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THE RETURN TO ST. VITH

The story of the United States 7th Armored Division's heroic fight to retake St. Vith, Belgium, 20 January 1945 to 29 January 1945

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A. C. HARRIS, JR
Lt Col, Cav
Chief of Section

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THE RETURN TO ST. VITH

Among the famous historical examples of indomitable courage and outstanding leadership during the recent war, the back-to-back stand of the 7th Armored Division at St. Vith, Belgium, during the period 17 December to 23 December 1944, has a place high in the annals of military historians.

St. Vith, Belgium--focal point of the bitter fighting found in the swirling snows of the "Belgian Bulge"--will long be remembered as one of the key points whose staunch defense by the 7th Armored Division broke the prongs of the mechanized might of Von Rundstedt's abortive blitz.

After a gallant stand of six days, the 7th Armored Division on orders relinquished its hard-won ground and again drove into the German line in the vicinity of Manhay, Belgium, and whittled at the German Army until relieved on 30 December 1944. Particularly notable is the fact that at this time, the gallant 7th Armored was fighting with understrength units, for only 70 per cent of the combat personnel was effective and medium armor was 56 per cent below normal.

Von Rundstedt's lightning armored columns were blunted and disorganized as they probed at the 7th Armored's defense, and the methodical German planners found themselves thrown six days behind schedule because of the 7th's stonewall ring of fighting personnel around St. Vith.

Not content to rest on its laurels, the 7th Armored Division began the task of "seek and destroy" as it eliminated pockets of resistance and feeble attempts of the enemy to regain the remnants of their last mission.

When the 7th Armored Division was withdrawn from the line at the end of January, it had forced the enemy back to within seven kilometers of the German border.

Although St. Vith received far less publicity than Bastogne, it was the opinion of many of the German Field Marshals, including Hitler himself, that St. Vith was far more important strategically than Bastogne. The most important fact to consider is that Bastogne could be by-passed and St. Vith could not. Not only to the German High Command was this a paramount issue, but to the Allied Supreme Command as well. For the same reasons that the German Ardennes offensive bogged down when denied this road and rail center, any large Allied counteroffensive to drive the enemy from Belgian soil would bog down unless St. Vith were in friendly hands. The German mission was to deny the Allied Forces the use of the road net, and to "defend to the last round" this all-important town.

Primarily the enemy employed delaying actions and small determined pockets of resistance to hold off the advance of the 7th Armored Division. The units so engaged were to fall back on St. Vith and hold at all costs. Consequently, when Combat Command B attacked and took St. Vith it encountered well-organized resistance. It had advanced into the area of pre-arranged artillery, Nebelwerfer, and automatic weapons fire. The enemy had taken about two weeks to organize the defense of St. Vith with all the cunning and sound military knowledge available in well-trained Prussian minds.

In addition to the strong enemy resistance encountered, the 7th Armored Division faced the added hardships of a bleak, biting winter. The entire operation was impeded by drifts of snow from two to three feet deep. Men shivered in foxholes as the temperature dropped to the zero mark, and yet kept their faces and weapons toward the attacks of the German forces.

RECUPERATION AND PREPARATION

January 1945 found the 7th Armored Division as XVIII Airborne Corps reserve in the vicinity of Aywaille, Belgium, preparing for the coming counteroffensive.

Replacements in men and material were absorbed by the division at this time, and an intensive training program with emphasis on maintenance and firing was begun. The extreme cold, lack of suitable billets, and icy and hazardous operating conditions caused the division many hardships.

However, preparations and training for the offensive to clear the last of the enemy from Belgian soil rapidly transformed a weary, battle-scarred division into a well-trained and hard-fighting team.

Ingenuity was necessary in the cold weather operations, and two officers in the division devised a very feasible makeshift for "grouzers" to enable track laying vehicles to operate satisfactorily over the ice-covered roads and countryside. Extensive reconnaissance and analysis of the terrain were made to determine the most effective manner of operation. The poor road net, heavily wooded areas, and rugged terrain dictated the employment of small infantry-tank-engineer teams. Where mass employment of tanks would be impossible, these small teams could operate over roads or trails and gain the rear of the enemy forces to make surprise seizures of important road centers or defiles.

Organizing small task forces and conducting training problems to study the proper uses of these units, the combat commands of the division prepared themselves for the coming counteroffensive during the first half of January. A US First Army camouflage team visited the division during this time and assisted in the solving of winter camouflage problems. Each line infantryman and all key personnel of tank battalions, artillery battalions, the engineer battalion, and the cavalry reconnaissance squadron were equipped with white outer garments to blend with the snow. The tanks of the 7th Armored were the first in the US First Army to be painted white.

On 19 January 1945 the 7th Armored Division had completed all preparations for its attack. The division was poised and ready for the assault.

THE RETURN TO ST. VITH

Task forces were organized and the division awaited corps order for the attack. Combat Command A and Combat Command B were organized as follows for the coming operation:

COMBAT COMMAND A

TASK FORCE W (WEMPLE)

17th Tank Battalion (-Companies B and C; 1st Platoon, Company D)
Company B, 23d Armored Infantry Battalion
2d Platoon, Company B, 33d Armored Engineer Battalion
2d Platoon, Company A, 814th Tank Destroyer Battalion

TASK FORCE R (RHEA)

23d Armored Infantry Battalion
Company C, and 1st Platoon, Company D, 17th Tank Battalion
1st Platoon, Company B, 33d Armored Engineer Battalion
1st Platoon, Company A, 814th Tank Destroyer Battalion

TASK FORCE S (SEITZ)

2d Battalion, 517th Parachute Infantry Regiment
Company B, 17th Tank Battalion
3d Platoon, Company B, 33d Armored Engineer Battalion
3d Platoon, Company A, 814th Tank Destroyer Battalion

COMBAT COMMAND B

TASK FORCE A (CHAPPUIS)

48th Armored Infantry Battalion (-Companies B and C)
Companies A and D, 31st Tank Battalion
1st Platoon, Company A, 33d Armored Engineer Battalion
1st Platoon, Company C, 814th Tank Destroyer Battalion

TASK FORCE B (THOMASIK)

509th Parachute Infantry Battalion (-Company C)
Company B, 31st Tank Battalion
Company B, 48th Armored Infantry Battalion
3d Platoon, Company A, 33d Armored Engineer Battalion

TASK FORCE C (ERLENBUSCH)

31st Tank Battalion (-Companies A, B, and D)
Company C, 48th Armored Infantry Battalion
Company C, 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion
2d Platoon, Company A, 33d Armored Engineer Battalion

The division command post moved to Waimes on 19 January, and Combat Command A and Combat Command B moved into final attack positions in the vicinity of Waimes during the night of 19-20 January.

The general plan of attack was to have Combat Command A on the left and Combat Command B on the right. The division objective at this time was to occupy a frontage of about 10,000 meters extending from the high ground north of St. Vith, and thence to the north and east to the town of Ambleve.

20 January 1945

On the morning of 20 January at 0750 the 7th Armored Division began its coordinated attack through the sector held by the 1st and 30th Infantry Divisions. The weather had not moderated, being very cold with snow flurries and visibility ranging from fair to poor. Icy conditions and near zero temperatures made movement of tracked vehicles extremely difficult.

Task Force Wemple jumped off at 200750 January for Diedenberg; meeting only light enemy resistance, it occupied Diedenberg by 1050. Task Force Rhea succeeded in securing the high ground southeast of Diedenberg by 1530, although it met heavy resistance from strong points established in houses located in its zone of action. During the remainder of the day Combat Command A consolidated its positions and made preparations for the attack on Auf der Hart Woods.

Combat Command B was to attack Born with two task forces: Task Force A (Chappuis) astride the road from the west and Task Force C (Erlenbusch) from the northwest. However, because of last-minute changes the attack was postponed; Task Force B (Thomasik) patrols encountered difficulty in returning from enemy reconnaissance, and the 120th Infantry Regiment, through which Combat Command B was to pass, had changed its plans just prior to the scheduled attack. At 1130 the attack was launched through the 120th Infantry Regiment. Task Force B approached Born without serious difficulty, but Task Force C encountered mines and terrain impassable for armor. At 1630 the assault was launched on Born by Task Force B and the infantry of Task Force C. Both forces encountered heavy small-arms fire from the enemy and by 1800 the attack had bogged down.

Brigadier General Bruce C. Clarke, commanding Combat Command B, directed the task forces to reorganize and be prepared to continue the attack on order that night. From 2300 to 2345 an intense artillery preparation was laid on the town, utilizing 13 battalions of division and corps artillery. The attack was again launched, this time encountering severe enemy resistance

which included tanks, self-propelled guns, and infantry. Both task forces succeeded in reaching the outskirts of Born at 21-132 January. The remainder of the night was spent consolidating the hard-earned positions. During this day's operation the task forces captured 115 prisoners who were components of the 18th Volk Grenadier and 3d Parachute Divisions.

21 January 1945

Combat Command A's Task Force B crossed its line of departure at 210400 January toward their objective, the Auf der Hart Woods. Only light opposition was met, and by 0900 it was on its objective. At 0800 Task Force Wemple and Task Force Rhea moved forward from their positions to tie in with Task Force Seitz, and the Auf der Hart Woods were occupied 211400 January. In clearing the objective Task Force Seitz met moderate enemy resistance, consisting of small-arms, mortar, and artillery fire. Five members of an enemy patrol were captured, and the identity of the enemy force was learned for the first time. The enemy soldiers were from units of the 12th SS Panzer Division, I SS Panzer Corps, who a month before were racing across the Ardennes toward the Meuse River.

Combat Command B was meeting considerable resistance in trying to enter Born. After consolidating positions during the early morning hours, Company A, 48th Armored Infantry Battalion, was given the mission of clearing that part of Born east of the railroad which ran from north to south, and Task Force C was ordered to clear the area northwest of the railroad. At 210545 January the attack began as scheduled. No sooner had the attack developed than it was quite evident that the enemy had brought up considerable reinforcements during the night. Later, from prisoner of war sources, it was learned that one full battalion of infantry had been moved into Born under cover of darkness. Artillery, Nebelwerfer, and mortar fire was far more intense than during the previous day. Evidently the Germans were determined that Born should be held at all costs. In anticipation of fierce resistance by the enemy, at 0830 the 38th Armored Infantry Battalion was attached to Combat Command B and moved to an assembly area within quick striking distance of Born. Stubborn last-ditch resistance by the enemy held up operations east of the railroad. Fighting was intense, and every house was a fortress in itself where hand-to-hand fighting developed. Born was a much different type of town from those heretofore fought through by the 7th Armored Division. Born consists of houses surrounded by gardens and yards, very much like an American town. This meant that the assault troops had to cross open ground in advancing from house to house. The Germans chose to organize each house as a strong point and defend it from the cellars. It was virtually impossible to assault these positions in the usual manner. To clear out the resistance, a tank destroyer was placed in a commanding location on a hill just outside of Born. One delayed-action round was fired into each house at the cellar and ground floor line. Mopping up behind the fire came foot troops to clean out any overlooked pocket of resistance. Clearing of the northwest section of Born proceeded with somewhat less resistance and by 0945, Task Force C was given the mission of continuing

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forward and clearing the east section of Born. The balance of this day's fighting, however, was bloody; and Company A, 38th Armored Infantry Battalion, was called in to assist Task Force C at 1700 to clear Born of all organized enemy resistance. Testifying to the severity of the day's fighting, one company of the attacking forces lost 80 men. Combat Command B immediately organized defensive positions in preparation for any enemy counterattacks.

The 7th Armored Division knocked out seven tanks and several self-propelled guns during this operation and damaged several other armored vehicles by artillery fire. Only 78 German soldiers were captured as a result of the coose-quarter action. At 212325 January the 508th Regimental Combat Team* relieved Combat Command A and assumed defense of the Diedenbers-Eibertingen area.

22 January 1945

The Reserve Command, which up to this time had been in division reserve, moved into the area Montenaau, Deidenberg, Eibertingen, and assumed defensive positions. The 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment was attached to the Reserve Command.

Combat Command A and Combat Command B were ordered to secure Hunningen and the high ground to the east and west of the town.

The order for the attack was for Combat Command A to attack from the northeast and Combat Command B to attack from the north. Combat Command B was to organize Task Force Beatty**, which would wait for the arrival of troops of Combat Command A (Task Force Seitz and Task Force Wemple), before attacking. Combat Command A moved out from the high ground east of Born at 1000 and ran into small-arms, antitank, and artillery fire, which held it up so that it was not until 1700 that both task forces were ready to jump off toward Hunningen. In the meantime, Task Force Beatty, Combat Command B, was ordered by the division commander to jump off at 1430 without further waiting for Task Force Seitz and Task Force Wemple of Combat Command A. Speed in the advance was the order of the day, and enemy resistance was either quickly overrun or by-passed. The daring aggressiveness of the attackers did much to disorganize the defense of the enemy, and by 1730 Task Forces Beatty, Seitz, and Wemple were on their objective. By 1900 all enemy resistance was completely crushed, and the town was organized for defense.

*Composed of:

- 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment
- 319th Field Artillery Glider Battalion
- Company D, 307th Engineer Battalion
- Company B, 80th Antiaircraft Artillery Battalion

**Composed of:

- Company C, 31st Tank Battalion
- Company B, 48th Armored Infantry Battalion
- 1st Platoon, Company A, 33d Armored Engineer Battalion
- 1st Platoon, Company C, 814th Tank Destroyer Battalion

Additional enemy units identified on 22 January 1945 were: 18th Volks Grenadier Division, 246th Volks Grenadier Division, 3d Parachute Division, and 25th SS Panzer Grenadier Regiment.

So rapid was the advance that seven 88-mm antitank guns were overrun. The fleeing enemy had left these guns in their original emplacements, with an ample supply of ammunition at the gun site. No attempt had been made by the enemy to destroy these pieces and deny them to the American forces.

23 January 1945

The long-awaited chance of the 7th Armored Division to retake St. Vith came on 23 January. Just one month previously, 23 December 1944, Combat Command B, commanded by Brigadier General Bruce C. Clarke, bearing the brunt of the defense of St. Vith, had been ordered to withdraw west of the Salm River with the balance of the 7th Armored Division and the other defending elements of this important road and rail center.

The original plan called for Combat Command A to retake St. Vith, but a last-minute change in plans gave Combat Command B the honor. Combat Command B was organized into three task forces for the mission:

TASK FORCE CHAPPUIS

48th Armored Infantry Battalion (Company B)
Companies A and B, 31st Tank Battalion

TASK FORCE BEATTY

Company B, 48th Armored Infantry Battalion
Company C, 31st Tank Battalion
1st Platoon, Company C, 814th Tank Destroyer Battalion
1st Platoon, Company A, 33d Armored Engineer Battalion

TASK FORCE RHEA

23d Armored Infantry Battalion (Company B)
Company C, 17th Tank Battalion
1st Platoon, Company D, 17th Tank Battalion
1st Platoon, Company B, 33d Armored Engineer Battalion
1st Platoon, Company A, 814th Tank Destroyer Battalion

The attack on St. Vith called for a full-scale attack by Combat Command B. Task Force Chappuis was to attack parallel and west of the Hunningen-St. Vith road; Task Force Beatty was to attack astride this highway; and Task Force Rhea was to attack due south of the Kinnelberg woods. The plan was to completely envelop St. Vith without exposing attacking troops to the suspected enemy concentrations east and southeast of the town.

The attack moved forward at 1415 preceded by a heavy artillery preparation. Just prior to and during the attack, the enemy resisted by the use of heavy artillery and Nebelwerfer fire. These enemy fires were ascertained to be coming from the vicinity of Wallerode, and an air strike was called for. The air force bombed and strafed likely-looking targets and targets of opportunity in this area, with excellent results. Small-arms and machine-gun fire were the main weapons used by the German defenders of St. Vith. Heavy to moderate resistance was met, but by 1745 all task forces had gained their objectives and were tied in.

Now that St. Vith had been recaptured by Combat Command B of the 7th Armored Division, the Germans were determined to retake it. From 2015 to 2250 the enemy launched three vicious counterattacks at the American troops. These attacks consisted of infantry supported by armor, artillery, and Nebelwerfers. The artillery fire was heavier than had been delivered before, since Combat Command B's advances into St. Vith had carried it into range of the organized artillery defense plan of the enemy.

By 2400, 157 prisoners were taken; one tank and four assault guns were destroyed; and one assault gun was captured intact. This again reflected the shattering force of the 7th Armored against the enemy.

24 January 1945

Combat Command A, commanded by Colonel W. S. Triplet, Infantry, composed of Task Forces Seitz, Rhea, and Griffin with Task Force Wemple in reserve to support by direct fire, jumped off at 1000 to seize and defend Wallerode and the high ground north and northwest of the town. Small-arms, machine-gun, and artillery fire resisted the advance of the troops, but in spite of this and the heavy mortar and Nebelwerfer fire, all task forces secured their objectives before nightfall. The ground operation of the enemy in this attack on Wallerode and vicinity consisted mainly of well dug-in infantry whose emplacements were connected by tunnels and studded with dugouts. The points of high ground were well defended by dug-in infantry, supported by mortars and machine guns. In addition, the houses along the routes of advance were organized for defense. However, the well-planned, well-coordinated, and brilliantly executed attack met with resounding success as had all others in this operation.

At 1000 on 24 January 1945, Combat Command B was given the mission of taking three objectives, namely: the high ground to the southwest, the ground to the south, and the high ground to the east of St. Vith, all of which was about 1500 meters from the town proper. Combat Command B, under Brigadier General Clarke, was organized as follows:

TASK FORCE ERLENBUSCH

31st Tank Battalion (-Company A)
509th Parachute Infantry Battalion

TASK FORCE CHAPPUIS

48th Armored Infantry Battalion
Company A. 31st Tank Battalion

SUPPORTING TROOPS

(support 48th by fire) Company C. 814th Tank Destroyer Battalion
(general support) Company A, 33d Armored Infantry Battalion
Company D, 87th Mechanized Reconnaissance Squadron

The high ground to the southwest (WALT) and south (NINA) were to be taken on the night of 24 January. The high ground to the east (CORKY) was to be taken on the morning of 25 January. WALT, NINA, and CORKY were the code names used for easy reference in this operation.

At 1630, Task Force Erlenbusch advanced toward the dual objectives of WALT and NINA, both being the high ground to the south. At 1910 Task Force Erlenbusch reported it had captured WALT. This mission was accomplished by Company C of the 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion because of the deep snow and rugged terrain which precluded the immediate use of armor. At 2015, NINA was taken by the remaining half of Task Force Erlenbusch, but the resistance was so great it was forced to withdraw shortly before dawn to the railroad tracks just south of St. Vith. The Reserve Command was called upon to furnish troops to fill the gap between NINA and WALT.

25 January 1945

At 250615 January 1945, Task Force Chappuis jumped off on its attack to CORKY. The southern half of CORKY was captured by 0900, but the northern sector offered such great resistance that the attack was halted short of its objective.

In the south Companies B and C of the 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion and Company C of the 87th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron had attacked NINA at 1530, and at 1635 had taken the high ground and were consolidating their positions.

26 January 1945

It was believed that Prumerberg and the surrounding ground was the key to the German defense of the area east of St. Vith. If this objective could be taken it was felt that strong organized resistance by the enemy would be reduced. At 260700 January, Task Force Chappuis committed its reserves and launched a final all-out assault on Prumerberg. The objective was taken at 0810, and by 1030 Task Force Chappuis had made contact and tied in with Combat Command A on the left.

It was expected at this time that elements of the United States Third Army would relieve the division. However, inasmuch as they had not arrived, Combat Command B was ordered to coordinate an attack of the 82d Airborne Division, which was to advance through Combat Command A and secure its right flank as it advanced through the heavy woods and incised terrain in the Bois de St. Vith. The objective of General Clarke's Command B was some 4600 meters east of St. Vith.

27 January 1945

Elements of Combat Command B jumped off at 1025 and immediately encountered heavy small-arms and artillery fire. The attack made slow progress in the thick woods that seemed to hide a determined enemy rifleman behind every tree, and soon the attacking troops had met with resistance far greater than their strength. General Clarke, the Combat Command B commander, notified division that reinforcements were sorely needed to continue the attack.

Additional troops were attached, and another full-scale attack was immediately launched; and by 280355 January, the hard-fought-for objective was in American hands.

At this time the communications were extremely poor, and the disposition of friendly troops was very uncertain. When Company B of the 38th Armored Infantry Battalion moved out to cut the Prumerberg-Setz road, it was brought under devastating small-arms and automatic weapons fire. So fluid was the situation, in the waist-deep snow and trackless forests of Belgium, that the attacking forces actually believed at first that they were being brought under friendly fire. Investigation proved otherwise; and in conjunction with a platoon of medium tanks, an attack was launched on this enemy pocket. By 1800, despite heavy enemy artillery fire bursting in the treetops and raining death in every direction, the well dug-in Germans were eradicated.

Elements of the US Third Army relieved Combat Command B on 29 January 1945. When they took over the sector of the 509th Parachute Infantry Battalion, 26 battle-weary paratroopers moved to the rear from their foxholes. These 26 combat heroes were all that remained out of an original complement of 400.

During these last days of bitter winter fighting, in which Combat Command B was the only element of the 7th Armored Division in continuous attack, 60 prisoners of war were captured.

A great deal of small arms equipment was taken, but the Germans committed none of their armor or assault guns, and denied the American forces the opportunity of capturing them. At times the enemy armor would engage American armor in extremely long-range duels, where he believed his 88-mm rifle would give him a slight advantage, but at this he proved highly ineffective.

ST. VITH -- THE KEY TO VICTORY

It was only through brilliant generalship and the courage of the attacking troops that the enemy was defeated and driven from his established positions.

The dashing, sometimes highly unorthodox attacks of American armor, which almost invariably seemed to meet with uncanny success, were employed in the operations of the 7th Armored Division.

The division gained the initiative on 20 January 1945 and never relinquished it until relieved on 29 January 1945. Attacks were launched continuously and with such rapidity that the enemy was hard pressed at all times, day and night.

The entire campaign--The Return to St. Vith--was one of great pride and honor to the 7th Armored Division. To those who had shown the world that they had the indomitable courage to stand and fight and stand to fight again in death-laced battles to retake that town, St. Vith and its capture will remain a never-to-be-forgotten episode in the minds of the fighting men of the 7th Armored Division.

TROOP LIST

The following is a compilation of the units which took part in the nine-day operation to retake St. Vith, Belgium, 20-29 January 1945. Their relationship to the 7th Armored Division is indicated.

Assigned units

Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 7th Armored Division
Headquarters and Headquarters Company, Combat Command A
Headquarters and Headquarters Company, Combat Command B
Headquarters and Headquarters Company, Reserve Command
Headquarters and Headquarters Battery, Division Artillery
Headquarters and Headquarters Company, Division Trains
 Division Military Police Platoon
 Division Band
17th Tank Battalion
31st Tank Battalion
40th Tank Battalion
23d Armored Infantry Battalion
38th Armored Infantry Battalion
48th Armored Infantry Battalion
87th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron
434th Field Artillery Battalion
440th Field Artillery Battalion
489th Field Artillery Battalion
33d Armored Engineer Battalion
129th Ordnance Battalion
77th Medical Battalion
147th Signal Company

Attached units

*203d Antiaircraft Artillery Battalion
*446th Quartermaster Truck Company
*3967th Quartermaster Truck Company
*275th Armored Field Artillery Battalion
*814th Tank Destroyer Battalion
2d Battalion, 517th Parachute Infantry Regiment
509th Parachute Infantry Battalion
Company C, 299th Engineer Battalion
Company B, 738th Tank Battalion (Mine Exploders)
987th Field Artillery Battalion
508th Parachute Infantry Regiment
319th Field Artillery Glider Battalion
Company D, 307th Engineer Battalion
Company B, 80th Antiaircraft Artillery Battalion

424th Regimental Combat Team

*424th Infantry Regiment, 106th Infantry Division

*591st Field Artillery Battalion

Company C, 331st Medical Battalion

Company C, 81st Engineer Battalion

*Indicates these units were present with the 7th Armored Division in both the December 1944 and January 1945 St. Vith operations.

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