⁹ With CCR guarding the northwest flank of CCB, CCA, which reached its assembly area several miles southwest of St. Vith at 7 P.M., was designated as the 7th Armored Division Reserve, and was instructed by General Hasbrouck to be ready to move on thirty minutes notice.¹⁰

Witness to the traffic scramble on the highway as he approached St. Vith, Hasbrouck had been convinced that CCB would be unable to muster sufficient strength to launch a strong counterattack, at least for the present. At noon General Hasbrouck had reached Bastogne, VIII Corps headquarters. He reported to General Middleton whose instructions were for Hasbrouck to "go up to St. Vith and help Jones."¹¹ Hasbrouck

⁹ T.W. Dailey, 17th Tank Battalion, Letter to General Hasbrouck, March 19, 1946, Hasbrouck Papers; Lt. R.E. Merriam, Combat Interview, 17th Tank Battalion, *loc. cit.*, 18 December, 1944.

¹⁰ Hasbrouck, *op. cit.*, 14.

¹¹ Author's notes from interview with General Hasbrouck, March, 1962.

left VIII Corps lacking any definite information about the situation that confronted his division, but he sensed that something was amiss; on the trip from Ninth Army he had seen German parachutes dangling from trees in the Malmedy area. Hasbrouck set out for St. Vith by way of Vielsalm where the tactical CP of the 7th Armored was established. On the stretch of highway between Vielsalm and St. Vith, Hasbrouck was appalled when he beheld the line of vehicles moving west. Particularly galling to the General, a cool, courtly West Pointer and a thorough professional soldier, was the fact that some retreat- ing personnel, including a lieutenant colonel, appeared to be drunk.¹²

About 4 o'clock upon reaching the schoolhouse in St. Vith, where German tanks could be heard to the east, General Hasbrouck found the staff of the 106th Division almost "in a state of shock" and it was difficult for him to determine what was happen- ing.¹³ Hasbrouck informed Jones that the Schonberg attack was

12 Ibid.; Hasbrouck, op. cit., 10, 11, 12; Marborough, "With the 7th Armored Division", (A.P.), loc. cit. Marborough's appraisal of Hasbrouck was based on interviews with officers of the 7th Armored.

13 Author's notes from interview with General Hasbrouck. Other witnesses made similar observations about the 106th Division staff. See Research and Evaluation Division study, loc. cit., 11, or comments of Col. Nungesser, Major Brennan and Lt. Balch in Captain Hechler's interview, loc. cit., 2. However, We have already noted General Hoge's observation of the 106th Division command situation on December 16. In a letter to the author, 20 February, 1963, General Hoge stated that on December 16th, during his visit to the 106th CP, the staff was "fully disorganized," that, in his opinion, they "ceased to function as a staff shortly after that," and "General Jones did little to exercise command." In his Personal Report, p. 15, General Hoge states, "Though attached to the 106th (cont.)

postponed, and it was agreed that the 7th Armored Division would immediately assume responsibility for the defense of St. Vith from the east and north. The orders of General Clarke were confirmed whereby CCB retained control of 168th and 81st engineers, originally under 106th Division command. General Jones retained command of Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 106th, the 424th Infantry and CCB of 9th Armored Division.¹⁴

13 (cont.) Division from the afternoon of 16 December, contact with that headquarters and orders from the C.G. 106th Division ceased on 18 December and all artillery support was cut off on 17 December. My operation from the 18th until the XVIII Corps took over on the evening of 22 December were without directions from higher headquarters. I did confer several times with General Clarke of CCB, 7th Armored, on my left, in order to coordinate our actions."

14 Hasbrouck, op. cit., 5, 12, 13; Report After Action Against Enemy: 106th, loc. cit., 2. General Hasbrouck is emphatic about the command arrangement which he maintains was arrived at through a verbal agreement with General Jones. Despite the fact that the arrangement is confirmed by information in the 106th Division After Action Report, Colonel Dupuy in his 106th Division history makes no mention of this command decision, although he states on page 114 that Hasbrouck on the morning of the 18th received a letter of instructions from VIII Corps establishing the respective zones of action with 7th Armored less CCB responsible north of the line Gouvy-St. Vith. In a letter to the author, 20 February, 1963, General Hoge stated that he was not aware that the 7th Armored Division had been given responsibility for the defense of St. Vith "by agreement or otherwise." However, Hoge notes in his Personal Report, p.6, for the 18th, "Gen. Bruce Clarke had practically taken over command at St. Vith by that evening." Apparently neither Middleton nor Hoge was aware that Jones had turned over the defense of St. Vith to Clarke. However, the Corps commander apparently intended that Hasbrouck and Jones share the direction of operations in the sector, which presented a delicate command situation: Hasbrouck, commanding the bulk of the forces at St. Vith, was a brigadier general; Jones was a major general.

Also under 7th Armored Division control was the 275th Armored Field Artillery Battalion, which would constitute the sole artillery support of the division until about noon on the 18th when 7th Armored organic artillery arrived. An VIII Corps outfit of 105 mm. howitzers, originally in support of the 14th Cavalry, the 275th refused to be drawn into the exit rush. The Battalion held its position despite the fact that no friendly troops remained between it and the enemy. The unit had shifted its batteries to form roadblocks, and had sited guns for direct fire. When General Clarke reached St. Vith, the commander of the 275th, Colonel Roy Clay, volunteered his unit's services, announcing that he was "tired of being pushed around and would not retreat any further." The 275th set up liason and communication with CCB at St. Vith and sent forward observers to the tank and infantry units in the vicinity.¹⁵

Throughout the cold, rainy night of December 17, despite constant probing by German patrols, CCB continued to strengthen its position east of St. Vith. The remaining elements of 38th Armored Infantry had arrived by midnight. Congestion on the Vielsalm-St. Vith highway remained critical throughout the night, but by 7 A.M. on the 18th, American troops would be dug in along a U-shaped arc extending from the Malmedy road on the north to the Prum road on the south.¹⁶

¹⁵ Captain K.W. Hechler, Interview, loc. cit., 3; Colonel O. W. Martin, CO, 7th Armored Division Artillery, Personal Report to General Hasbrouck, March 18, 1946, Hasbrouck Papers; Research and Evaluation Division, loc. cit., 13; Major Arthur G. Hoge, Jr., Exec., After Action Report, 275th AFAB, 10 January, 1945 (N.A.R.S.).

¹⁶ Boyer Narrative, loc. cit., 3; Erlenbusch, Personal Report, loc. cit., December 17.

* * * * * With the appearance of the moon a light appeared in the sky. On a special mission in support of the 106th Division's 424th Infantry about ten miles further south during that night of December 17, a squad from C Company, 168th Engineers was posted by a Bailey bridge over the Our River. Having wired the bridge for demolition, the engineers were waiting on the west bank, ready to destroy the bridge if the Germans advanced to the river. The Our flowed through a deep defile at this point, and the east bank was particularly steep, wooded and dark. At intervals the steel bridge was bathed in eerie light from the high searchlight beams projected against the low-hanging clouds by the enemy.¹⁷

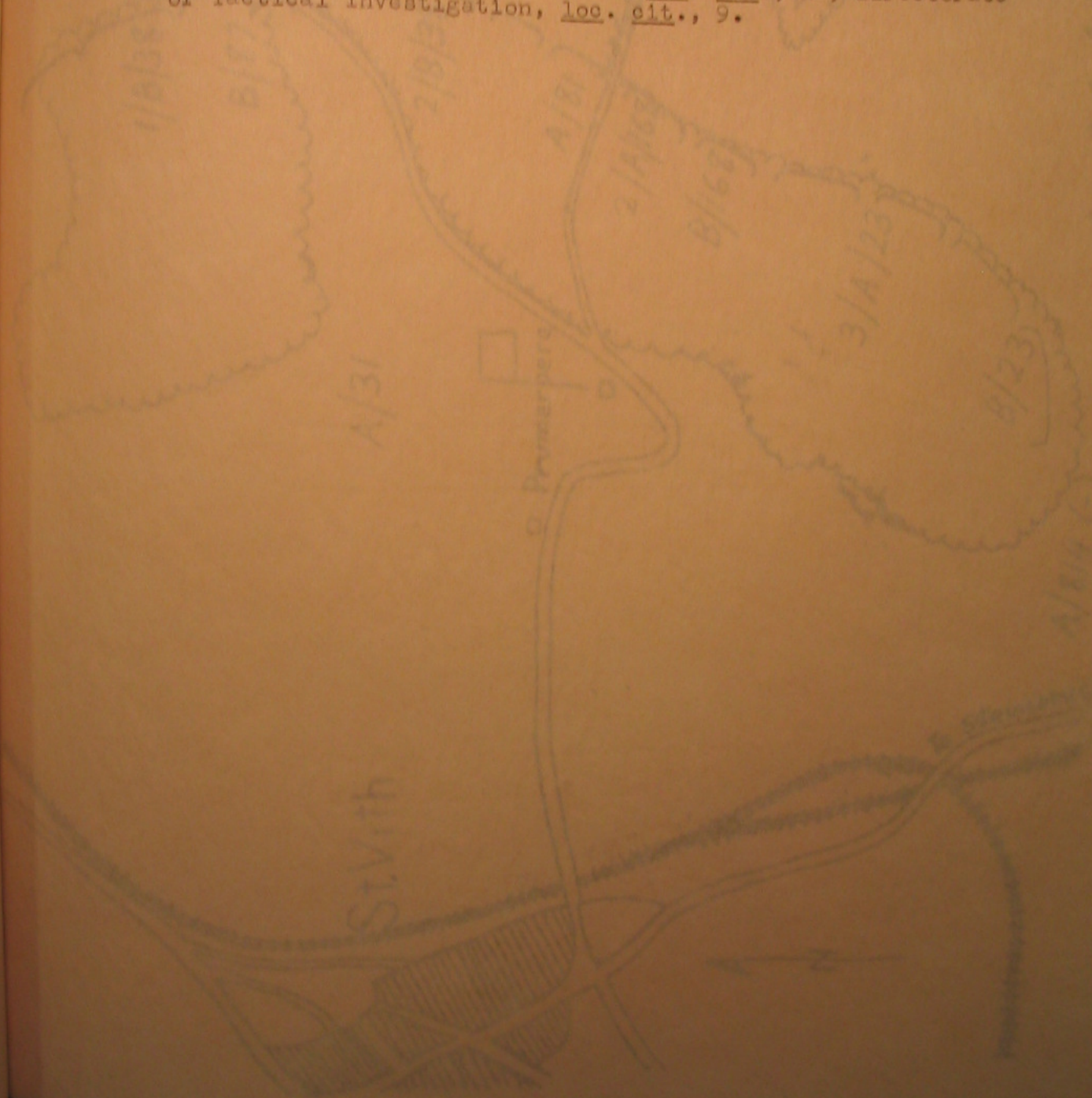
Throughout the night men of the 424th Infantry streamed down the east bank and across the bridge. A few soldiers walked alone; some came in pairs, others in groups: privates, non-coms and a few officers. Some men were unarmed; a few even lacked helmets. They had little to say except that their units had been smashed and they had been ordered back. By morning, the engineers were certain that very few friendly troops remained in that sector beyond the river.

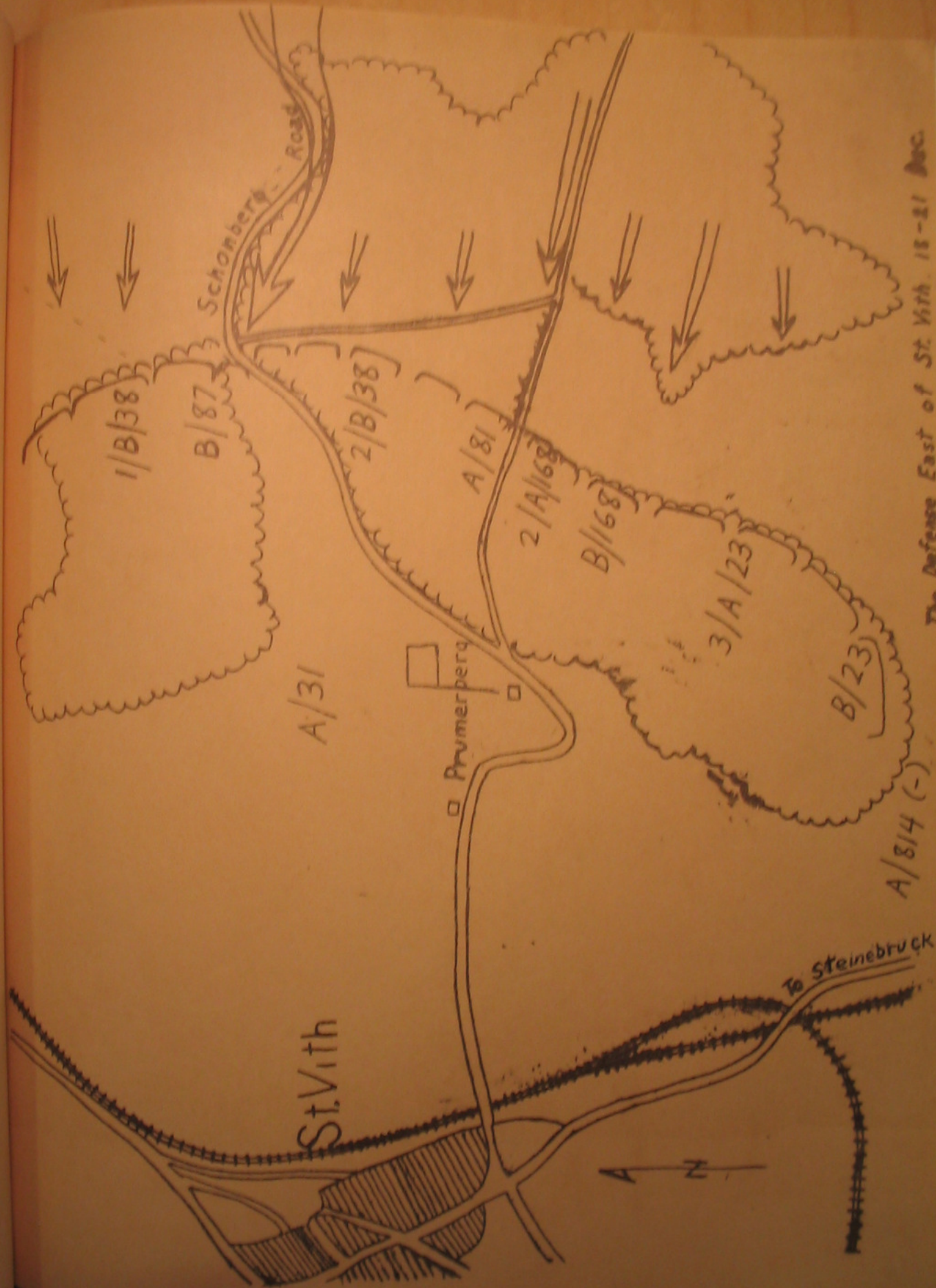
Still further south that night, another regiment, the 112th Infantry, splintered from its parent 28th Division, was pulling back to the friendly side of the Our. With CCB, 9th

¹⁷ The account in this and the following paragraph was derived from the author's personal notes written several months after the action.

Armored already in position west of the river, with the spearhead of the enemy's SS Panzer Divisions approaching Stavelot to the north, the St. Vith sector was assuming the form of a salient. It was the only center of resistance in the 106th - 28th Division area.¹⁸

¹⁸ VIII Corps: After Action Report, loc. cit., 10; Directorate of Tactical Investigation, loc. cit., 9.





The Defense East of St. Vith. 18-21 Dec.

St. Vith

Prumerberg

Schonberg Road

To Steinebruck

N
S

1/B/38

B/87

2/B/38

A/81

2/A/68

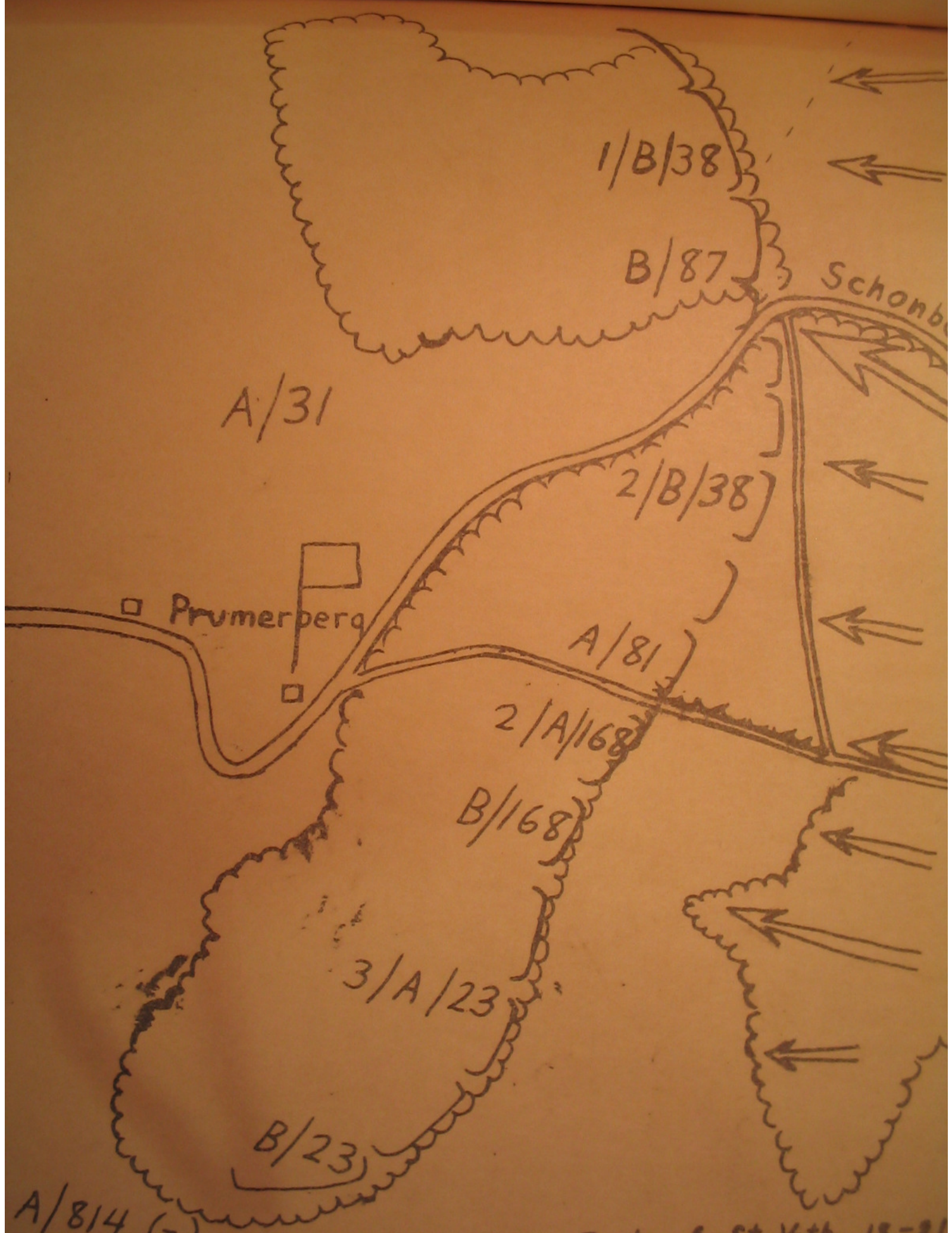
B/68

3/A/23

B/23

A/31

A/814 (-)



December 18: The Enemy Probes the Perimeter

By December 18th, the Americans were making troop dispositions that would vitally influence the outcome of the Battle of the Ardennes. Holes had been punched in the sectors of the 106th and 28th Divisions, but the shoulders of the penetration, at Elsenborn and Echternach, were firmly held by the Americans, and reinforcements were moving toward the threatened area. At 2:15 A.M., December 18, the 101st and 82nd Airborne Divisions, in a rest area at Rheims, France, were released by Eisenhower to General Bradley's 12th Army Group. The two divisions were immediately ordered to concentrate near Bastogne, from which point, with its excellent road net, they could move out as the situation required. Also destined for Bastogne was Patton's 10th Armored Division. Concentrating north of Luxembourg, 10th Armored would arrive in Bastogne by 4 P.M.¹

In a morning conference between the acting XVIII Airborne Corps commander, Major General James Gavin and Lt. General Courtney Hodges, commander of First Army, it was decided that 101st Airborne would continue to Bastogne, but the 82nd would be diverted to Werbomont to help block 6 SS Panzer Army's spearhead, Kampfgruppe Peiper. In reaching Stavelot, about twenty-five miles from the Meuse, Peiper had gained nearly thirty miles from its start line. Later that day Hodges

¹ Directorate of Tactical Investigation, loc. cit., 9, 10.

would rush the 9th and 30th Divisions down from the north to impede 6 SS Panzer Army's progress.²

* * * * *
During the night attack in which the enemy had seized Recht, five miles northwest of St. Vith, Headquarters of the 7th Armored Division's CGR in its evacuation to Petit-Thier found itself enmeshed in the traffic snarl on the Vielsalm road. Retreating elements of 14th Cavalry proved to be the particular hindrance. In fact, at that time, fragments of the shattered 14th were scattered all over the countryside.³

At 3:30 on the previous afternoon Colonel Devine had ordered his cavalry back to a line along the Recht-Poteau-Rodt road and the Group CP had been set up at Poteau by 4:30. With his executive, two other staff officers and extra troopers in three jeeps led by an armored car, Colonel Devine started out for St. Vith in the evening to confer with General Jones.⁴

Devine tried repeatedly to enter St. Vith, but at every approach to the town, he was warned by military police of the

² Merriam, op. cit., 117, 118; Toland, op. cit., 98, 102.

³ Lt. Col. Fred M. Warren, loc. cit.; After/After Action Report: 14th Cavalry Group, loc. cit., 2.

⁴ Lt. Jack Shea, 2nd Information and Historical Service, Headquarters First U.S. Army, Special Interview - Group Staff and CO Ambushed, 2, 14th Cavalry Group in the German Counter-Offensive, Belgium, 5 January, 1945 (N.A.R.S.). The account that follows in the next four paragraphs has been taken from Lt. Shea's interview with officers who were involved in the ambush.

presence of the enemy and told he could not get through. Giving up his attempt to see Jones, Devine ordered his little convoy back to Poteau. Finding the Vielsalm highway jammed, the group turned north, intending to reach Poteau by way of Recht. About thirty-five yards apart in the intense darkness, all vehicles using "cats-eye" headlights, the convoy had reached a point about 2,000 yards due east of Recht when suddenly they heard a sharp command: "Halt!"

The armored car stopped and the three jeeps closed in behind. A figure paced slowly toward the armored car. The Group Executive Officer, Lt. Colonel Dugan, drew his pistol, turned slightly and whispered, "I don't like this." The figure, recognizable now as a German soldier, marched forward, halted, and for an electric moment stared unbelievably at the U.S. circled star on the bow of the armored car. Slowly he started to back away.

Dugan's pistol barked, and either the enemy fired a flare or one of the jeeps turned its headlights to full beam, for suddenly the scene was alight. Half-tracks with German soldiers scurrying around them could be seen along the sides of the road. An enemy vehicle opened fire on the armored car which answered with its turret-mounted 50 calibre machine gun and enemy machine pistols chattered. In making its getaway, the armored car, shoved into reverse, crashed into one of the jeeps from which the men dove into a roadside ditch.

Later that night, in small groups, all victims of the

ambush straggled back into Poteau. Upon his return to the command post at 11:30, Colonel Devine, badly shaken, turned over command of the 14th Cavalry to Lt. Colonel Damon, commanding officer of the 18th Cavalry Squadron. Devine then went to bed, and at 2:00 A.M., December 18, he was evacuated through medical channels as a non-battle casualty.⁵

Under orders from VIII Corps at 3:30 that afternoon, the battered little 14th Cavalry Group, which had lost 28% of its personnel and 35% of its vehicles, was relieved of attachment to 106th Division and assigned to 7th Armored. At Vielsalm where it was sent to reorganize, the 14th Cavalry became, according to General Hasbrouck's order, the Provisional Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron.⁶

This * * * of * * * * * the * vicinity of St. * * *
With with enemy troops disguised as Americans. Reports of
A trooper of the 14th Cavalry, Sergeant John Meyers, on the morning of the 18th volunteered to lead a five-man patrol from Poteau toward Recht. About 400 yards north of Poteau, the patrol sighted a group of soldiers gathered around an American M-8 assault gun, abandoned by the 18th Squadron in a field 150 yards ahead. Deploying his men to cover him, Meyers advanced across the open ground toward the M-8. He called out,

5 After/After Action Report: 14th Cavalry Group, loc. cit., 2.

6 Ibid., 3; Hasbrouck, op. cit., 56. Judging from the amount of material available in the Archives, the 14th was a thoroughly investigated outfit, providing a fascinating case study in the disintegration of a combat force. According to information obtained by Lt. Shea in an interview on March 23, 1945 with officers of the Group, there was an unhealthy rivalry between the 18th and 32nd Squadrons, and with the exception of Col. Dugan, the staff officers of the Group were not leaders who elicited unswerving loyalty from subordinates.

asking the soldiers if they were American. "Yes," came the reply, "we are E Company."⁷

The soldiers wore American overcoats, helmets and web equipment, but Meyers was suspicious: a cavalryman belongs to a "Troop" and Meyers doubted that any friendly "company" was in the area. Cautiously, with his rifle ready, Meyers crept to within twenty yards of the M-8. Suddenly he realized that the soldiers carried German weapons. Keeping the enemy covered, he slowly backed away. The enemy group dropped to the ground and started to fire. Meyers returned fire as he too dropped to the ground. Under the covering fire of his patrol, he then crawled to safety. Cannister rounds from an American light tank nearby burst among the enemy, none of whom escaped.

This was one of several encounters in the vicinity of St. Vith with enemy troops disguised as Americans. Reports of such incidents caused apprehension among the troops, because a soldier was not always sure that he could distinguish friend from foe. That same morning as it was leaving St. Vith, a detachment from 106th Division Headquarters was halted by military police in American uniforms. But the police turned out to be Germans, one of whom fired a rocket that signaled the start of a terrific artillery barrage against the halted vehicles. Skor-

⁷ Major James W. Faris, Executive, 13th Cavalry Squadron, The 14th Cavalry Group in the German Counter-Offensive, loc. cit. The account here and in the next paragraph is taken from the composite report submitted as a recommendation that Sergeant Meyers be awarded the Silver Star.

zemy's Operation Greif was having a measure of success.⁸

* * * * *
On this cold, misty day, the third of the offensive, the enemy increased the momentum of his attack against the St. Vith salient, particularly in the sector of CCB 7th Armored. Probing for a soft spot in the line, he jabbed the perimeter repeatedly, striking from the northeast, east, north, southeast and south, forcing CCB to abandon its plan for an attack toward Schonberg.⁹

At 8 A.M. in a lunge from the north, the enemy seized the crossroads village of Hunnange. To meet this threat, CCB counter-attacked with three medium tank companies, and one tank destroyer company, A/811, borrowed from CCB, 9th Armored. After losing seven tanks, an armored car and over 100 men, the enemy was driven back into the woods 2000 yards northeast of Hunnange.¹⁰

Having taken part in the counter-attack against Hunnange, C Company, 31st Tank Battalion, positioned earlier east of St. Vith as a mobile reserve, was soon called upon to meet an enemy thrust - four tanks, eight armored cars and an estimated battalion of infantry with direct tank fire and artillery support

8 "With the 106th Infantry Division in Belgium, January 22, 1945" (Associated Press), loc. cit.; Report of the VIII Corps After Action, loc. cit., 7.

9 Report of the VIII Corps, loc. cit., 11; Research and Evaluation Division, loc. cit., 16.

10 Erlenbusch, Personal Report, loc. cit., December 18; Hasbrouck, op. cit., 15; Hoge, loc. cit., 6.

from the vicinity of Wallerode - directed against B Company, 38th Armored Infantry on the high ground east of St. Vith. Here as at Hunnange, small arms fire had broken out at 8 A.M. All along B Company's front the enemy foottroops advanced with close direct fire support from two tanks and an assault gun. The tanks created a hellish din by firing into the trees, decapitating treetops and branches which fell among the B Company foxholes. Within ten minutes, heavy fire from tanks and numerous Panzerfausts had destroyed a light machine gun and wiped out a rifle squad. The center platoon of B Company fell back 300 yards, but T/Sgt. J. P. Revels rallied the men and launched an immediate counter-attack.¹¹

By 8:45 the impetus of the enemy attack was shifting to B Company's right platoon, commanded by 1st Lieutenant J. H. Higgins and against Lieutenant W. E. Holland's B Company, 168th Engineers. Here the enemy employed a reinforced infantry company, about 150-200 men equipped with an unusually high proportion of automatic weapons. By 9:20 this attack had been beaten back, and the enemy withdrew, leaving behind the burning wrecks of one Mark IV tank and a 175 mm. assault gun.¹²

At 11:30 the enemy renewed his attack, again against the right platoon of B Company and the engineer company. An outpost of the 168th Engineers reported the approach of an enemy Ferdinand tank and two platoons of infantry. A tank section from A Company, 31st Tank Battalion, moved forward and took

¹¹ Boyer, Narrative, loc. cit., December 18.

¹² Ibid.

the heart out of the assault when one of the friendly tanks fired a Pishochet shot that struck the ground ahead of the Ferdinand and then burst under it about twenty-five yards in front of the line. A hail of rifle and machine gun fire drove off the infantry, who fled leaving twenty dead.¹³

The day's heaviest attack in the eastern sector came in the middle of the afternoon when a battalion of infantry on a two-company front with direct support from four tanks and eight assault guns smashed into Higgins' platoon and the positions of the engineers, and made a deep penetration. The 81st Engineers' H&S Company, busy digging in around the Engineer CP in Fromerberg, was employed as a counter-attack force under Colonel Riggs who personally led his men up the hill in the face of heavy rifle and machine gun fire and re-established the position. Heavy enfilade fire placed upon the support tanks and assault guns by A and C Companies, 31st Tank Battalion, broke up the attack. After three and one-half hours of vicious fighting, much of it hand-to-hand, Troop B, 87th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, the reserve unit, was placed in the line to plug a gap between B/38 and the Provisional Engineers. At 1 P.M. A Company, 23rd Armored Infantry Battalion, Captain J. R. Foster, had been attached to the 38th and had been positioned between A and B 38th, relieving Troop B. Just before dark C Company, 23rd Armored Infantry Battalion, was brought up to form a secondary line south of the Schonberg highway behind

¹³ 1914.; 105th Engineer Battalion, After Action Report, 122. 211., December 18.

B/38. By 6 P.M. C/31st, the fire brigade, had been withdrawn and shunted up to the northwest sector.¹⁴

While B/38 and the engineers had been repelling a series of attacks, north of the Schonberg road A/38 and B/87 had been having a relatively quiet time - except for an incident in which the brave crew of an armored car from B/87th disabled a 60-ton Tiger tank. The M-8 armored car lay in wait in a concealed position near the boundary between A/38th and B/87th roads. When the huge Tiger lumbered up toward the defense line, then moved north along a trail in front of the line. The M-8 slipped from its position and started up the trail behind the Tiger. At the same moment the German tank commander saw the car and began traversing his gun to the rear. The M-8 accelerated to close in so that its 37 mm. gun would be effective against the Tiger's thin rear armor. Closing to twenty-five yards, the little "runabout" quickly fired three rounds. There was a muffled explosion inside the Tiger. Then flames billowed from the turret and engine ports.¹⁵

In the northeast near Wallerode, where enemy fire had been harrassing the eastern sector, A Company, 31st Tank Battalion, had maneuvered a tank platoon to bring fire to bear on enemy infantry, while a second platoon placed its fire on the enemy gun positions. Thus with A Company's support, the ubiquitous C Company was able to drive the enemy back to Wallerode. At

¹⁴ Headquarters 31st Engineer Combat Battalion, Narrative, loc. cit.; Boyer, Narrative, loc. cit., 4, 5; Author's Interview with Thomas J. Riggs.

¹⁵ Boyer, Narrative, loc. cit., 4.

4:30 C Company was withdrawn to a reserve position west of St. Vith to refuel and resupply.¹⁶

Early in the afternoon the 31st Tank Battalion had learned that its service company (Train) and that of the 23rd Armored Infantry Battalion had been attacked by strong enemy patrols pushing west from Poteau along the Vielsalm-St. Vith highway. An VIII Corps unit caught in this same attack, the 740th Field Artillery Battalion abandoned eight 8" howitzers along the road. The Battalion's service companies, using cooks, clerks, a few infantrymen, and three newly-repaired tanks manned by mechanics, were able to disengage and get into position during the night at Krombach where they set up a service park for the 7th Armored.¹⁷

The enemy force, a flank thrust of 1 SS Panzer, that had pushed CCR's 17th Tank Battalion out of Recht during the night, had now seized Poteau, cutting the vital Vielsalm-St. Vith highway, separating the combat forces of CCB from their service units. More ominous, the rear of the entire St. Vith salient was now threatened.¹⁸

After a personal reconnaissance, Colonel Erlenbusch placed his D Company in defensive positions astride the Vielsalm road northwest of Rodt to counter this threat. General Hasbrouck, rated by his officers an excellent "checker player," adept at moving units in battle, ordered CCA, in reserve at

¹⁶ Erlenbusch, Report, loc. cit., December 18.

¹⁷ Ibid.; VIII Corps, Report, loc. cit., 11.

¹⁸ Warren, Personal Report, loc. cit.

Beho, to move north via St. Vith, attack and retake Poteau. Recognizing the importance of the crossroads, the Germans had entrenched tanks and infantry on the high ground covering a large expanse of open terrain north and east of the village.¹⁹

Spearheading the attack from the southeast at 1:20 P.M. C Company, 40th Tank Battalion, CCA was repulsed when the tank-infantry teams were unable to cross the 700 yards of open terrain swept by machine gun, mortar, tank and anti-tank fire. Later in the afternoon, CCA received an order from Hasbrouck: "Imperative you seize Poteau this P.M. and hold it!"²⁰

At dusk Colonel Brown, CO 40th Tank Battalion, sent C Company's lead platoon under Lieutenant Reeves into Poteau without infantry support. After dark the 48th Armored Infantry Battalion fought its way into Poteau. In a furious battle lighted by the glare of three burning enemy tanks, the Americans flushed the well-trained, superbly equipped SS troopers from the houses of the village. C Company of the 48th had been forced to wade an icy canal to gain positions which they held without relief for forty-eight hours in freezing weather under direct enemy fire. For the time being, the enemy had been kicked out of Poteau.²¹

South of the St. Vith perimeter, in the sector of CCB, 9th Armored, at midmorning two battalions of the 62nd Volks-

¹⁹ Erlenbusch, Report, loc. cit., December 18; Tom Marborough, "With the Seventh Armored Division" (Associated Press), loc. cit.; Lt. Col. John K. Brown, CO, 40th Tank Battalion, Personal Report, April 5, 1946, Hasbrouck Papers.

²⁰ Research and Evaluation Division, loc. cit., 18.

²¹ Brown, Report, loc. cit.

grenadier Division²² with about a dozen tanks again probed north from Winterspelt, then stormed down upon the Our valley village of Steinebruck where B Company, 9th Armored Engineers, had blown the bridge. With his flanks wide open, General Hoge again withdrew, now to a ridge west and north of Steinebruck with his right flank unit, A Company, 27th Armored Infantry, positioned near Maspelt where in the afternoon patrols regained contact with 424th Infantry. The north flank unit on Hoge's tenuous arc tied in with Britton's B Company, 23rd Armored Infantry, defending the southeast. During the afternoon B Company repelled an enemy attack with the aid of tanks from CCB, 9th Armored.²³

Within the salient, which now curved twenty-five miles from Vielsalm east to St. Vith, then south to Maspelt, the buildup of the defense continued through the day and into the night of December 18-19. Protecting the north flank, Reserve Command had taken over traffic control on the Vielsalm-Petit Thier-Poteau highway where CCR was busy retrieving abandoned

22 At this time elements of four German divisions were in action in the St. Vith area, north to south: 1 SS Panzer, 18 Volksgrenadier, 62nd Volksgrenadier and 116th Panzer Division. G-2 Periodic Report, 106th Division, for 182400, G-3 Journal, Part III, loc. cit. According to the Consolidated Interrogation Report, covering the period 161500-171500, in the 106th Division G-3 Journal, the 62nd Volksgrenadier Division had an estimated strength of 6500 and 75% of its personnel were infantrymen. Originally formed in 1939, the 62nd saw action in Poland, Flanders and on the eastern front where it suffered heavy casualties. It was first identified at St. Vith on December 16.

23 Hasbrouck, op. cit., 19.; Dupuy, op. cit., 117, 118; Erlenbusch, Report, loc. cit., December 18.

equipment, while maintaining contact with CCA. By 7 P.M. when Troops A and C, 87th Cavalry, arrived to reinforce B Company, 31st Tank Battalion, a strong defensive position had been established, extending east from Hunnange, then south to link up with A Company, 38th Armored Infantry, about 1000 yards northeast of St. Vith. During the night B Company, 33rd Armored Engineers, which had been busy preparing a secondary defensive line, west of St. Vith, was moved to the right flank of the northern sector at the junction with 38th to lend support to B/31st.²⁴

The 7th Armored Division's organic artillery had taken up positions unit by unit throughout the day. The 440th Armored Field Artillery Battalion had gone into place in support of CCR east of Ville-Du-Bois and Petit Thier at 2 A.M.; the 434th, in general support, reached its position between Ville-Du-Bois and Petit Thier at 7 A.M., and by noon the 489th, which soon was busy helping the service companies to extricate themselves, was in place in the same general area. Already in position, of course, was the Corps unit, the 275th, that had volunteered its services, and lending fire support to Hoge's CCB was the 16th Armored Field Artillery Battalion.²⁵

Well to the west, supply points had been set up by 6 P.M. at Samree where incidentally units moving to the rear had also

²⁴ Boyer, Narrative, loc. cit., 5; Warren, Report, loc. cit.; Erlenbusch, Report, loc. cit., December 18.

²⁵ Col. O.W. Martin, CO 7th Armored Division Artillery, Report to General Hasbrouck, 18 March, 1946, Hasbrouck Papers.

created a serious traffic problem. To protect the supply depots, seven roadblocks were established at critical points in the La Roche-Samree area. Moments after going into position, the crew of one roadblock south of La Roche was attacked by a German motorized patrol that had side-slipped south of St. Vith. The German force retreated after losing a motorcycle, four soldiers killed and others wounded.²⁶

In the alien sea east of the St. Vith "peninsular", the 422nd and 423rd Regiments had been ordered to attack toward Schonberg, near which ammunition, food and water would be air dropped, according to the radio message sent by General Jones at 2:15 A.M. That morning, after gaining Schonberg, the regiments were then to attack in the direction of St. Vith-Wallerode to rejoin friendly forces. During the morning in rain and heavy fog, units began moving out of their Eifel fastness preparatory to their Schonberg attack the next day. At 9 P.M. Division again radioed the 423rd: "Supplies for you and 422nd to be dropped at bend in road one half mile south of Schonberg on 19th. CG, 106th."²⁷ The planned drop had not yet materialized, and time was running out for the Eifel regiments.

²⁶ Col. A. J. Adams, An Account of the Activities of the 7th Armored Division Trains from 18-22 December, 16 April, 1946, Hasbrouck Papers.

²⁷ G-3 Journal, 106th Division, December 17, 18; After Action Report: 106th Division, loc. cit., December 18.

December 19: The Fourth Day

The night of December 18-19 was one of constant probing by German patrols in the St. Vith area. To the north the continued movement of enemy vehicles, including tanks, could be heard, and for the first time, enemy artillery, firing battery concentrations, began harassing St. Vith and its roads.¹

There was other vehicular movement in eastern Belgium on this bitter cold night that would decisively affect the outcome of the Battle of the Bulge. The U.S. 30th Division from 9th Army had deployed south of Spa to reinforce the line along the Ambleve River from Malmedy to Stavelot where approximately forty tanks of Peiper's Kampfgruppe had crossed the Ambleve. During the evening of the 18th, the 30th Division recaptured Stavelot, cutting Peiper's supply line, trapping the 1 SS vanguard in the narrow confines of the Ambleve valley. By 10 P.M. 82nd Airborne was deploying at Werbomont, placing another obstacle in the path of the SS. In his advance, Peiper had followed the only east-west route in the northern zone of attack. Though more than twenty miles deep, his corridor had been nowhere more than seven miles wide. With the 2nd and 99th U.S. Divisions holding firmly on the line Monschau-Elsenborn, with the veteran 1st Division moving in to hold Butgenbach, and with St. Vith still in American hands, "Dietrich could not rapidly bring forward

¹ Boyer, Narrative, loc. cit., 5.

sufficient reinforcements to relieve Peiper or to maintain the momentum of the attack."²

South of Peiper another seige was in the making: by mid-night forward elements of Panzer Lehr Division, which had raced through a gaping hole in the U.S. 28th Division sector, had captured Margeret, three miles east of the important road center of Bastogne. Ready to forestall this new threat, however, was the CCB of Patton's 10th Armored, which reached Bastogne by dusk and immediately set up task forces on the road approaches east of the city from which VIII Corps Headquarters was moving to Neufchateau. During the night of the 18th, the 101st Airborne got in, and soon after dawn one of its regiments joined battle with Panzer Lehr.³

In Major Don Boyer's sector in the Frumerberg woods one mile east of St. Vith, the night had been one of constant patrol activity by both sides, and from the north came the roar of enemy vehicles including tanks. There were intervals of quiet, however, and while the men of 168th Engineers waited in their foxholes, the sharp commands of German officers pierced the cold night from somewhere in the forest. Suddenly someone yelled, "Yankee Bastards!" and the voice seemed very close. The taunt was answered by a burst of tracer fire from a machine gun. Sgt. Harry Woodland of C Company raised himself in his foxhole, cupped

² Directorate of Tactical Investigation, loc. cit., 10; Wilmot, op. cit., 584, 585.

³ Directorate of Tactical Investigation, loc. cit., 10; Report Of the VIII Corps, loc. cit., 15.

his hands to his mouth and shouted "Come and get us, you sons of bitches!" Then a voice nearby yelled, "You tell 'em, Harry!"⁴

At daybreak, Major Boyer made a quick survey of the line, starting with the Provisional Engineer Company on the right, then continuing north to the Schonberg road, and the junction between B/38 and A/23. Boyer found Lieutenant Holland's company in fairly good shape, but on Holland's left, B Company of the 38th was licking its wounds after the savage fighting of the day before. There was a gap between Lieutenant Jamiel's 1st Platoon on the left and Lieutenant Van Fradenburg's 2nd Platoon, which had suffered heavy losses and had been dangerously weakened when its machine gun squad had retreated without permission. Boyer combined the 2nd with Higgins' 3rd Platoon and Higgins was given command of B Company, whose commander, Captain W. W. Greene, had gone forward, tommy gun in hand, to meet a German attack the previous morning. He had not returned.⁵

While the lines were being readjusted, Major Boyer led an officers patrol of Lieutenants Higgins, Holland, and Captain Mattox, CO, Headquarters Company, 38th, to reconnoiter the scenes of the furious fighting on the 18th. In the combined areas of B/38th, B/37th and the Engineers more than 200 German bodies were found. Many Germans had been killed as they tried to dig themselves in behind trees or fallen logs. Those not equipped with shovels had tried to scoop shallow holes with helmets,

⁴ Boyer, Narrative, loc. cit., 5; Personal notes; Research and Evaluation Division, loc. cit., 20.

⁵ Boyer, Narrative, loc. cit., 6; After Action Report, 168th, loc. cit.; Research and Evaluation Division, loc. cit., 20.

bayonets or even fingernails. Along a firebreak in the area of E/38, enfilade fire from Lt. Moranda's Machine Gun Platoon had cut down nineteen Germans who had crashed through the line and attempted to dash down the reverse slope. These dead were identified as paratroopers of the Gross Deutschland Division. Under their camouflaged jump jackets were blouses with the Gothic "GD" on the shoulder straps.⁶ From Solbuchs and shoulder straps on various corpses, the 62nd Volksgranadier Division was identified. So too was the 3rd Panzer Regiment of 2 Panzer Division when shoulder straps and log books in two wrecked tanks were examined.⁷

At 8:30 A.M. Colonel Fuller directed Boyer to take command of E/38 and E/87 and to readjust the line. Boyer set up his command post about fifty yards behind Van Fradenburg's 2nd-3rd Platoon for it was against this portion of the line that yesterday's attacks had been directed. Holland's Provisional Engineer Company had been redesignated as E/168th when Captain Maher's A Company of the 168th entered the line on the right between Holland and Britton's E/23rd. The officers' patrol had found that the area held by the enemy in the previous day's fighting

⁶ However, these paratroopers had not served at St. Vith under Gross Deutschland, for this division was not in the Bulge. The paratroopers were replacements drawn from Gross Deutschland. Or possibly the paratroopers were a detachment of Fuhrer Escort Brigade which was drawn from Gross Deutschland Division. Letter from General von Manteuffel, April 13, 1961.

⁷ Boyer, Narrative, loc. cit.; 7; After Action Report, 168th, loc. cit.

evacuated, so when most of the German corpses had been removed, Holland moved his line forward to new positions. During the afternoon, Holland placed himself and his B Company under the command of Boyer, who now had a task force of four companies totaling approximately 450 men, 380 in the line with a reserve of 70 divided between a platoon of the 423rd Infantry and H&S Company, 81st Engineers, which had manned a gap in the 168th lines but was now relieved. In the morning, C Company, 23rd Armored Infantry Battalion had been detached from the 38th and shifted to the north flank to assist 31st Tank Battalion.⁸

The day's only major assault in the eastern sector was aimed at B/23rd during the afternoon, when Britton's line was hit by an estimated company of infantry with a Mark V Panther tank and two assault guns. A 90 mm. tank destroyer section from A Company, 814th Tank Destroyer Battalion had been attached to the 23rd during the morning, and the 90's soon knocked out the Panther and one assault gun. With their direct fire support removed, the enemy infantry were unable to advance against the heavy rifle and machine gun fire placed upon them by B Company which held its fire until the Germans were about 50 yards from the line. They soon wavered and withdrew, leaving sixty dead.⁹

Meanwhile, below the hill in Prumerberg at the new Engineer CP - the former having been abandoned in the morning after

⁸ Boyer, Narrative, loc. cit., 6; After Action Report, 168th loc. cit.; Headquarters 81st Engineer Combat Battalion, Narrative, loc. cit.

⁹ Boyer, Narrative, loc. cit., 6.

receiving heavy artillery fire - a kitchen unit was set up to feed men given temporary relief from the fighting. Late in the afternoon, members of C Company, 168th, got their first hot meal - spaghetti - since the morning of the 16th. At dusk, as they trudged slowly up the hill to rejoin the line, a strange quiet hung over the area. Suddenly the silence was broken by the eerie wail of "screaming meemies." The engineers scrambled into the woods that lined the road as the rockets crashed into the trees directly overhead. One engineer pressed his face into the earth at the foot of a tree and waited as the Nebelwerfer fire splintered branches above. After several minutes, the barrage lifted. The engineer raised his head and beheld a fresh gash in the tree trunk not a foot from his face. He was unscratched but nearby he heard someone cry, "Medic! Medic!" Those who could continued up the hill.¹⁰ contact by patrols

Throughout the day troops manning the eastern sector could hear heavy fighting taking place in the north. There had been two enemy attacks during the night to seize Hunnange but these had been repulsed by tanks of 31st Tank Battalion and the armored cars and assault guns of 87th Cavalry.¹¹ local and Polish

In the morning the enemy launched an attack from north of Neider Emmels. In an attempt to envelop GCB's left flank, about 500 infantrymen supported by five tanks attacked repeatedly but at 1 P.M. was finally forced to withdraw, due partly

¹⁰ After Action Report, 168th, loc. cit.: personal notes.

¹¹ Hasbrouck, op. cit., 23.

to the heavy artillery fire laid down by 434th Armored Field Artillery Battalion in position near Krombach. The 275th Armored Field Artillery Battalion which had been threatened in the enemy attack, moved to Hinderhausen. Another assault from the vicinity of Wallerode was broken up by artillery fire.¹²

Back in the crossroads village of Poteau the 7th Armored Division's CCA continued to maintain a precarious foothold, but by 9 A.M. the enemy was placing a tremendous amount of fire on the town. At mid-morning CCA's 40th Tank Battalion and the 48th Armored Infantry launched a coordinated attack to clear the SS troopers from the woods east and north of Poteau. After five hours of ceaseless fighting with 48th Armored Infantry taking heavy casualties, CCA was able to relieve the pressure on the crossroads. Having extended its position laterally in the day's fighting, CCA was able to make contact by patrols with CCR on the left and CCB on the right about 7 P.M.¹³

Throughout the day the northern sector received an increasing volume of enemy artillery fire including Nebelwerfer concentrations. Protecting the northern flank, CCR continued to maintain its position astride the road between Vielsalm and Poteau where it tied in with CCA. In the afternoon, CCR was given a Provisional Cavalry Troop, formed from remnants of the 14th Cavalry, which was used to screen the north flank west from the junction with CCA. Though it remained in position south

¹² Erlenbusch, Personal Report, loc. cit.

¹³ Hasbrouck, op. cit., 23.

of Recht, the 17th Tank Battalion was turned over to CCB, reducing CCR's strength to a single composite battalion.¹⁴

CCB had also gained added artillery support when 434th Armored Field Artillery Battalion moved into positions near Krombach where it was reinforced by the 965th Field Artillery Battalion (155 mm. Howitzers) which had volunteered its support when it had been found wandering on a road in the rear. These two units plus the 275th now supplied CCB's artillery fire, and General Clarke later remarked, "We were then in pretty good shape." But due to continued bad weather aerial observation was still lacking.¹⁵

However, General Clarke had moved his CCB headquarters to Krombach, and Jones had moved his CP to Vielsalm where by 9 A.M. General Hasbrouck as a precautionary measure had drawn up a detailed plan of withdrawal for his combat commands in case the enemy seemed likely to cut off the St. Vith salient. Having lost contact with VIII Corps, which was in the process of moving to Neufchateau, Hasbrouck and Jones at this time had little knowledge of developments in the Bulge outside the St. Vith area where enemy forces were now probing relentlessly for a vulnerable point in the defense while other German formations were sliding by to the north and to the south. The 106th did get word that civilians in Houffalize had seen about 150 German

¹⁴ Erlenbusch, Personal Report, loc. cit.; Hasbrouck, op. cit., 25.

¹⁵ O.W. Martin, loc. cit.; Harborough, "With the 7th Armored Division", loc. cit.

tanks and trucks moving through Binsfield during the night of the 18-19th headed in the direction of Troisvierges and Bastogne.¹⁶

Particularly disturbing to Hasbrouck on the morning of the 19th was the knowledge that the enemy was threatening the area behind the "horseshoe." On the 18th there had been a skirmish at a roadblock near La Roche, and early on this day a light tank company (D/40) of OCA had intercepted a German infantry force assaulting Gouvy where 50,000 American rations had been stored. Advancing with blazing 37's and machine guns, D Company routed the enemy attack, forcing the Germans to flee southward, at least for the time being.¹⁷

At this worrisome juncture during the morning, into the 7th Armored Headquarters came Colonel G. M. Nelson, commander of the 112th Regiment, which was completely cut off from its parent 28th Division. Nelson reported that his regiment had been driven back from Weiswampach early in the morning and had now taken a defensive position near Holdingen. The Colonel did not know the whereabouts of the remainder of the 28th Division, and, in fact, he had not known the location of any friendly troops until a 7th Armored Division patrol had contacted his regiment.¹⁸

¹⁶ Hq. 106th, G-3 Journal, Part III, loc. cit.; Merriam, op. cit., 155; Hasbrouck, op. cit., 23; Hq. 106th Division, G-2 Report, 182400-192400 Dec.

¹⁷ Hasbrouck, op. cit., 22, 23.

¹⁸ Hq. 106th Division, G-3 Journal, Part III, loc. cit.; Hq. 106th Division, G-2 Report, loc. cit.; Hasbrouck, op. cit., 26, 27.

At 4 P.M. Nelson's 112th was placed under command of the 106th Division. The 112th was moved northeast to link up during the night with the 424th Infantry near Burg-Reuland so that the two regiments held the shoulder of the breakthrough south of the St. Vith sector. In a message to 106th during the afternoon, 424th reported that its three battalions remained in position just west of the Our whereas at 3 P.M. there was no direct contact with the enemy, although the regiment was receiving enemy artillery fire.¹⁹

Just north of the 424th, CCB 9th Armored was opposed by at least two battalions of infantry plus about five to ten tanks in the vicinity of Steinebruck. Shortly after noon CCB had quickly broken up an attack by knocking out three enemy tanks. Later, small enemy groups became active in the rear and within Hoge's lines.²⁰

There had been numerous probing attacks along Hoge's entire front during the 18th and into the 19th, but all attacks were successfully repelled. However, Hoge's deployment was fraught with hazard. Behind CCB's position, the railroad track to St. Vith ran largely through a deep cut with precipitous sides. There were no roads across this valley, and Hoge discerned that a route of withdrawal was lacking for all except foot troops. For his tanks and vehicles the only escape road was through St.

¹⁹ After Action Report, 106th Division, loc. cit.; Hq. 106th Division, G-3 Journal, Part III, Message, 19 December.

²⁰ Hq. 106th Division, G-2 Report, loc. cit.

with itself, which was very congested, under constant attack, and, according to Hoge, "might be lost at any time." After informing General Clarke, who agreed to the plan, Hoge pulled his entire line back several hundred yards as darkness fell on the 19th. His new front, extending about five miles over rugged terrain, reinforced the right flank of GCB 7th Armored.²¹

In the hostile sea to the east, radio communications with the 422nd had been lost, and by next morning there would be no word from the 423rd. Having failed in their attempt to launch an attack against Schonberg, more than 6000 Americans had laid down their arms, or were about to, by nightfall on December 19th. Later it was learned that two air drops had been made, but not within reach of the trapped regiments.²²

The German forces in the Schonberg area could now direct their full strength to the capture of St. Vith. As early as 9 A.M. twenty-five to fifty horse-drawn enemy artillery pieces had been sighted moving north from Winterspelt, and in the cold night enemy artillery and mortar fire fell in great amounts on St. Vith. Again in this night much vehicular movement could be heard to the east. On the northern flank there were continuous patrol clashes, and in one a German combat patrol of roughly thirty-five men pounced on the rear CP of the 31st Tank Battalion. The enemy was dispersed after a vicious hand-to-hand struggle.²³

²¹ Hoge, Personal Report, loc. cit., 7.

²² Report of VIII Corps, loc. cit., 11; After Action Report, 106th Division, loc. cit.

²³ Hq. 106th Division, G-3 Journal, G-2 Report, loc. cit.; Boyer, Narrative, loc. cit., 7; Erlenbusch, Personal Report, loc. cit.

The Fifth Day: December 20

By December 20th, the U.S. XVIII Airborne Corps, including 30th Infantry, Third Armored, and 82nd Airborne Divisions, was deployed along the line Malmedy-Vielsalm-Houffalize. At 5:30 on the 19th the British XXX Corps had been ordered to take up positions west of the River Meuse. On the 20th General Patton, commander of the U.S. Third Army, issued a directive for an attack north from the Luxembourg-Arion area.¹

A few miles east of St. Vith, the enemy was preparing to bite off the salient that was sticking into the German throat like a thumb. On the evening of the 17th, Field Marshall Model, commander of Army Group B, and 5th Panzer Army's commander General Manteuffel had met near the headquarters of 18th Volksgrenadier Division at Schonberg. Because of the congestion on the roads east of Schonberg, it was easier to walk so Model and Manteuffel had been on foot. In their conversation, the commanders revealed their impatience with their lack of progress at St. Vith, and Model agreed to release the elite Fuhrer Escort Brigade to reinforce Manteuffel's attack on St. Vith the next day. However, road movement was so difficult that Fuhrer Escort had not been able to get into action until the 19th, and on the 20th its influence began to be felt at St. Vith, where the defenders now knew that they were in the midst of a full-scale

¹ Directorate of Tactical Investigation, *loc. cit.*, 12.

German offensive.²

For the present, the most dangerous threat to the St. Vith salient appeared to come from the south and southwest of Vielsalm. 7th Armored Division Headquarters had received reports that enemy elements had reached Houffalize, La Roche, and Samree. To protect his southwestern flank, Hasbrouck dispatched Task Force Jones (part of the 17th Tank Battalion, the 440th Armored Field Artillery Battalion, and elements of 814th Tank Destroyer Battalion) to the Cheram-Gouvy-Deifeld area to defend the road junctions. In place by 4 P.M. Task Force Jones became immediately engaged with enemy elements which were driven back by 6 P.M.³

In a broad area west of St. Vith, there was in fact at this time a commingling of friendly and enemy troops, the latter having slipped by north and south of the salient. A 106th Division supply dump at St. Vith containing 8000 rations and 10000 gallons of gasoline had been used until exhausted, but resupply from the rear had become extremely hazardous with enemy detachments lurking in the forests along the route. During the 20th, supply vehicles at La Roche were heavily engaged, and a roadblock five miles north of Houffalize was attacked for the second consecutive day. The enemy was driven off, but all American vehicles and twelve of the fourteen men were lost.⁴

² Research and Evaluation Division, loc. cit., 23, 25; Freidin and Richardson, op. cit., 239.

³ Hasbrouck, op. cit., 28; Research and Evaluation Division, loc. cit., 25.

⁴ Erlenbusch, Personal Report, loc. cit.; Adams, loc. cit.

A major German effort was being made to seize a ration and gasoline supply dump on the northwest edge of Samree, where service troops had been placed in defensive positions. At 9:45 A.M. a reinforced German infantry battalion supported by artillery assaulted a roadblock south of Samree and under cover of heavy fog had infiltrated the village by early afternoon. Throughout the attack that lasted until mid-afternoon, supplies for units of the 7th Armored, the 106th and the 112th Infantry were issued from the north end of the dump while the south side was on fire and under attack.⁵

Seven trucks from the 31st Tank Battalion were loaded with fuel during the fighting. For protection two guards with tommy guns had been placed in the rear of each truck, the guards having been recruited from kitchen crews. It took the truck convoy two days, with a night spent hiding in the woods, to travel from Krombach to Samree and return. They "ran the gauntlet" of four enemy ambushes. The corporal in charge of the convoy was killed, three men were wounded, and one truck was so badly damaged that it had to be towed back to Krombach.⁶

In another case, Sgt. Trapp's convoy of three trucks from the 31st and one of the 23rd Armored Infantry journeyed to a supply dump in the La Roche area for badly needed ammunition. Finding the supply dump unguarded, Sgt. Trapp's men loaded the

⁵ Hasbrouck, op. cit., 29; Hoge, Personal Report, loc. cit., 16.

⁶ Erlenbusch, Personal Report, loc. cit.

truck and started back for St. Vith. On this trip the convey suffered one casualty in two skirmishes with enemy troops. As Colonel Erlenbusch reported, "The supply problem was one of running trucks through miles of enemy-infested territory in search of friendly dumps having the desired type of supplies, and then coming back through the same hostile territory to deliver the goods to the combat elements."⁷

The service facilities of the units in CCB, 7th Armored, were pooled, with the maintenance sections consolidated under Captain La Fountain, Ordnance Officer of the 31st Tank Battalion, who set up a small shop to repair and salvage damaged vehicles and weapons of units in the St. Vith defense. Frequently this section operated under enemy artillery fire, and often it was necessary for the men to lay down their tools, seize weapons and repulse enemy patrols that had penetrated the area.⁸

For the Americans in the Prumerberg woods just east of St. Vith, the 20th was another relatively quiet day, although artillery fire, including battalion concentrations, was pounding St. Vith and its road junctions. Apparently in an effort to neutralize the mortars which seemed to be giving them great trouble, the enemy poured "Screaming Meemie" barrages into the valley behind the eastern positions. At 10 A.M. two direct hits from enemy artillery demolished the 38th Armored Infantry's rear command post, a building in a housing development east

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

of the railroad. The CP was then moved into the school house at St. Vith. Colonel Fuller, commander of the eastern defense, maintained his forward CP in a stone house beside the Schonberg road, about 800 yards behind the main line of resistance. Colonels Nungesser and Riggs, the engineer commanders, assisting Fuller, had established an engineer forward command post in an old tavern, "The Beer Garden," at a roadbend about 200 yards below Fuller's CP. The command posts were in contact with the front lines and the rear CP's by radio and telephone.⁹

At 10:30 A.M. Lt. Bundy, a forward observer of the 434th Armored Field Artillery Battalion, reported to Major Boyer and announced that the 434th was now in support of CCB, 7th Armored. Up to this time the 275th, the Corps battalion that had refused to panic, had furnished CCB's only artillery support. Three forward observers of the 275th had been assigned to the flanks of the eastern sector, with Lt. Fox serving as liason officer. During the 20th the 434th fired 71 missions, 1439 rounds while the 275th got off 2057 rounds in 75 missions. Two batteries of the 965th Field Artillery Battalion (155 Howitzers), also in support of CCB, fired 656 rounds during this day. Lt. Boyd's Assault Gun Platoon, three guns plus one tank from A/31 mounting a 105 mm. howitzer, and Lt. Kennebrew's Mortar Platoon lent their fire support to this sector of B/38th Armored Infantry. For the men on the line it was a comfort to hear the "cough-whang" of the American mortars.¹⁰

⁹ Boyer, Narrative, loc. cit., 8.

¹⁰ O.W. Martin, Report, loc. cit.; Boyer, Narrative, loc. cit., 10.

However, visibility remained bad and the liaison planes of 7th Armored Division Artillery were still grounded back at Liege. Because the routes to the rear supply dumps had in many cases been cut by the enemy, ammunition had to be conserved. At a unit commanders' meeting during the evening at CCB'S command post in Krombach, General Clarke instructed the commanders to issue only two-thirds of a ration daily and to fire artillery missions only when the situation appeared critical.¹¹

During the morning a ten-minute battalion artillery concentration had been placed on a company of enemy tanks followed by infantry advancing south from Wallerode headed toward the position of Captain Anstey's A/38th, on the north flank of the eastern sector. In a withering barrage, the infantry was slaughtered and four enemy tanks were left burning while the others turned and fled back through Wallerode toward Born.¹²

In the afternoon five half-tracks, with a captured American vehicle in the lead, dashed into Wallerode from Born, then headed southwest again on the road leading into the positions of A/38. When the enemy force had closed to within twenty-five yards of the line, the captured American half-track was destroyed by tank fire of A Company, 31st Tank Battalion on the left, while a bazooka team of A/38th knocked out the four German half-tracks. Heavy machine gun fire was poured into the burning vehicles, and all enemy troops were killed except for two badly wounded Troopers of 1 SS Panzer Division who were

¹¹ O.W. Martin, Report, loc. cit.; Research and Evaluation Division, loc. cit., 26.

¹² Boyer, Narrative, loc. cit., 10.

captured.¹³

Also during the afternoon patrols from B/38 and B/87th reported that "Jerry" infantry in company strength were moving in attack formation through the woods south of the Schonberg road. In the gathering dusk the Germans opened fire with "burp guns" (machine pistols) about 150 yards in front of B Company and B Troop, while enemy mortar rounds clumped into the woods behind the line, and Feldwebels could be heard shouting commands among their squads. Apparently the Germans had hoped that the Americans would disclose their positions by opening fire prematurely, but the defenders, knowing they must conserve ammunition, held their fire. Boyer had told them that for each shot there must be a corpse. The enemy did not close in, and by 4:15 all firing had ceased.¹⁴

Up on the north flank shortly after dusk the enemy launched a night tank attack against Ober Emmels where a light tank platoon of C Company, 31st Tank Battalion, had established an outpost line, using two men from each tank crew dismounted. As the enemy tanks advanced in two waves, two tank destroyers lay in wait in direct fire positions on the reverse slope of a ridge just west of Hunnange. The tank destroyer crews received warning of the enemy advance, its size and formation from the tank platoon which had now been forced out of Ober Emmels. Waiting until the first wave of six tanks appeared along the ridge top

¹³ Boyer, Narrative, loc. cit., 11.

¹⁴ Boyer, Narrative, loc. cit., 10.

abreast their positions, the tank destroyer crews and C Company opened fire simultaneously, knocking out four tanks and damaging two others. The second wave of six enemy tanks fired several rounds and then retired toward Neider Emmels.¹⁵

Throughout the day, the enemy jabbed at the flanks of the St. Vith perimeter, both north and south. The heaviest attack yet in the area of CCA at Poteau had come at 11:30 when almost two battalions of infantry supported by heavy tanks attempted to capture Poteau. Having received a message from Hasbrouck: "Imperative you command road leading into Poteau from Recht," CCA would not be dislodged, and the enemy withdrew leaving four burning tanks.¹⁶

Down in the territory of CCB, 9th Armored, the 27th Armored Infantry Battalion repulsed an attack by two companies of enemy infantry at 4:30 P.M. B Battery of 482nd Anti-Aircraft Artillery Battalion, with quadruple-mounted caliber 50's on half-tracks, in support of the 27th, slaughtered enemy infantry advancing across open ground. CCB, 9th Armored held its positions and prevented the enemy from cutting the road south of St. Vith. The German attacks became intensified on the 20th and one portion or another of Hoge's sector was under attack day and night. Usually from company to battalion in strength, supported by tanks or assault guns and artillery, these attacks fortunately were not coordinated along the entire front at one time so that

¹⁵ Erlenbusch, Personal Report, loc. cit.

¹⁶ Hasbrouck, op. cit., 32.

in several instances CCB was able to pull an infantry company out of the line and move it laterally to assist the unit under immediate attack, then returning the company to its previous position when the assault had been repelled. Because of the rugged terrain and heavy woods, Hoge was able to make little use of tanks in the line.¹⁷

Further south a patrol of about forty Germans penetrated lines of the 424th near Neidingen and five enemy tanks pushed through south of Neidingen at 5 P.M., only to be turned back by guns of the 820th Tank Destroyer Battalion. A counter-attack by elements of the 112th Infantry Regiment recaptured Beiler, pushing the enemy back about one mile along a two mile front. By day's end the situation remained fairly stable on the southern flank.¹⁸

This had been another cold, overcast day, and by nightfall there were few men, who, after five nights in foxholes on the St. Vith perimeter, were not feeling the pangs of frostbite in their feet. Again on this night from the northwest, north, east, and south the heavy movement of tanks and trucks could be heard. Between 1 and 3 A.M., December 21st, directly in front of the Prumerberg line, the roar and clatter seemed to be that of many tanks and half-tracks lumbering up a steep grade. The artillery fired battery concentrations upon three north-south trails and the Schonberg road over which the enemy

¹⁷ Hq. 106th Division, G-3 Journal, Description of Operations, 192400-202400, CCB, 9th Armored; Hoge, *loc. cit.*, 8.

¹⁸ Hq. 106th Division, G-3 Journal, Part III, G-2 Periodic Report, 192400-202400.

traffic was apparently moving. One salvo fell on the junction where the Wallerode road met the Schonberg highway. There was a muffled explosion, a larger one, and soon a reddish glow tinged the sky above the trees.¹⁹

During the night sixty-eight men and two officers led by Lt. Ivan Long of the Intelligence and Reconnaissance Platoon, 423rd Regiment crept back into St. Vith where they reported that the two Eifel regiments had surrendered. Long and his men, who were given rations and much-needed rest, also reported that they had seen large concentrations of enemy armored units near Wallerode.²⁰

* * * * *

At First Army Headquarters on this the fifth day of the battle, Generals Hodges, Simpson (Commander of 9th U.S. Army) and Montgomery were in conference when a liason officer from the 7th Armored Division broke into the meeting with a pencilled note from General Hasbrouck appealing for information and help: "I can delay them (the enemy) the rest of today maybe but will be cut off by tomorrow."²¹

In reply General Hodges sent word to Hasbrouck that General Matthew Ridgway's XVIII Airborne Corps was closing in behind the St. Vith "horseshoe", where Hasbrouck was now placed in command of all troops. At the same time, in a general re-organization, the 7th Armored Division, the 106th, CCB, 9th

¹⁹ Boyer, Narrative, loc. cit., 11

²⁰ Erlenbusch, Personal Report, loc. cit.; Research and Evaluation Division, loc. cit., 26.

²¹ Quoted in Merriam, op. cit., 156.

Armored, and 112th Infantry Regiment of the 28th Division passed to the control of Ridgway's Corps which with U.S. First and Ninth Armies was placed under command of Montgomery's British 21st Army Group. VIII Corps passed to control of U.S. Third Army in Bradley's 12th Army Group. The boundary established between the two Army Groups was the line Givet-Houffalize.²²

This was the first order that Hasbrouck had received in three days.²³

²² Report of the VIII Corps, loc. cit., 18; Directorate of Tactical Investigation, loc. cit., 12.

²³ Merriam, op. cit., 156.

Back near Poteau during the morning Warrant Officer Wall-
man, in charge of transportation for the 434th Field Artillery
Battalion, embarked on a rescue mission in the area immediately
southwest of Poteau where 10A had temporarily gained control of
a short stretch of the highway. Here lay the seven abandoned

¹ Soper, Narrative, 100- 211- 12; Kriemhild, Personal Report,
100- 211- 13.

² Research and Evaluation Division, 100- 211- 19; Annex to
After Action Report, 100th, 100- 211- 100-21.

The Enemy's All-Out Assault

As the cold dawn broke at St. Vith on Thursday, December 21st, men shivering in tanks or huddled in foxholes waited for the great assault they knew must come today. Throughout the night they had heard the roar of enemy tanks, and since 4 A.M. the movement had become particularly heavy near Ober and Neider Emmels north of St. Vith.¹

Despite five days of fighting, the pain of frostbite, the growing shortage of food and ammunition, morale among the defenders remained "magnificent" as General Clarke observed while inspecting the line on a visit to the front. In the Frumerberg woods casualties had been high among machine gunners and there had been many deaths and injuries from shells that burst in the trees overhead. The gaps in the line had been filled, but now reserves were almost non-existent.²

* * * * *

Back near Poteau during the morning Warrant Officer Wallbaum, in charge of transportation for the 434th Field Artillery Battalion, embarked on a rescue mission in the area immediately southwest of Poteau where CCA had temporarily gained control of a short stretch of the highway. Here lay the seven abandoned

¹ Boyer, Narrative, loc. cit., 12; Erlenbusch, Personal Report, loc. cit.

² Research and Evaluation Division, loc. cit., 39; Annex to After Action Report, 168th, loc. cit., Dec. 21.

eight inch howitzers, in perfect condition except for damaged tires, three prime movers, a number of lighter vehicles and a supply of ammunition for the guns. Gathering all the recovery vehicles he could find in the 7th Armored Division Artillery, Wallbaum retrieved the equipment while German artillery harassed the recovery force with fire from the heights north of Poteau. Later, when one of the rescuers was congratulated for his part in the successful evacuation, he replied, "Hell, we just wanted to get it out of there so the Jerries couldn't use it against us!" The equipment was moved across the Salm River to safety and turned over to First Army Ordnance the next day.³

Also west of the Salm, the U.S. 84th Infantry Division from Ninth Army had moved into position near Marche on the right of XVIII Airborne Corps. The 82nd Airborne had pushed south toward the rear of the St. Vith salient, providing a slender contact with 7th Armored Division at the Salm River bridge in Vielsalm. To prevent 7th Armored's supply force from being overrun, Division Trains were moved back through the 84th Division to the vicinity of Harze, for at this time the enemy was in strength well west of Houffalize southwest of the salient.⁴

At the front, southeast of St. Vith, enemy artillery started pouring in upon Captain Britton's B Company, 23rd Armored Infantry, at 11 A.M. The pounding lasted for fifteen minutes, then

³ O.W. Martin, Report, loc. cit.; After Action Report, HQ, 7th Armored Division Artillery, Recovery of Guns.

⁴ Office of Tactical Investigation, loc. cit., 11, 13; Hasbrouck, op. cit., 33, 34.

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⁴ Office of Tactical Investigation, loc. cit., 11, 13; Hasbrouck, op. cit., 33, 34.

German infantry attacked from the direction of Breitfeld. By noon A/23rd and B/38th were bearing the full brunt of an infantry attack coming in along the Schonberg highway. Within the next hour Fuller's entire eastern task force was embroiled with the enemy.⁵

Starting at 1 P.M. the Germans raked the entire northern sector with artillery fire for over an hour, then pushed an attack down the Ambleve-St. Vith highway, striking at the area of B Company, 31st Tank Battalion. The enemy force consisted of about eight tanks and an estimated infantry regiment (1500 men), supported by artillery and Nebelwerfer fire from the vicinity of Wallerode. In just ten minutes, five B Company tanks were put out of action. The uninjured crewmen of the three remaining tanks sprang from their turrets, seized rifles from dead and wounded soldiers, and joined the defense line of B Company, 33rd Armored Engineers. To counter this enemy thrust, C Company, 31st Tank Battalion, the troubleshooters, with eight tanks moved to the area of A/38 and poured a murderous fire into the flank of the enemy drive. At the same time, C Company's Sergeant Blair, with four tanks, moved up to the north edge of St. Vith to be prepared to meet the enemy attack head on. However, the enemy thrust lost its momentum, and the Germans were soon forced back toward Potesau.⁶

This was the beginning of the enemy's all-out assault, one

⁵ Boyer, Narrative, loc. cit., 12.

⁶ Erlenbusch, Personal Report, loc. cit.; Boyer, Narrative, loc. cit., 12.

that would converge on St. Vith from the north, south, and east, with the decisive blow coming in from along the meadow road from Schonberg. At the headquarters of CCB in Erosbach, as word of continuous fighting arrived during the day, staff members reported that they could feel the pressure mounting, and General Clarke ordered that a woods road from Commanster to Vielsalm be readied for the withdrawal in case St. Vith fell.⁷

At 11:50 a patrol from Troop B, 87th Cavalry returned with information that an estimated battalion of infantry was advancing two companies abreast along the Schonberg road. At noon heavy automatic and semi-automatic weapons fire broke out on the left along the front of Foster's A/23rd and Higgins' B/38. Against Foster and Lt. Jamiel's left platoon of B Company, the enemy infantry assaulted repeatedly, employing numerous Panzerfausts in an unsuccessful attempt to score a breakthrough. During this series of attacks, lasting until 1:15 P.M., Lt. Van Fradenburg's right platoon of B/38 and B/87th were only lightly engaged.⁸

From 1:30 P.M. to 3:10 B/87 and the entire B/38 were under assault by two battalions of enemy infantry, each battalion attacking on a narrow front, with two companies abreast.

The Krauts kept boring in, no matter how fast we decimated their assault squads. As fast as we would repel one assault, another would return. All machine

⁷ Boyer, Narrative, loc. cit., 12; Harberough, loc. cit.

⁸ Boyer, Narrative, loc. cit., 13.

guns were employing swinging traverse and taking a deadly toll. But again and again there was a flare of flame and smoke (the explosion could not be heard because of the general din) as some Kraut got in close enough to heave a grenade into a machine gun crew or to launch a dread Panzerfaust.

One caliber .50 squad, which hitherto had been dishing out a deadly hail of fire all along the front, was hit by a Panzerfaust which struck the barrel halfway between the breech and the muzzle. The gunner fell forward on the gun with half his face torn off; the loader had his left arm torn off at the shoulder and was practically decapitated, while the gun commander was tossed about fifteen feet away from the gun to lie there quite still.⁹

For the present, the enemy was unable to score a breakthrough, and at mid-afternoon he withdrew. There was now a lull, during which the defense lines were readjusted and ammunition was redistributed. Higgins requested Major Boyer to commit F Platoon, 423rd Infantry, but that unit had already gone into action in the sector of A Company, 23rd Armored Infantry. For the eastern defense, there were no more reserves.¹⁰

The enemy had been pouring in on other portions of the St. Vith salient. About 300 German infantrymen swarmed across the road between Poteau and Rodt and advanced against the gun positions of the 275th Field Artillery Battalion at Hinderhausen. To repel this attack the artillerymen fired their guns at point-blank range with fuses set at zero, and at dusk Lt. Barnhill's eight tank platoon of F/87th moved in firing cannister rounds. Although the attackers were dispersed, they still constituted a threat within the horseshoe west of St. Vith.¹¹

⁹ Col. Thomas J. Higgins, Personal Report, loaned to the author.

⁹ Boyer, Narrative, loc. cit., 13.

¹⁰ Boyer, Narrative, loc. cit., 14; Erlenbusch, Personal Report, loc. cit.

¹¹ Boylan, loc. cit.

Below St. Vith the enemy was attempting to drive a wedge between General Hoge's CCB, 9th Armored and CCB of the 7th Armored. During the morning, the enemy penetrated Hoge's line and advanced down the draw between Galhausen and Neubruck almost to Hoge's CP. A hastily gathered force of clerks, cooks and communication personnel, supported by the direct fire of Battery B, 482 Armored Field Artillery Battalion, drove back the attackers. Hoge then moved his CP, which had been subjected to heavy shelling, back to Braunluf. As the attacks up north increased in tempo, the Germans began pushing in along the St. Vith Steinebruck road. By 4 P.M. the 27th Armored Infantry was heavily embroiled in an attempt to protect the junction between CCB/7th Armored and CCB/9th Armored. Further south the 424th and 112th Infantry Regiments were having a relatively quiet time, despite constant probing by enemy patrols.¹²

About 4 P.M. the eastern front again erupted in flame. The action that followed in the area of B/38 was described by Major Boyer:¹³

"Screaming Meemie" batteries go off to our front, and for some reason I knew they were coming in on us. I remember yelling, "Down!" and as we slid into our

¹² Hasbrouck, op. cit., 39, 40; Hoge, Personal Report, loc. cit., 9, 10.

¹³ Col. Thomas J. Riggs, Personal Report, loaned to the author. During a personal interview with Col. Riggs, who was at the scene of the action described by Boyer, the author determined that the reports of the two officers were in accord on all important details of the action.

holes, in came the worst hail of steel and screaming metal that I have ever seen or heard. Back and forth, right and left, then back and forth again, across our positions came the crushing, thumping, tearing scream of steel followed by steel. Huge gashes were out in the logs over our holes, and all around us we could hear the crash and ripping of tree tops and even of trees as the merciless hail of steel swept and lashed through the forest.

Again and again we heard the anguished scream of some man somewhere who had been hit, yet we could only cower in our holes hoping we wouldn't get a direct hit. It seemed as if our nerves were being torn out by the roots in the increasing waves of hideous sound.

Artillery added its din to the heavy "screaming meemie" barrages -- switching back and forth along the front and then converging on the center of the line in the vicinity of the Schonberg Raod.

At 1619 (4:19) I could see German infantry starting to come through the woods - running a few paces, hitting the ground, then getting up to run again. This is what I expected. They would try to charge through our positions as the barrage was lifted at th last minute and before we could recover from the stunning shock. As I called, "Heads Up!" almost simultaneously the awful hail of steel was lifted from us and moved to the woods in our rear.

4:20 - 5 P.M. - This attack followed the same pattern as two earlier ones, except that there was close support from tanks and assault guns. We slaughtered the attacking echelons, and very few managed to cross the logging road in front of our positions, but 'Jerry' kept boring in. Still he could not break through.

One assault gun got within ten yards of our lines, but was left a burning hulk by a beautiful deflection bazooka shot through its side armor - and in front of B/38 a Panther was destroyed on the logging road when one soldier with a bazooka climbed out of his hole, ran forward, and pressing his tube against the fenderline, pulled the trigger. As he fired, he slumped to the ground dead.¹⁴

Shortly after five there was a lull in the battle. A torrent of fire, 88's, Nebelwerfer, field artillery and mortar had poured in upon the eastern line. During the barrage, the supporting artillery engaged in counter battery fire, with Lt.

¹⁴ Boyer, Narrative, loc. cit., 15.

Shanahan, Forward to the 275th, "calling the shots" over his radio from an advanced position in the area of B/38. Colonel Fuller, the task force commander, having left in the afternoon for GCB headquarters at Krombach to obtain orders personally, Colonel Riggs had assumed command. On receipt of word by radio that the 275th had exhausted its ammunition, Riggs released that unit from its support role.¹⁵

The "hold your ground" order remained, but the defense was weakening. Gaps were appearing in the lines and there were no men to fill them. Earlier Riggs had rounded up a small group of stragglers near the forward CP and personally led them up the hill. The original units of the task force, particularly the engineer companies and B/87th, were more than 50% depleted by casualties. Medical orderlies did what they could as screams and cries of wounded could be heard in increasing numbers. The casualty toll among machine gunners had been appalling, but always men moved in to take the places of the victims. Communications to the rear and with flank units were failing badly as a result of the barrages.¹⁶

At 5:15 mortar fire started clumping into the woods

¹⁵ Boyer, Narrative, loc. cit., 15; Riggs, loc. cit., 8. Practically all St. Vith unit and personal reports sing the praises of this valiant artillery outfit. In our conversation, Riggs stated that he believed the action of the 275th probably misled the Germans into thinking that the Americans had greater strength at St. Vith than was the case. Boyer on p. 15 states that the 275th probably prevented a quick seizure of St. Vith.

¹⁶ Boyer, Narrative, loc. cit., 12, 15; Riggs, loc. cit., 8; Hechler Interview, loc. cit.

around us, and once more we could hear the "burp-burp-burp"¹⁷ as they opened up with assault fire about 150-175 yards in front of us. As they moved in we could hear the guttural voices of their Feldwebels as they "talked it up" among their squads. This assault was aimed at Jamiel's platoon (B/38) in an attempt to open up one side of the Schonberg Road.

By 5:35, heavy tank fire could be heard above the small arms fire fight to our left. Higgins called over the radio with tears in his voice asking where the tank destroyers were. I tried to relay this situation to Fuller, but the line was cut - both radio and phone with Forward CP were out. I reached Riggs through Holland's phone and called for TD's.¹⁸

At 6:05, Jamiel reported that the tank section from A/31 which had been covering the Schonberg Road either had been knocked out or withdrawn. Two Panthers were shelling his foxholes systematically, one hole after the other with direct fire. One Panther was knocked out and the other withdrew along with the infantry.¹⁹

Soon after 7 P.M. another awesome artillery and "screaming meemie" barrage -- the heaviest yet -- fell along the entire St. Vith defense line from north to south. By 8 o'clock B/87 and B/23rd had sent frantic messages: the enemy had infiltrated their positions. At 8:35 Jamiel called over his radio, in a voice choked with emotion: "God Damn It - they've got two heavy tanks here on the crest, and they're blasting my men out of their holes one at a time! They're all gone, and the same thing has happened on the other side of the road. Damn It

17 This a reference to the distinctive sound of machine pistols used by German assault troops.

18 According to Riggs, there were no TD's available to him at this time - they had been placed on the flanks. In the Hechler interview, Colonel Nungesser reported that about this time one of the American tanks was knocked out and three others withdrew in a hurry.

19 Boyer, Narrative, loc. cit., 15.

can't you do something to stop 'em?"²⁰

About the same time A/31 reported that German tanks and infantry were coming in along the Schonberg road. Again Sgt. Blair's composite platoon, posted north of town, was called upon to meet this new enemy penetration. As Blair's platoon moved out the Schonberg road, about 1000 yards east of St. Vith the four tanks reached the road fork near the Engineer CP at Prumerberg where they were ordered to hold to protect the withdrawal of B/23 and A/31. At this juncture of the battle, the enemy tank-infantry teams advanced with smooth cooperation. A tank would fire a flare whereupon the accompanying infantry opened fire with machine pistols and rifles. As the light faded, the infantry dropped to the ground, and the tank fired with all its weapons. Then the maneuver was repeated.²¹

Suddenly a flare burst in the air behind Blair's position. The intense light blinded the crewmen, and silhouetted the four American medium tanks. There was a vicious exchange of tank fire at point-blank range. A huge Tiger rushed straight at Blair's command tank, rammed it, and turned it over. Miraculously Blair himself was uninjured. He scrambled from the wreckage and found that all four of his Shermans were burning. Later, with twelve of his men who were still alive, Sgt. Blair made his escape on foot by way of a railroad cut to Krombach.²²

²⁰ Boyer, Narrative, loc. cit., 16; Erlenbusch, Personal Report, loc. cit.

²¹ Ibid.; Letter from General Manteuffel; Hechler Interview, loc. cit.

²² Erlenbusch, Personal Report, loc. cit.; Riggs Interview.

It was now 10 P.M. From his position with remnants of B/38 in the woods to the right of the Schonberg road, Major Donald Boyer could hear German armor clattering and creaking down the road to the Forward CP. B Company placed mortar and machine gun fire on the road in an attempt to disperse the enemy infantry following the tanks. Soon German dead lined the ditches on both sides of the road, but the enemy kept pressing forward, taking a heavy toll of machine gunners and bazooka men who harassed them from the woods south of the road.²³

Tiger tanks were now firing at point-blank range into the "Beer Garden", the stone building that for five days had served as Colonel Riggs' forward CP. Colonel Riggs worked his way back up the hill where he told Boyer that the CP had been wiped out. Lt. Higgins had sent out a patrol to find A/23 and A/38 but the men had failed to make contact. They reported that Jamiel's entire platoon had been wiped out.²⁴ Boyer also learned that at least six tanks, including four Tigers, were now in St. Vith, and columns of German infantry were pouring into town along the Schonberg road.²⁵

Task Force Boyer was now alone on its wooded hill one mile east of St. Vith. Using Lt. Shanahan's radio net, Riggs and Boyer reported to General Clarke: "Road cut. At least eight heavy tanks and infantry in town. What are our orders?"

²³ Boyer, Narrative, loc. cit., 12, 16, 17.

²⁴ Lt. Jamiel made his escape.

²⁵ Boyer, Narrative, loc. cit., 18; Riggs Interview; Riggs, loc. cit., 9.

About 45 minutes later came the reply: "To Riggs or Senior Officer present: Reform; save what vehicles you can; attack to the west through St. Vith; we are forming a new line west of the town."²⁶

It was close to midnight now and snow was falling heavily, muffling the sounds of fighting. In a meeting of company commanders, Higgins, Rogers and Holland reported that their men - dazed after five days without sleep and twelve hours of continuous fighting, suffering from hunger and frostbite - were in no condition to attack. Of the 670 men who had manned the line between the Schonberg and Prum roads (the Boyer Task Force plus B/23) only about 185 remained.²⁷ The rest were dead or severely wounded. By radio Rogers gained confirmation from his Maintenance Officer in St. Vith that at least 8-10 heavy German tanks were in the town.²⁸

Colonel Riggs ordered his survivors to prepare to move out to the right along the wooded ridge that ran several hundred yards to the southwest. The men were ordered to carry their personal and crew-operated weapons, but a messenger was sent to the mortar platoon of B/38 with orders for the half-tracks to be destroyed. Rogers was to order his Maintenance Officer

²⁶ Boyer, Narrative, loc. cit., 17; Riggs Interview.

²⁷ Several officers, platoon and company commanders, apparently in good health, were missing at this time. Perhaps they had left the front lines earlier on legitimate missions, but their absence was noted by their men, and suspicion remains that certain officers were negligent in their duties. Riggs Interview.

²⁸ Boyer, Narrative, loc. cit., 12, 17; Riggs Interview.

to destroy those B Troop vehicles in the St. Vith railyards that could not be evacuated. Five men of B Company were severely wounded and could not be moved. An aid man volunteered to remain with them. In the morning he would try to surrender to a German medic.²⁹

Boyer and Higgins moved out immediately along the line at the edge of the woods, to inform each platoon leader of the withdrawal plan. From foxhole to foxhole, among the remaining men of B/38, the engineers of 168th and 81st Combat Battalions, the word was quietly passed. "Let's go. We're moving out." When Boyer reached the positions of B/23, an officer of Britton's company reported that the right flank had vanished, and that the enemy controlled the Steinebruck road. For more than two hours the Germans had been pouring armor and infantry up the road into St. Vith and westward to Krombach.³⁰

Snow had been falling thickly for more than an hour. At 2 A.M. by liason radio, Colonel Riggs learned that enemy tanks had also entered St. Vith from the northwest. Behind them, through the veil of white, Riggs' men saw an eerie orange glow above the town. St. Vith had fallen.³¹

²⁹ Riggs Interview; Boyer, Narrative, loc. cit., 17, 18.

³⁰ Personal Notes; Boyer, Narrative, loc. cit., 18.

³¹ Riggs, loc. cit., 9; Personal Notes.

1. Lt. General Bruce C. Clarke, CG, 93d 7th Armored, Division
Complimentation recommending a unit citation for Troop B, 87th
Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron. Included with Personal Re-
port, Boyer, 1st. 211. Cited in Research and Evaluation
Division, 38, 39.

The End for Task Force Fuller that paral-
leled the tracks. Under fire all the way, A Company suffered
heavy losses in its withdrawal.²

When Troop B, 87th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron entered
the line east of St. Vith on December 17th the troop had a
strength of six officers and one hundred and thirty-six men.
Now, about midnight of December 21, Sgt. L. H. Ladd and forty-
six men, all that remained of Troop B, made their way back to
Commanster, the CP of CCB, 7th Armored. Unshaven, with blood-
shot eyes, lines of fatigue etched on his face, Sgt. Ladd demanded
to see General Clarke. "I wanted to get it from you personally
that Troop B was ordered out of that position we were holding,"
said Ladd. "Me 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." General Clarke assured Ladd that he had indeed issued
the order, and the sergeant, then satisfied, moved out with his
men into the snowy night to take positions in a new defense
line.¹

A Company, 31st Tank Battalion disengaged east of St. Vith
with the loss of only one tank, and withdrew through the town to
join forces with CCB, 9th Armored to the west. Captain Anstey
and his A Company, 38th Armored Infantry had refused to withdraw
without orders though Anstey knew St. Vith was occupied by the
enemy. At 1:30 A.M. A Company attacked west through the town,

¹ Brig. General Bruce C. Clarke, CO, CCB 7th Armored, Division
Communication recommending a unit citation for Troop B, 87th
Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron. Included with Personal Re-
port, Boylan, loc. cit.; Quoted in Research and Evaluation
Division, 38, 39.

passed under the railroad bridge along the road that paralleled the tracks. Under fire all the way, A Company suffered many losses in its withdrawal.² As early as the afternoon Clarke had begun to extricate his forces from a potential trap at St. Vith. On Corps order, a new perimeter defense was set up west of St. Vith and east of the Salm River. During the afternoon all administrative elements were cleared out of the St. Vith-Krombach area and placed west of Vielsalm. The north sector of the St. Vith defense was then given a plan to fall back to positions along the Hunnange-St. Vith road while the eastern sector was expected to fall back to the eastern edge of town. The pullback of troops in the north began at 8:15 P.M.³

By 8:35 it was apparent that Task Force Fuller was being completely overrun, so the force in the northern sector was given a revised order to establish a line on the high ground west of St. Vith with left flank elements on the wooded knoll 800 yards west of Hunnange and the right flank astride the St. Vith-Neundorf road.⁴

At 9:30 CCB, 9th Armored Division, lost contact with CCB, 7th Armored when enemy tanks and infantry succeeded in driving up the Winterspelt-Steinebruck road after an intensive artil-

² Erlenbusch, Personal Report, loc. cit.; Letter from Thomas K. Gilday, A Company, 38th Armored Infantry.

³ Action Against Enemy, Report After, Hq. 106th Infantry Div.; Erlenbusch, Personal Report, loc. cit.

⁴ Hasbrouck, op. cit., 39.

lery preparation. CCB 9th Armored pulled back to new positions southwest of St. Vith. A platoon of the 7th Armored's 31st Tank Battalion was then sent to maintain contact between the elements of the two combat commands.⁵

The village of Maldingen was designated as an assembly area for vehicular stragglers (armored infantry, halftracks and supply vehicles) while Krombach was designated as a straggler collecting point for troops. During the night, some 200 men of the four Armored Infantry Companies, one Reconnaissance Troop and Provisional Engineers managed to work their way back from their overrun positions east of St. Vith, but of these only about 100 were fit for further combat. The remainder had to be evacuated because of wounds, complete exhaustion, or exposure. The able-bodied were organized into a composite armored infantry company which was directed to prepare defenses 800 yards east of Krombach.⁶

During the early morning hours of December 22nd, the enemy was already probing westward from St. Vith, whereupon Task Force Lohse (units of 31st Tank Battalion and 87th Reconnaissance Squadron) was rushed from its position on CCB's northern flank to high ground east of Neundorf just in time to repulse the enemy's forward elements as they emerged west of St. Vith. By 6 A.M. CCB's line extended from Rodt east of Neundorf and

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Erlenbusch, Personal Report, loc. cit.

to the southeast of Krombach and a junction with CCB, 9th Ar-
mored.⁷ A second party was sent off, only to be intercepted as it

reached the Steinebruck road. * * * * * could be heard
clearly. A second party was released; it too was quickly cap-
tured.

On the wooded high ground southeast of St. Vith, Colonel
Riggs and his band of survivors - several officers and about
seventy-five enlisted men including some walking wounded -
filed wearily through the snow-filled forest in the pre-dawn
hours of December 22. In the thick snowfall, visibility was
poor, and each man tried as best he could to hold on to the
person ahead.

Earlier it had been decided that infiltration parties
would be formed. Groups of five-eight men were to head off
in different directions and attempt to filter back to friendly
lines. Riggs had called his non-coms together and asked them
to draw maps to aid the infiltration parties. He had also di-
rected them to bury ammunition and weapons that would not be
taken, or to render such equipment unserviceable. Already some
groups had disappeared into the night.

With the remnants of his force, Riggs worked his way west-
ward through the forest toward the Steinebruck-St. Vith road
that must be crossed for a successful escape. At one point
Riggs paused to inspect several mortar half-tracks abandoned in
a gully below the hill. He hoped to find ammunition, but there
was none.

At the western extremity of the hill overlooking the road

⁷ Hasbrouck, op. cit., 41, 42.

but still under the cover of the trees, Riggs halted. An infiltration party was sent off, only to be intercepted as it reached the Steinebruck road. German commands could be heard clearly. A second party was released; it too was quickly captured.

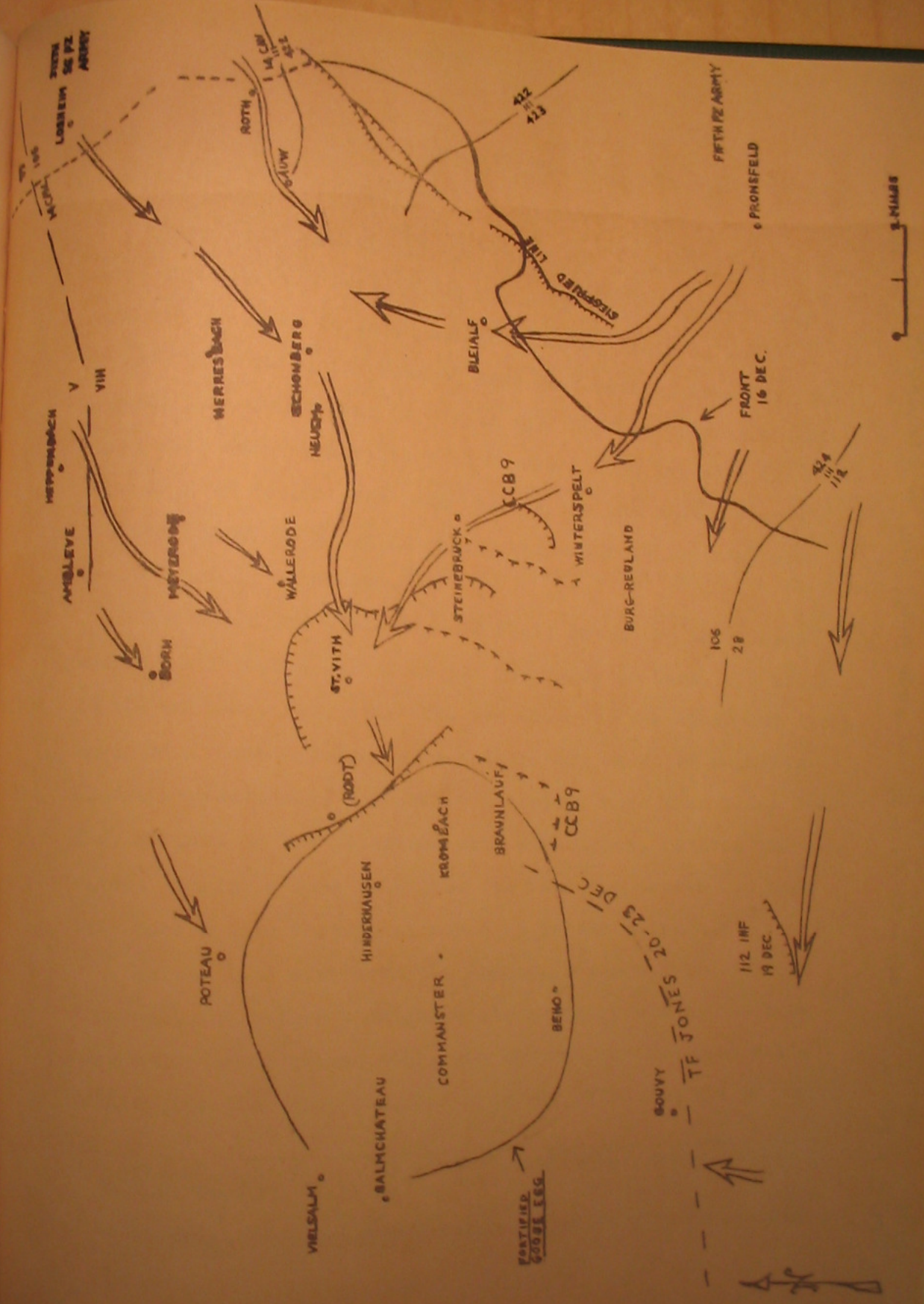
It was full daylight now. The snow had stopped, but a thick fog lapped at the base of the hill. On all sides German voices could now be heard: "Amerikaner, Alles Kaput!"

Suddenly a German soldier emerged from the fog and trudged up the hill. An over-sized helmet hung low over his face and his ill-fitting gray coat dragged in the snow. With his machine pistol ready, he ordered, "Hands OOp, Hands Oop!" Then other Germans, appearing from the fog, crept up the hill. Hesitantly the Americans lay down their weapons and raised their arms.

A huge man, Riggs looked very tired now. Like his men he had had practically no sleep for five days. Turning to his men, he said, "We're prisoners now, but remember, we're still American soldiers."

Then, holding himself very erect, Riggs led his men through knee-deep snow, down the hill, and into captivity.⁸

⁸ Riggs, Personal Report; Author's personal notes. At about this time the infiltration party of which Major Donald Boyer was a member was also taken prisoner.



Reproduced in part from map in

St Vitt. Lion in the Way, the 106th Infantry Division
in World War II, Colonel R. Ernest DuPuy

Battalion, 424th Inf. The Final Withdrawal
extending west from Hinderhausen.

German pressure on the new line west of St. Vith was renewed during the early hours of December 22. After a grim nine-hour battle, in which American cooks, drivers, and even wounded took part, the town of Rodt was snatched from the 7th Armored Division's CCA. For five days CCA had prevented the enemy from turning the flank of Clarke's CCB, but with the capture of Rodt contact was lost between the two combat commands. CCA was forced back further west, while CCB pulled back with its left on Hinderhausen.¹

The 275th and 434th Armored Field Artillery Battalions were down to about 20 rounds per gun, and, in fact, all units in the salient, including CCB, 9th Armored, the 424th and 112th Regimental Combat Teams, were desperately short of supplies. Almost miraculously, a 90-vehicle convoy, more than a day overdue, arrived in the afternoon with ammunition, rations and gasoline. During a long trip from the rear the trucks had more than once passed through ambushes by German patrols.²

In the late afternoon the Germans began a drive to take Krombach, and before midnight their infantry was in the town. Also under heavy attack, CCB, 9th Armored pivoted back while holding its link with CCB, 7th Armored. With the aid of 3rd

¹ Hasbrouck, op. cit., 42; General Hasbrouck, Letter to the Author, January 6, 1963.

² Erlenbusch, Personal Report, loc. cit.; Hasbrouck, op. cit., 42.

Battalion, 424th Infantry, CCB 9th was defending along a line extending west from Neubruck.³

On the 21st the Headquarters of the 27th Armored Infantry Battalion had taken over Hoge's former headquarters in a farmhouse at Neubruck. Nearby, the Battalion Aid Station of the 27th occupied a big stone house where the medics draped a large Red Cross flag over the front porch. On the morning of the 22nd, after receiving heavy shelling, the entire headquarters of the 27th was captured together with the aid station. Emerging from a clump of trees across the road, a twelve-man German patrol entered the aid station and ordered the American aid men to remove German wounded from the woods across the road. About a dozen German casualties, with small arms wounds in legs, arms and abdomen, were brought in and given first aid. Several ambulances and litter jeeps were parked near the house, and the Germans then asked that their wounded be transported to a German medical post. When the enemy insisted that an American officer go along, Captain Paul Russamano, the Battalion Surgeon, volunteered to accompany the American litter jeeps and German wounded to the enemy aid station. Two trips were made to the German station, after which Captain ^{Russamano} was not permitted to return to his own lines.⁴

³ Hq. 106th Division G-3 Journal, Part IV, G-3 Periodic Report: 5-31 December; Hoge, loc. cit., 10.

⁴ Hoge, loc. cit., 10; Letter from R.M. Keller, M.D., Wentzville, Mo., April 5, 1962. Dr. Keller became Battalion Surgeon of The Medical Detachment, 27th Armored Infantry when Captain Russamano was taken prisoner by the Germans on December 21, 1944.

At 3 P.M. a task force from the 14th Tank Battalion launched a counter attack, and regained the 27th Armored Infantry Battalion Headquarters and the Battalion aid station, and liberated the American personnel. The headquarters staff members of the 27th had been confined to the cellar of the farmhouse during the counter attack. After surrendering meekly, the Germans were forced to return wrist watches they had taken from Americans. The Germans in turn lost their watches. During the day, the 424th Infantry of the 106th Division was attached to CCB, 9th Armored whose CP was moved to Commanster, also CP for CCB, 7th Armored.

Hoge and Clarke were now in close contact and it was here that Hoge received from 106th Division Headquarters an overlay map that showed a defense of Commanster not unlike "Custer's Last Stand on the Little Big Horn." CCB 9th Armored, CCB 7th Armored, 112th Regimental Combat Team and 424th Infantry Regiment, and several miscellaneous units were all shown in a circle on the high ground enclosing Commanster.⁵

Under continuous enemy attack all along its front during the 22nd, Hoge's CCB had become fragmented. Small task forces, generally a tank company and an infantry company, with artillery support fire from 16th Armored Field Artillery Battalion and B Battery, 482nd Anti-Aircraft Artillery Battalion, had been driven slowly apart and pushed into the Commanster area.⁶

⁵ Hoge, loc. cit., 11.

⁶ Hoge, loc. cit., 12, 13.

The American salient east of the Salm River had now been pressed into the shape of an oval, which became known as the "Fortified Goose Egg." Within the reorganized defensive shell, extending about seven miles eastward from Vielsalm and about six miles in deepest north-south width, were troops of CGC, 9th Armored, the 112th and 424th Regimental Combat Teams, the 275th Armored Field Artillery and 965th Field Artillery Battalion and a few Provisional Engineers plus all remaining elements of the 7th Armored Division. For this force of about 20,000 Americans, there was only one certain supply route, a secondary road leading west from Vielsalm.⁷

In the evening, at Hasbrouck's headquarters in Vielsalm, General Ridgway, the commander of XVIII Airborne Corps, acting on instructions from Field Marshall Montgomery, issued verbal orders for the withdrawal of all forces east of the Salm to positions behind 82nd Airborne.⁸ Hasbrouck was made commander of all troops within the "Goose Egg," and General Hoge was appointed his deputy. The overworked 106th Division Commander, General Jones, who had just been appointed Ridgway's Assistant Corps Commander, suffered a heart attack and had to be hospitalized. Jones' Assistant Commander, General Ferrin, was put in charge of the badly-depleted Division.⁹

⁷ Hasbrouck, op. cit., 44; Dupuy, op. cit., 172.

⁸ In Struggle For Europe, p. 596, Wilmot states that early on the 22nd, Ridgway ordered Hasbrouck to continue the fight east of the Salm. Hasbrouck's reply was that in this case there would be "no more 7th Armored Division." At this point Montgomery intervened and directed that Hasbrouck should pull back.

⁹ Hasbrouck, op. cit., 44; Dupuy, op. cit., 172-74.

On receipt of Montgomery's message reading: "You have accomplished your mission - a mission well done. It is time to withdraw,"¹⁰ Hasbrouck, the proficient mover of men in battle, was ready and so too was General Clarke. The Division Commander had prepared a plan of withdrawal as early as the 19th, while his subordinate, General Clarke, had selected one escape route, that of Hinderhausen-Commanster-Vielsalm. Engineers had been put to work on this five-mile stretch of narrow forest road, but much of it was still in poor condition. Providentially, on the night of the 22-23rd, the road froze solid, providing an exit for the tanks and heavy guns as well as troops.¹¹

Because German patrols prowled within the lines, Hasbrouck issued withdrawal orders verbally to his liaison officers who passed the information during the night to all units in the Goose Egg. H Hour was set for 6 A.M., and three routes were designated for the withdrawal: (A) Petit Thier-Ville Du Bois-Vielsalm (B) Hinderhausen-Commanster-Vielsalm (C) Beho-Salmchatuea. Only two bridges across the Salm, one at Vielsalm and a second at Salmchatuea, were available to support some 20,000¹² troops and their material.¹³

The 7th Armored Division's artillery commander, Colonel O.W. Martin, said the withdrawal operation was like "squeezing a huge lemon."¹⁴ One war correspondent compared the movement

¹⁰ Research and Evaluation Division, loc. cit., 32.

¹¹ Hq. 106th Infantry Division, G-3 Journal, Part III; Research and Evaluation Division, loc. cit., 30, 34.

¹² Dupuy, op. cit., 174; Colonel Dupuy sets the number at 22,000.

¹³ Hasbrouck, op. cit., 44, 45, 49.

¹⁴ O.W. Martin, Report, loc. cit.

to a game of checkers. The artillery battalions were switched from position to position, like pieces on a checker board, so as to provide continuous fire support and prevent the enemy from falling on the rear of the retreating columns. In this most difficult of military maneuvers, a daylight withdrawal, order and discipline were essential.¹⁵

Two artillery battalions, the 965th and the 275th, exited during the night, to the Salm's west bank within the lines of the 82nd Airborne, in front of which (near Salmchateau) the enemy was building up his strength. The 434th Armored Field Artillery remained in place temporarily to provide support for CCB's covering force, Task Force Boylan, consisting of a medium tank company, a tank destroyer company and an infantry company, ordered to hold a screen at Hinderhausen.¹⁶

At H Hour, Hoge's CCB, 9th Armored was heavily engaged, but Hoge received a message from Hasbrouck ordering that the withdrawal be initiated at once, as further delay would place the entire operation in jeopardy. Drastic measures were required, so Hoge opened his radio net and issued orders for the withdrawal in the clear. All trains and supply vehicles were to move out at once via Beho-Salmchateau-Sart to Manhay. Combat units were to withdraw in echelon, from the north and east first. As its turn came in the column each unit would establish the rear guard until it uncovered the succeeding unit. The 16th

¹⁵ "With the 7th Armored Division", loc. cit.

¹⁶ Research and Evaluation Division, loc. cit., 34.

Armored Field Artillery Battalion was assigned to cover the withdrawal from its present positions and later to displace successively by battery as the withdrawal progressed.¹⁷

By 7 A.M., CCB, 9th Armored had disengaged and was making its way west with infantrymen of the 106th Division's 424th Infantry Regiment clinging to the tanks, as many as fourteen men to a single tank, "like flies to a lump of sugar."¹⁸ And for the first time since December 17th, a benevolent sun shown in a clear sky while Allied bombers and fighters droned overhead.¹⁹

CCB, 7th Armored evacuated its troops south of Krombach by way of Beho and Vielsalm, while Clarke's forces north of Krombach used the Hinderhausen-Sommanster-Vielsalm route, a road so narrow that to prevent delays Clarke ordered disabled vehicles to be pushed to the side and abandoned. The 434th Armored Field Artillery Battalion, displacing battery by battery in order to continue its fire support, came out just ahead of Boylan's covering force which pulled back under heavy pressure.²⁰

Starting at 3:30 P.M. CCA began its withdrawal through CCR's position near Petit-Thier, covered by the fire of 489th Armored Field Artillery Battalion. CCR then made its getaway.²¹

¹⁷ Hoge, loc. cit., 13.

¹⁸ "With the 7th Armored Division", loc. cit.

¹⁹ Hasbrouck, op. cit., 45.

²⁰ Research and Evaluation Division, loc. cit., 34.

²¹ Hasbrouck, op. cit., 46.

As the south flank covering force, Task Force Jones played perhaps the most important role of any unit in the Goose Egg during the mass exodus. From its positions near Beho at 2:30 Task Force Jones began leapfrogging, unit by unit, in the direction of Salmchateau, a few hundred yards south of which two light tanks were knocked out by an enemy ambush. Recolling to a point about a mile and a half south of Salmchateau, Task Force Jones lost four tank destroyers, a medium tank, two towed guns and other vehicles when an enemy tank attack hit the column in the rear. Part of the Task Force escaped (despite another ambush) over an alternate crossing of the Salm at St. Marie, south of Salmchateau, while the remainder fought their way to safety by way of Salmchateau. Task Force Jones' fire support, the 440th Armored Field Artillery Battalion, having departed earlier, found its way barred at the bridge in Salmchateau. With machine guns blazing, the armored artillery column ran a gauntlet of small arms fire, and the battalion proceeded to the Vielsalm bridge where they regained friendly territory.²²

Providing the final covering protection, Colonel Nelson's 112th Infantry Regiment, now so distantly removed from its parent 28th Division, had been deployed on the high ground just east of the Salm. The 112th was the barn door which was to be slammed in the face of the enemy when all other friendly forces had withdrawn. Nelson had been under strict orders not to pull back until directed to do so by Hasbrouck, but by afternoon it appeared to Nelson that all other friendly troops were west of

²² Hasbrouck, *op. cit.*, 47, 48; Dupuy, *op. cit.*, 182.

the Salm. His 1st Battalion had become hotly engaged with enemy tanks and infantry that had moved west on the heels of CCB, 9th Armored. After repeatedly trying to reach 7th Armored Division Headquarters by radio but without success, Nelson decided to get out. His 2nd Battalion got over the Salm at Vielsalm, but Nelson, with regimental headquarters and the 1st Battalion, at 4:30 found the Salmchateau-Vielsalm road clogged by elements of Task Force Jones and other outfits forced north from Salmchateau when that exit was found to be in enemy hands. It was dark and Nelson's men were verging on panic as vehicles in the stalled column flamed under German 88 fire. Finding a side road, Nelson extricated his column and pressed on in clear moonlight to a crossing of the Salm by way of a frozen swamp. Only eighteen vehicles out of several hundred in the 112th were lost.²³

Up at Vielsalm on the east bank of the Salm enemy armor was already poking into town. As General Hasbrouck left his CP, a German tank rounded a corner and blazed at the Division radio halftrack and two jeeps parked in front of the building. The halftrack was destroyed but Hasbrouck and his men made their escape in the jeeps. Later, on Division order, the bridge at Vielsalm was destroyed, and by midnight the last units from the Fortified Goose Egg had reached new assembly areas west of the Salm River.²⁴

On this clear night many miles to the east, Colonel Thomas

²³ Dupuy, op. cit., 180, 181; Hasbrouck, op. cit., 48.

²⁴ Dupuy, op. cit., 182; Hasbrouck, op. cit., 50.

Riggs, Major Don Boyer and scores of other Americans were marching toward the Rhine with an escort of German guards.²⁵

²⁵ Estimated American losses in the Defense of St. Vith for the period 16-23 December, 1944:

In his Personal Report, p. 16, General Hoge estimated that losses of CCB, 9th Armored were "considerable in both men and vehicles. The losses among officers were particularly heavy, so that by the time we got back to the 82nd Division, the infantry companies, engineer company and reconnaissance company were reduced generally to one officer each. The tanks and artillery were not so severely hit. Several staff officers were lost. The casualties in the 27th Armored Infantry Battalion, Engineer and Reconnaissance Company amounted to between 20 and 25 percent, with fewer losses in the Tanks and Artillery. Approximately ten tanks were lost and twenty supply vehicles, together with several command and communications vehicles."

For the 7th Armored Division, according to General Hasbrouck, The Seventh Armored Division in the Battle of St. Vith, p. 54: 228 men were Killed in Action, 642 Wounded in Action, 167 Missing in Action, about 120 of whom were believed to have been prisoners of war. The Seventh Armored Division sent 11, 976 men into action at St. Vith. CCB, 9th Armored Division entered the battle with about 2700 men.

The 106th Division had on December 16 a strength of 8,490 men. Estimated losses to the end of the month were 415 killed, 1254 wounded and 6821 missing, with most of the latter taken prisoner. From the Report After Action Against Enemy, 106th Division for December, 1944.

roads, and as a result of these full-scale air operations, enemy losses during the day from the air were estimated to be the greatest since the Mortain pocket in France the previous summer. According to Manteuffel the Germans lost a "terrible percentage" of their armor and elements of the Luftwaffe. Manteuffel concluded that the air raids signaled the end of the German offensive.

¹ Hoge, pp. 15-16.
² Hasbrouck, pp. 54-55.
³ Manteuffel, pp. 103-104; Manteuffel, pp. 103-104.
⁴ Office of Special Investigation, pp. 11-12, 14, 15; Manteuffel, pp. 11-12, 14; Manteuffel, pp. 11-12, 14.

Also from the air. After St. Vith desperately needed supplies were successfully parachuted into beleaguered Bastogne, where on the 22nd the American commander, Brigadier General Anthony McAuliffe, had replied to a German demand for surrender with the famous "I am a American." The withdrawal from the St. Vith salient was completed with few losses and "almost mechanical precision."¹ A large measure of credit for the success of this operation belonged to the Allied air forces who provided air support during the withdrawal.²

In fact, on December 23rd, for the first time in the Battle of the Ardennes, the enemy felt the power of Allied air might. Over two thousand Allied planes roared into action against enemy troops, vehicles and lines of communication. The German General Blumentritt reported, "Allied air forces laid down a blanket of bombs behind the German front which paralyzed the movement of already inadequate supplies and reinforcements."³

The air attacks were especially heavy against enemy columns moving north on the Bastogne-Houffalize and the Noville-Houffalize roads, and as a result of these full-scale air operations, enemy losses during the day from the air were estimated to be the greatest since the Mortain pocket in France the previous summer. According to Manteuffel the Germans took a "terrible pummeling," and Blumentritt concluded that the air raids signaled the end of the German offensive.⁴

¹ Hoge, loc. cit., 16.

² Hasbrouck, op. cit., 49.

³ Merriam, op. cit., 193; Blumentritt, loc. cit., 22.

⁴ Office of Tactical Investigation, loc. cit., 14, 18; Hart, op. cit., 241; Blumentritt, loc. cit., 22.

Also from the air on this day, badly needed supplies were successfully parachuted into beleaguered Bastogne, where on the 22nd the American commander, Brigadier General Anthony McAuliffe, had replied to a German surrender demand with a single word: "Nuts!" Against this staunch center of resistance, Manteuffel was forced to employ elements of his attacking units to enclose the town, thereby weakening the forward thrust of Fifth Panzer Army. Then too, the weak German Seventh Army, bereft of tanks, had been unable to block the approach roads from the south on 5 Panzer Army's left flank. The menacing pressure of Patton's III Corps (80th, 26th and 4th Armored Divisions), grinding slowly northward toward Bastogne, caused increasing subtraction of strength from Manteuffel's 5 Panzer. However, on the 24th, a battle group of the 2nd Panzer Division, having bypassed Bastogne, approached the Meuse at Dinant. Here the enemy force was met and repulsed by the 29th Armoured Brigade of XXX Corps (British), which Montgomery had posted along the river on the 20th.⁵

Knowing that they had no chance of reaching Antwerp and little of crossing the Meuse, Model and Manteuffel presented a revised plan to Hitler on December 24, but the Fuhrer would not permit a withdrawal. On December 26, Patton's III Corps gained a tenuous contact with the garrison at Bastogne, although it was after this date that the really hard fight developed around the town. By January 1, 1945, eight German divisions were involved in the Bastogne area, and though the enemy persisted in

⁵ Wilmot, *op. cit.*, 599; Manteuffel, *op. cit.*, 540; Blumentritt, *loc. cit.*, 22; Hart, *op. cit.*, 241; Office of Tactical Investigation, *loc. cit.*, 17.

its attacks until January 3rd, the town did not fall.⁶ In the XVIII Corps sector of the German penetration, furious fighting had begun even before the elimination of the "Fortified Goose Egg." On the 20th, 2 SS Panzer Division slipped south from its position behind 6 Panzer Army and crept up behind the St. Vith salient. On the 22nd 2 SS Panzer struck at 82nd Airborne's vulnerable right flank extending back from Vielsalm. At the same time, 82nd Airborne's Salm River line running north from Vielsalm was beset by 9 SS panzer which was also in action against the north shoulder of the St. Vith salient.⁷

In concert with U.S. 30th Division, a regiment of Gavin's paratroopers were already hotly engaged against Peiper's Kampfgruppe, fighting like caged tigers to extricate themselves from their trap in the canyons of the Ambleve. His cause now hopeless, Peiper received on December 23 a radio order to abandon equipment and escape on foot. At 3 A.M. of the 24th, with about 800 of his original force of 2000, Peiper began marching toward the east. Abandoned in the Ambleve valley behind them were 39 tanks, 70 half-tracks, 33 guns and 30 supply trucks.⁸

Also thwarted in his attempt to achieve a breakout was Otto Skorzeny, leader of Operation Greif. In the first days of the breakthrough, Skorzeny had released a few jeeploads of

⁶ Wilmot, op. cit., 599, 600; Manteuffel, op. cit., 540; Office of Tactical Investigation, loc. cit., 21.

⁷ Merriam, op. cit., 149.

⁸ Wilmot, op. cit., 594.

volunteers, but the bulk of 150 Panzer Brigade had been stalled behind the columns of 1 SS Panzer. On December 21st, the Brigade was committed to an unsuccessful attack at Malmedy. After a single day in action, 150 Panzer Brigade was withdrawn to a defensive position south of town. On December 29 Skorzeny returned to Germany and the unit was disbanded. Such was the inglorious end of Operation Greif.⁹

On December 23rd, Ridgway's XVIII Airborne Corps, extending from Malmedy to Marche, became engaged in "a grim battle for existence." The action became further intensified when on Christmas Eve the enemy launched a vigorous attack along the Bastogne-Liege road toward Manhay, now defended by the battle-weary 7th Armored Division. But General Hodges, First U.S. Army commander, had been concentrating reserves behind the 30th Division since December 22nd, so when the 7th Armored was pushed out of Manhay, reinforcements were ready to meet the German advance. After three days of intense fighting, the

⁹ Merriam, *op. cit.*, 165. The psychological successes of Operation Greif should be recognized however. When the first jeep load of Skorzeny men in American uniforms was captured, the news travelled quickly, spreading a wave of suspicion and fear behind Allied lines. Allied sentries became doubly alert, sometimes going to ridiculous extremes to establish the identity of suspect personnel. On p. 225 of Dark December, Merriam writes, "It was all a hoax, yet hundreds and thousands of Allied soldiers were put on guard, roadblocks were hastily manned throughout the entire Allied rear area, Eisenhower was given a double, while he, himself, virtually became a prisoner in his own headquarters."

However, at least one historian was of the opinion that there was indeed a Skorzeny plan to do away with Eisenhower. Shulman, *op. cit.*

For an interesting account of Operation Greif and the exploits of Otto Skorzeny, see Charles Foley, Commando Extraordinary (New York, 1955).

line war restored.¹⁰

By Christmas Eve, General Manteuffel had been convinced that the German offensive had failed. The most he could hope to do was reach the Meuse. In the days ahead "the attacker will be attacked" was his grim notation.¹¹ "By Christmas day the Germans had already lost about 10,000 men as prisoners and at least that much again in dead and wounded. They had by this time committed almost all reserves and had begun to feel Allied air might."¹²

Between the 23rd and 27th of December, the Allied fighter planes attacked troops, vehicles and lines of communication while bombers of U.S. Eighth Air Force roared over to shatter roads, railroads and bridges behind the German lines. On December 26, German-occupied St. Vith was devastated: 1700 tons of bombs reduced it to a ghost town around which traffic had to be routed through fields and pastures.¹³

Nineteen days after the start of the Battle of the Bulge, on January 3, the U.S. First Army went over to the offensive with VII Corps leading the way. In the zero weather, snow was often waist deep, and roads were icy.¹⁴

The First Army advance was slow, and the fighting, as well as the weather, was bitter. However, by January 8, Hitler had

¹⁰ Merriam, *op. cit.*, 167, 168, 173, 174.

¹¹ Manteuffel, *op. cit.*, 540.

¹² Shulman, *op. cit.*, 245.

¹³ Merriam, *op. cit.*, 193, 213.

¹⁴ Eisenhower, *op. cit.*, 363.

authorized Model to give up the area west of Houffalize and eight days later patrols from First and Third Armies met at Houffalize.¹⁵

In the January 24, 1945 European edition of the American Army daily, The Stars and Stripes, the following item appeared:

With First Army, Jan. 23 - St. Vith, the Germans' last stronghold of any consequence on the 1st Army's sector of what was once a 'bulge,' was recaptured today by the 7th Armored Division. Tanks and armored infantry drove 100 yards into the key road hub early in the afternoon. After a house-to-house battle which lasted 3 hours and 45 minutes, the force under Brigadier General Bruce C. Clarke, of Syracuse, N.Y., had cleared it of the enemy.

One month after it had been kicked out, the 7th Armored was back in St. Vith.

By early February, the Germans were back behind their West Wall, along nearly the entire front, and Field Marshall Montgomery had released U.S. First Army for return to General Bradley's control.¹⁶

In their daring Ardennes gamble, the Germans had paid heavily. They had suffered about 120,000 serious casualties, and about 50,000 Germans had been captured. Six hundred German tanks and assault guns had been destroyed, and "deep disillusionment set in among the troops."¹⁷ In turn the Germans had exacted a fearful price: Allied losses were calculated at a total of 77,000 men, 8000 killed, 48,000 wounded and

¹⁵ Wilmot, op. cit., 608; Merriam, op. cit., 207.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Shulman, op. cit., 248.

21,000 captured. Another gain for the Germans, if it could be called that: they had set the Allied time table back by about six weeks.¹⁸

In the opinion of Manteuffel, Hitler had sacrificed the bulk of his main forces west of the Rhine River and Germany's chances of any further resistance were wrecked. Field Marshall von Rundstedt referred to the Battle of the Bulge as "Stalin-grad No. 2."¹⁹

18 Eisenhower, op. cit., 364, 365; Shulman, op. cit., 248.

19 Hart, op. cit., 242.

St. Vith had been a primary objective of Manteuffel's 5 Panzer Army. According to the operation plan, St. Vith was to be utilized as a communication center. "It was as important a point in its sector as was Bastogne on the Army's left flank," Manteuffel later revealed. The Germans had planned to seize St. Vith in the first twenty-four hours of the offensive, and because they expected to gain it with hardly a fight, General Lucht's comparatively weak LXVI Corps was assigned to capture St. Vith. In Harrison's Dark December, p. 154, Manteuffel is quoted as saying "I wanted to have St. Vith on December 17. Although I had expected Bastogne to be defended, I did not think the Americans would be able to defend St. Vith." Although the enemy very nearly succeeded in gaining the town on the afternoon of December 17, 1944, St. Vith was a center of resistance for five days, splitting the German effort

¹ Quoted in Office of Technical Investigation, 192-111-1, Appendix F.

² Freidig and Richardson, eds., 22-111-1, 236.

The Defense of St. Vith in Retrospect
St. Vith had contributed to the disruption of the German offensive
a broad front. More important perhaps, the American stand at
St. Vith had contributed to the disruption of the German offensive
During an interview on July 20, 1945, Field Marshall Keitel and Colonel-General Jodl, generals who had helped Hitler plan and direct the Ardennes offensive, were asked to account for the failure of the campaign. Prominent among their reasons for the lack of success was the fact that the Germans had met "Tougher resistance than expected of, in themselves, weak U.S. troops, especially in St. Vith."¹ As a focal point of five good roads and three railroads, St. Vith had been a primary objective of Manteuffel's 5 Panzer Army. According to the operation plan, St. Vith was to be utilized as a communication center. "It was as important a point in its sector as was Bastogne on the Army's left flank,"² Manteuffel later revealed. The Germans had planned to seize St. Vith in the first twenty-four hours of the offensive, and because they expected to gain it with hardly a fight, General Lucht's comparatively weak LXVI Corps was assigned to capture St. Vith. In Merriam's Dark December, p. 154, Manteuffel is quoted as saying "I wanted to have St. Vith on December 17. Although I had expected Bastogne to be defended, I did not think the Americans would be able to defend St. Vith." Although the enemy very nearly succeeded in gaining the town on the afternoon of December 17, 1944, St. Vith was a center of resistance for five days, splitting the German effort

¹ Quoted in Office of Tactical Investigation, loc. cit., Appendix F.

² Freidin and Richardson, eds., op. cit., 236.

in the north and preventing the enemy from joining forces on a broad front. More important perhaps, the American stand at St. Vith had contributed to the disruption of the German offensive timetable.³

"Quick exploitation of the success of the first day of the attack is decisive. The first objective is to achieve liberty of movement for the mobile units," proclaimed Field Marshall Model on the opening day of the offensive.⁴ The enemy's intention, according to VIII Corps' estimate on December 17, 1944, was to secure the primary roads, and the American objective would be to prevent their seizure. First U.S. Army's appreciation read: "The success of the entire operation depended upon the enemy's ability to maintain the impetus of the offensive. It was imperative that he reach objectives, particularly the Meuse bridgeheads, before our reserves could be brought into action." Halted short of St. Vith, the enemy was unable to make use of the five roads that radiated from the town. Furthermore, as Manteuffel later admitted, the delaying action at St. Vith had given the Americans time to reinforce the northern flank of the breakthrough.⁵ "By the evening of December 18, the entire operation had been placed in doubt because its success depended upon a quick march to the Meuse," read the appraisal of General Blumentritt. "By the third day, the American reserves,

³ Eisenhower, *op. cit.*, 347; Wilmot, *op. cit.*, 584; Letter from General Clarke to the author; Office of Tactical Investigation, *loc. cit.*, 17.

⁴ Quoted in First U.S. Army Report of Operations, 1 August 1944-22 February, 1945.

⁵ Freidin and Richardson, eds., *op. cit.*, 239.

brought up from the rear, were making themselves felt. In the first three or four days it had not been possible to even reach the River Ourthe, much less Liege."⁶

Eisenhower's evaluation corresponds to that of Manteuffel, for as the Supreme Commander wrote, the defense at St. Vith "prevented quick encirclement of the Monschau position held by 99th and 2nd Divisions until the 1st and 9th could come to their support."⁷ While the defenders were holding at St. Vith, the northern flank was reinforced, the Salm River line of XVIII Airborne Corps was formed behind the salient, U.S. Third Army reformed and attacked the south flank of the penetration, and XXX British Corps deployed in a blocking position at the Meuse River line. These vital moves had all been initiated before St. Vith fell on December 22.

In the first few days of the offensive, 6 SS Panzer Army, in which was concentrated the main German strength, had failed to live up to the high expectations of its commander, Sepp Dietrich. Its II SS Panzer Corps had been unable to break through the Monschau Forest on to the Elsenborn ridge, and 1 SS Panzer, Dietrich's center spearhead, had been unable to cross the Ambleve River. 6 Panzer Army's advance was also impeded by the salient at St. Vith for "Dietrich could not rapidly bring forward sufficient reinforcements to relieve Peiper, or to maintain the momentum of the attack."⁸ The supply line of Kampfgruppe

⁶ Blumentritt, loc. cit., 20.

⁷ Eisenhower, op. cit., 347.

⁸ Wilmot, op. cit., 585.

Peiper was cut when the U.S. 30th Division recaptured Stavelot, and Peiper's task force was confined to a narrow corridor with only one east-west road.⁹

From the very beginning of the offensive, Dietrich ran into problems of logistics. He brought up his divisions in pairs, one behind the other, with only two roads available at his point of departure. He had very little room to maneuver.¹⁰ By the second day of the attack there were monumental traffic jams in 6 SS Panzer Army's area, as Peiper and Skorzeny have testified. By the end of the first week, the disorganized state of German communication lines was having an effect. All further movement of 6 SS Panzer Army had virtually stopped by December 21 for lack of needed gasoline and ammunition on the supply columns immobilized to the east of St. Vith or on the trains halted between Prüm and Gerolstein in Germany.¹¹

It became readily apparent to the Germans that the St. Vith salient had to be eliminated, for not only was it a thorn in 6 SS Panzer Army's left flank, but also the salient threat-

¹⁰ Office of Tactical Investigation, loc. cit., 23.

¹¹ Hasbrouck, op. cit., 37; Research and Evaluation Division, loc. cit., 27. According to General Hasbrouck, this information was confirmed after the war by an American officer who had been captured on the 18th and marched into Germany via Schonberg, Bleialf and Prüm. Another captured American officer reported seeing great quantities of equipment in the railyards at Gerolstein, in Germany, intended for the Ardennes.

In the Research and Evaluation Division report, p. 27, the diary of a captured German artillery officer is quoted as an indication that St. Vith was holding back the flow of German traffic: "22 December: After St. Vith is taken, traffic flows continuously. If enemy planes had appeared, it would have been a terrific disaster."

ened the north flank of Manteuffel's 5 Panzer Army.¹² General Lucht's LXVI was halted before St. Vith, and 5 Panzer Army's armored infantry supply columns, "jammed bumper-to-bumper east of St. Vith, became practically immobilized..."¹³ Recall that on the evening of the 17th, Manteuffel and Model had met on foot due to the traffic congestion near Schonberg. The few German columns able to move in the St. Vith area had to struggle along muddy, narrow secondary roads, and as Manteuffel had revealed, "The Americans had fully exploited their defensive success in and about St. Vith, and had known how to swing the battle in their favor in this area. Many more of our troops had been tied down at St. Vith than was expected."¹⁴

For the Germans there was another complicating factor. Had Manteuffel captured St. Vith, he would have been able to swing his 5 Panzer Army north to go to the aid of Dietrich's imperiled column. Instead, 9 SS and 2 SS Panzer Divisions of Dietrich's II SS Panzer Corps were delegated to assist 18th and 62nd Volks Grenadier Division and Fuhrer Escort Brigade in the capture of St. Vith.

When St. Vith finally fell at the end of the first week of the offensive, the German cause was already beginning to look bleak indeed, for the enemy had fallen far short of his goals. "The quickened progress of the second week was illusory," Manteuffel later asserted, "for it only amounted to a

¹² Freidin and Richardson, eds., op. cit., 236.

¹³ First U.S. Army Report of Operations, loc. cit.

¹⁴ Quoted in Freidin and Richardson, eds., op. cit., 239.

deeper penetration between the road centers, which the Americans were now firmly holding."¹⁵ Furthermore, after the reduction of the St. Vith salient on December 23rd, the problem of supply became increasingly serious, as the Allied air forces began to operate, taking a heavy toll among German motorized columns.¹⁶

Both Blumentritt and Manteuffel have pointed out that for the Germans there was a serious deficiency of gasoline even before the attack started. The initial fuel demands of the Panzer armies had not been met, for as Blumentritt wrote, "only 18,000 cubic meters of fuel were available whereas the command estimated it needed 35,000. Rocket batteries had to be largely abandoned at the jump-off line to give priority to tanks."¹⁷ Manteuffel maintained that only half of the artillery ready at the start line could be brought into action. Worse still, said Manteuffel, much of the available gas "was kept too far back, in large lorry columns on the east bank of the Rhine. Once the foggy weather cleared, and the Allied air forces came into action, its forwarding was badly interrupted."¹⁸

Because they lacked ample fuel, the Germans had planned to seize gas dumps and supply installations in the course of their advance.¹⁹ A 25,000 gallon dump at Samree was the chief

¹⁵ Hart, op. cit., 241.

¹⁶ Office of Tactical Investigation, loc. cit., 18.

¹⁷ Blumentritt, loc. cit., 19.

¹⁸ Hart, op. cit., 232, 241.

¹⁹ Blumentritt, loc. cit., 19.

prize gained, but the Germans failed to seize a huge 2,500, 000 gallon depot near Stavelot, although ironically they came within a few hundred yards of it.²⁰ "However, few American supply dumps were overrun, owing to the comparative slowness of the advance, and the Germans had consumed most of their fuel negotiating the tortuous sideroads which the armored columns had been obliged to take. This was the price of delay in capturing St. Vith and of the failure to secure Malmedy and Bastogne."²¹

Until its final hours, the battle of St. Vith was fought at villages and road junctions, in open fields and along fire-breaks in evergreen forests outside the town itself. The defense of St. Vith was, in a true sense, a cooperative effort: although the majority of the troops were from the 7th Armored Division, units of four divisions plus Corps took part. Until December 22nd there was no single commander - the direction of the defense was shared. Lacking sufficient time to reconnoiter the terrain, the units were committed piecemeal to hastily improvised defensive positions. Many of the soldiers at St. Vith were not operating in their normal roles: tankmen, mechanized reconnaissance troops, engineers, and even cooks and bands men fought as infantry. Because it was a mixed grouping of forces, problems of command arose at all levels, but in the main, units cooperated efficiently.

The defense of St. Vith was fought in lonely isolation:

²⁰ Office of Tactical Investigation, loc. cit., 22.

²¹ Wilmot, op. cit., 599, 600.

few instructions were received from outside the salient until December 22, and the troops had little knowledge of events elsewhere in the Bulge. There was no relief column into St. Vith; there was no air drop of badly needed supplies. When ammunition and rations reached St. Vith, it was due to the heroic efforts of truck drivers who journeyed miles through enemy-infested territory. A "splendid feat of arms," one war correspondent called the defense of St. Vith, but this should not blind us to the fact that some Americans, victims of panic in the surprise of the German onslaught, fled from the battle area. In fleeing, they seriously hampered the many who chose to remain.

Since World War II, generous publicity - including more than one Hollywood movie - has been given to the defense of Bastogne, and perhaps in the public mind the Battle of the Bulge will always be associated with the magnificent stand of the paratroopers. A colorful passage in a dark chapter of the war, the epic defense of Bastogne quickly fastened itself on the popular imagination.

However, of at least equal importance in the defeat of Hitler's armies in the winter of 1944-45 was the defense of St. Vith, the importance of which grows in retrospect.²² It

²² In "The Return to St. Vith: the Story of the U.S. 7th Armored Division's Heroic Fight to Retake St. Vith," the Armored School, Fort Knox, Kentucky, 20 January, 1945, Lt. Colonel A.C. Harris, Jr. wrote: "Although St. Vith received far less publicity than Bastogne, it was the opinion of many of the German Field Marshalls, including Hitler himself, that St. Vith was far more important strategically than Bastogne."

was at St. Vith that the Germans were first seriously thwarted in their offensive. As a communications center, St. Vith was a vital objective in the German operation. Expecting to have St. Vith during the first twenty-four hours of the attack, the Germans failed to gain the town for five days, an interval in which the Allies were given time to reinforce their positions and seal off the German penetration. When St. Vith finally fell on December 22, 1944, the entire German operation had been placed in jeopardy. As First U.S. Army's appreciation of events to December 24 read: "The initial phase of the German offensive ended on 22 December."²³ In the Battle of the Ardennes, the defense of St. Vith was indeed a turning point.

²³ Quoted in Office of Tactical Investigation, loc. cit., 17.

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ONE BOX, ONE FOLDER
AT A TIME, PLEASE

DOCUMENTS
REMAIN IN FOLDERS
AT ALL TIMES, PLEASE

LAY ALL MATERIALS
FLAT ON TABLE
AT ALL TIMES, PLEASE

COORDINATE ALL
PHOTOCOPYING
WITH
COPY CENTER STAFF



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St. Vith, Belgium

Lt. Ivan H. Long, Pontiac, Michigan, (Center) talks to members of his Intelligence and Reconnaissance Platoon, of the 423rd Inf. Regt., 106th Inf. Division. Trapped by the sudden German thrust, the platoon maneuvered through 18 miles of German concentrations of infantry and armored units without the loss of a single man. Lt. Long attributes the success of the march to the scouting ability of Pvt. Sam Bordelon, Birmingham, Alabama, who acted as first scout.

16 December 1944

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An American soldier looks over the wrecked town of St. Vith.

24 January 1945

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Troops of the 7th Armored Division look over
an undamaged German tank, captured on the road
to St. Vith, Belgium. 23 January 1945

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