

AGAINST ALL ODDS:  
The Story of the 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division in the Battle of the Bulge

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Masters of Arts

By

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December 1998

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ABSTRACT

AGAINST ALL ODDS:  
The Story of the 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division in the Battle of the Bulge.

by Joseph M. Giarrusso

This thesis is a study of the events that lead to the destruction of the 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division during the opening dates of the Ardennes Campaign, the “Battle of the Bulge”, and the POW experience of these soldiers.

Research on this subject reveals that neither the men nor officers of the 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division were to blame directly for the largest loss of an American unit in history. Instead, failure by Allied intelligence, a loosening of military structure and a belief by Allied Command that the war would be over shortly because Germany could no longer mount any real offensive operations, lead to their misinterpreting or ignoring many tell-tale signs that a German offensive was building.

In addition, this thesis looks at the effects of the 106<sup>th</sup>'s stubborn resistance on the German assault timeline that helped give the Allies time to regroup for defense and mount a counter-offensive.

## DEDICATION

The time and work put into these pages and the masters program is dedicated to:

My father, Joseph L. Giarrusso, who served as a private in the 87<sup>th</sup> “Golden Acorn” Division in Europe during this mighty conflict and was the major inspiration for my love of history.

My mother, Patricia C. Patterson Giarrusso, who nurtured my love of history and academics and taught me to always embrace knowledge and learning.

The men of the 106<sup>th</sup> who, in the face of an enemy with far superior numbers and in the most adverse conditions, fought the toughest fight.

Finally, to all those who paid the ultimate sacrifice in service to their country, to you a country is indebted.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis chair, Dr. Harry Gailey, for his assistance and guidance throughout the research process. His support through this experience was invaluable. In addition, I thank Dwight Messimer and Dr. Jonathan Roth for their time in reviewing this thesis and providing valuable feedback.

Second, I thank my family; my father, Joseph and mother, Patricia; my sister, Mary Ann and brother-in-law, Lance; as well as my second set of parents, John and M.-A. Lucas for all their support and encouragement during this program.

Finally, and most of all, I thank my wonderful wife, Caroline, who gave patience, understanding and support during the whole process. This thesis would not have been possible without her continued support and encouragement.

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## GLOSSARY

<b>Armee</b> .....	Army
<b>Armeekorps</b> .....	Corps
<b>Artillerie</b> .....	Artillery
<b>Battalion</b> .....	A medium-size unit, usually 500 to 1,000 men in strength and commanded by a lieutenant colonel or a major
<b>Battery</b> .....	An artillery unit of company size
<b>Brigadeführer (SS Rank)</b> .....	Brigadier General (U.S. one star)
<b>CCA, B, or R</b> .....	Combat Command A, B or Reserve, of an Armored Division
<b>CATOR</b> .....	Combined Air Transport Operations Room (SHAEF)
<b>Company</b> .....	A basic military unit usually composed of two or three platoons. An infantry company usually consists of 100 to 200 men and is commanded by a captain
<b>Division</b> .....	The smallest standard combined-arms formation, usually 10,000 – 18,000 men in strength and usually commanded by a major general
<b>Ersatz</b> .....	German for Substitute, short term for German coffee served to POW's
<b>FA</b> .....	Field Artillery
<b>Fallschirmdivision</b> .....	Parachute Division
<b>Führer Begleit</b> .....	Hitler's (literally leader's) Escort
<b>G-2</b> .....	Intelligence section (Army level or lower)
<b>G-3</b> .....	Operation section (Army level or lower)

<b>G-4</b> .....	Supply Section (Army level or lower)
<b>Generalfeldmarschall</b> .....	Field Marshal
<b>Generaloberst</b> .....	General (U.S. four star)
<b>General der Infanterie</b> .....	Lieutenant General (U.S. three star)
<b>General der Panzertruppen</b> .....	Lieutenant General (U.S. three star)
<b>Generalleutnant</b> .....	Major General (U.S. two star)
<b>Generalmajor</b> .....	Brigadier General (U.S. one star)
<b>Greif</b> .....	Condor
<b>Grenadier</b> .....	Infantryman
<b>Gruppe</b> .....	Group
<b>Gruppenführer (SS Rank)</b> .....	Major General (U.S. two star)
<b>Heeresgruppe</b> .....	Army Group
<b>Hauptmann</b> .....	Captain
<b>I&amp;R</b> .....	Intelligence and Reconnaissance
<b>Kampfgruppe</b> .....	Combat group of variable size often a combined arms task force, typically named after its leader
<b>Kriegsgefangener</b> .....	POW
<b>Luftwaffe</b> .....	Air force
<b>Nacht</b> .....	Night
<b>NCO</b> .....	Non-Commissioned Officer
<b>OB West</b> .....	Oberbefehlshaber West; High Command of German forces in the West; von Rundstedt's headquarters
<b>O-Tag</b> .....	Zero-day; Code for day of start of the Ardennes Offensive
<b>Obergruppenführer (SS Rank)</b> .....	Lieutenant General (U.S. three star)

<b>Oberst</b> .....	Colonel
<b>Oberstgruppenführer (SS Rank)</b> .....	General (U.S. four star)
<b>Oberstleutnant</b> .....	Lieutenant Colonel
<b>Oflag</b> .....	German offizierlager, officers POW camp
<b>OKW</b> .....	Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (Armed Forces High Command)
<b>Operation Herbstnebel</b> .....	Operation ‘Autumn Fog;’ Code name for Army Group B’s alternative attack plan
<b>Panzer</b> .....	Armor or tank
<b>Panzergrenadier</b> .....	Armored infantry
<b>Panzerarmee</b> .....	Armored army
<b>POW</b> .....	Prisoner of War, PW used by U.S. and British in WWII
<b>Regiment</b> .....	A large single-arm unit, usually consisting of three battalions; a typical infantry regiment is 2,000 to 3,000 men and is usually commanded by a colonel
<b>S-2</b> .....	Intelligence Officer (SHAEF)
<b>S-3</b> .....	Operations Officer (SHAEF)
<b>SHAEF</b> .....	Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force
<b>Stalag</b> .....	German stammlager, prisoner of war camp for all ranks
<b>SS</b> .....	For the purpose of this thesis, SS refers to Waffen-SS which was the fully militarized combat formation of the Schutzstaffel(SS). They were a separate fighting force from the Wehrmacht and reported up to Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler.
<b>TAC</b> .....	Tactical Air Command
<b>TCC</b> .....	Troop Carrier Command

<b>TD</b> .....	Tank Destroyer
<b>VG</b> .....	Volksgrenadier
<b>VGd</b> .....	Volksgrenadier Division
<b>Volksdeutsche</b> .....	Citizens of a non-German country considered by the Nazis to be German “racially”.
<b>Volksgrenadier</b> .....	People’s infantry division organized in late 1944
<b>Wacht am Rhein</b> .....	Watch on the Rhine; Hitler’s code name for the Ardennes Offensive
<b>Wehrmacht</b> .....	Armed Forces

## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

“This is undoubtedly the greatest American battle of the war and will, I believe, be regarded as an ever-famous American Victory.”<sup>1</sup> Prime Minister Winston Churchill made this statement, in an address to the House of Commons, shortly after the largest pitched battle on the Western front during the Second World War. This battle would take place during the coldest and snowiest weather in decades, in the semi-mountainous, forested area of the German-Belgium-Luxembourg border region.

Since D-Day, the Americans had carried out highly successful offensive operations. A result of this success was that the American soldier, including those at Supreme Allied Headquarters, was imbued with the belief that the German war machine did not have the ability to mount a serious counterattack against the Allied forces. The German Ardennes offensive ranks second only to Pearl Harbor, as the worst failure of military intelligence during the war. Unfortunately it would be the GI who would pay the price for this failure. In all, more than a million men (600,000 Americans, 500,000 Germans, and 55,000 British)<sup>2</sup> would fight in this battle. Three German Armies, the equivalent to 29 divisions, and three American Armies, the equivalent of 31 divisions would be thrown into a 500 square mile battlefield. One

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<sup>1</sup> Charles B. MacDonald, *A Time for Trumpets: The Untold Story of the Battle of the Bulge*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1985), 614.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 618.

hundred thousand Germans would die, be captured or wounded during their offensive, while the Americans would suffer 81,000 men killed, wounded, or captured.<sup>3</sup> These would be the worst American losses from battle in World War II on all fronts. This, “the greatest American battle of the war,” was given the unflattering title of the Battle of the Bulge, because of the large bulge the German offensive made in the American lines.

However, to one division, the 106<sup>th</sup> Division “Golden Lions”, this great American battle would become a living nightmare. This division and its men would have the dubious honor of being hit by a greater concentration of enemy strength than any other American division in the war. Also, in their single brief engagement of the first three days of the battle, the 106<sup>th</sup> suffered more losses than any other American division in World War II. The totals for this division were 416 killed, 1242 wounded and 7001 missing in action (MIA). An overwhelming number of the MIAs were later liberated as prisoners of war (POW) in 1945. These losses account for over 60 percent of the division personnel.<sup>4</sup> A majority of the losses were from the 422<sup>nd</sup> and 423<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Regiments that were encircled, and after attempting to break their way back to the American lines, were faced with the unsavory decision of surrender or annihilation. Their choice would be survival. However, during their time in the battle they played a major role in throwing off the time table of the German Fifth Army to such an extent that it gave valuable time to the American forces behind and to the south to regroup and later stop the German offensive.

Cedric Foster, a popular news analyst of the time summed up the story of the 106<sup>th</sup> in his nationwide broadcasts on 21 January 1945:

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Tonight for the first time there may be told the story which, in its dual aspects, is one of the most tragic and yet one of the most glorious episodes in the history of American arms ... the story of America's 106<sup>th</sup> Division. ... The record they wrote is a shining example for all of the armed forces of the United States.<sup>5</sup>

These pages are an attempt to tell the history of the 106<sup>th</sup>, in particular the 422<sup>nd</sup> and the 423<sup>rd</sup> Regiments, and how this green division from Fort Atterbury played an important role in the opening days of the Battle of the Bulge.

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<sup>4</sup> John Kline, "Commemorating the 48th Anniversary of the Battle of the Bulge, December 16, 1944 to January 25, 1945", (a presentation to the Apple Valley Rotary Club, December 16, 1992), 2.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 3.

## CHAPTER II

### Hitler's Reich Crumbles around Him

By September 1944, Adolph Hitler's dream of a thousand year Reich was crumbling down around him at an ever-increasing rate. The once mighty German *Wehrmacht* was little more than a skeleton of its former self and was collapsing on all fronts at an ever-quickenning pace. The beloved leader of Germany, was now a tired, sick, paranoid man, who consistently mingled fantasy with reality, more the former than latter. When looking at situation maps, he would call on divisions that did not exist and would make battle plans that may have been possible in 1940 but were far out of the German military capabilities in 1944.

Daily situation briefings greeted the Führer with nothing but bad news on all fronts. Over the past six months, 25 German divisions had been smashed by the Russian juggernaut - the worst defeat ever inflicted on the *Wehrmacht* -- and the Red Army was continuing to roll into Poland on its way to East Prussia. In Italy, the Americans and British had captured Rome and were attacking German forces a few hundred miles further north. In France, American, British and Canadian forces had landed on the continent, broken out of the beachheads - virtually annihilating two German Armies in the process - and were now driving through Belgium and Northern France toward the German border. Even in the south of France, a second invasion force of Americans and Free French was racing from the Riviera up the Rhone Valley while in the process trapping a part of the German Third Army.



With the start of the sixth year of war for Germany, Hitler had lost 3,360,000 men killed, wounded or missing. In August alone, 466,000 more of Germany's young men were lost, and September promised to be no better, for in scarcely two weeks, 27 German divisions had been eliminated from the war maps.<sup>6</sup>

Even with the mounting losses in both men and territory, Hitler still believed, in his dreams, that he could bring about a master stroke that would at least bring a favorable ending of the war for Germany. What Hitler was looking for was a way to buy time so that his "secret weapons" could be finished and produced in quantity. What he devised would be one last gasp, in a war already lost, which was doomed to fail from the moment of conception.

On September 16, Hitler attended his daily briefing on the situation at the fronts. As usual, bad news was coming from everywhere except for successful counterattacks that were being waged by panzer units in the Ardennes against American units trying to cross the German border. On hearing this news, Hitler jumped to his feet and said, "I have made a momentous decision, I shall go over to the counterattack!" Pointing to the map he continued, "Here, out of the Ardennes, with the objective—ANTWERP!"<sup>7</sup> Whether Hitler was aware of it or not, he was advocating a strategy that was discussed in a book written a hundred years before called *On War* by Karl von Clausewitz. In a paragraph of this work, Clausewitz answered the Führer's dilemma when he said, "When the disproportion of power is so great that no limitation of our objective can ensure us safety from catastrophe ...

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<sup>6</sup> William K. Goolrick and Ogden Tanner, *The Battle of the Bulge*. (Alexandria, Virginia: Time-Life Books, Inc., 1979) vol. 18, World War II. Gerald Simons, ed., 20

<sup>7</sup> Danny S. Parker, *Battle of the Bulge: Hitler Ardennes Offensive, 1944-1945* (Philadelphia: Combined Books, Inc., 1991), 17.

force will, or should, be concentrated in one desperate blow.”<sup>8</sup> To the shock of those present and to the generals in the field, what Hitler did was put in motion a plan that resulted in the largest battle of the entire campaign on the western front.

Hitler decided on the west for many reasons. The eastern front was not an option, because no matter what size force Germany could muster, it would be swallowed up by the massive Red Army, and therefore would gain no advantage. The Italian Front was not considered because it was a narrow area to fight in and a victory there would gain no advantage for Germany. In the west, however, the Allied armies were much smaller than the Russian Army was and a defeat of 30 Allied divisions would be devastating to America and Britain. Another reason for choosing the Western Front was the terrain, which was better suited for an offensive move utilizing armor. Also, the capture of Antwerp would cut off the key supply port from most for the Allied armies. Lastly, Hitler hoped to split what he thought was a fragile alliance between the Allies.

Hitler believed that he could cutoff the British and Canadian armies, and maybe even part of the American First and Ninth armies, from their supply lines, and force the British into a second Dunkirk. He believed further that public opinion in one of the two countries would turn against the war and perhaps force a pullout because of the losses. This in turn would drive a wedge between the two countries about the course of the war. The country left fighting would be forced to come to the negotiation table and settle for a peace in Germany’s favor. Hitler then could turn his efforts to the east. However, Hitler never figured on the close unity that had developed between Britain and the United States.

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<sup>8</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, (1832), quoted in Danny S. Parker, *Battle of the Bulge: Hitler Ardennes Offensive, 1944-1945* (Philadelphia: Combined Books, Inc., 1991), 17.

Figure 1: Strategic Map: West Front (15 December 1944)<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Trevor N. Dupuy, David L. Bongard and Richard C. Anderson Jr., *Hitler's Last Gamble: The Battle of the Bulge, December 1944-January 1945*, (Harper Collins Publishers, 1994), 7.

### CHAPTER III Hitler's Grand Plan

Hitler's generals were shocked by the Führer's plans. Almost everyone felt that Antwerp was far too ambitious of an objective for what remained of the *Wehrmacht* and the *Luftwaffe*. Even *Generaloberst* Alfred Jodl, the head of the operations staff of the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* (OKW), believed that the objective was beyond the ability of the German military. Nevertheless, Hitler ordered Jodl and his staff to work up plans for a counteroffensive toward Antwerp. After about four weeks, Jodl came back with five plans of action. Operation *Holland* called for a single attack from the Venlo area with Antwerp as the objective. Operation *Liege-Aachen* called for a two-pronged envelopment attack launched simultaneously from northern Luxembourg and northwest of Aachen that would come together at Liege trapping the First U.S. Army. Operation *Luxembourg* called for another envelopment attack with two pincers, one from central Luxembourg and the other from Metz converging on Longwy and trapping Patton's Third Army. Operation *Lorraine* had a two pronged attack from Metz and Baccarat converging on Nancy. Lastly, Operation *Alsace* again proposed a two-pronged attack from Epinal and Montbeliard converging on Vesoul.<sup>10</sup>

Hitler, already having his mind made up concerning Antwerp as the objective, asked that plans one and two be combined for the final offensive. On 11 October the combined plan was submitted to the Führer. The plan called for the deployment of three German armies. The newly raised Sixth *SS Panzerarmee*, led by *SS-Obergruppenführer* Joseph "Sepp"

Dietrich, a boozy, up-through-the-ranks comrade of Hitler's dating back to the 1920's, would lead the main thrust. With five infantry and four SS panzer divisions, the Sixth *SS Panzerarmee* would advance from Monschau to Losheim facing the American 99<sup>th</sup> Division and parts of the 14<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Group and then cut to the Northwest, crossing the Meuse on both sides of Liege and then advance to Antwerp. To the South would be the Fifth *Panzerarmee*, led by *General der Panzertruppen* Hasso Eccard von Manteuffel, a classically trained officer favored by Hitler for his previous successes, would strike through the middle of the Ardennes, through the 106<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> American Divisions. The Fifth *Panzerarmee*, consisting of three panzer, one panzer grenadier and four infantry divisions, would provide flank protection until they joined in the assault on Antwerp. The Seventh *Armee*, consisting of a panzer grenadier and six infantry divisions, would advance West to the Meuse River dropping off troops along the way to block the Allies from sending reinforcements to the American forces under attack by the other two armies. To the North of the Sixth *SS Panzerarmee*, several divisions of the Fifteenth *Armee* would attack to protect the rear once the main force was near the Meuse River. This side operation was code named Operation *Spatlese* (Late Harvest).<sup>11</sup>

With the plan in place, Hitler code-named the operation after an old German nationalistic song *Wacht am Rhein* (Watch on the Rhine). He seemed to hope that if Allied intelligence picked up the name, they would be fooled into believing that the Germans were planning a defensive battle along the Rhine River. Hitler ordered that no radio transmissions be used nor were the plans to be discussed with anyone, without permission, under penalty

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<sup>10</sup> Parker, 21.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

of death. *O-Tag* was set for 27 November, but difficulties in bringing in and supplying troops led to the day being moved back several times until 16 December was settled on.<sup>12</sup>

This plan was kept under such secrecy that not even *Generalfeldmarschall* Karl Rudolf Gerd von Rundstedt, *Oberbefehlshaber im Westen*, nor the generals who would command the armies were told of the plans. On 22 October, Hitler called for Rundstedt and *Generalfeldmarschall* Walter Model, leader of *Heeresgruppe B*, to send their chiefs of staff, *General der Kavallerie* Siegfried Westphal and *General der Infantry* Hans Krebs to Wolf's Lair.<sup>13</sup> Waiting for a verbal lashing from Hitler for the recent loss of Aachen, they stood in stunned silence as the Führer unveiled his plans to them. When Westphal revealed the plan back at Rundstedt's headquarters, the *Generalfeldmarschall* was appalled by the idea, although he admitted that Hitler's choice of the Ardennes for the counteroffensive represented "a stroke of genius."<sup>14</sup> However, Rundstedt still saw the plan as far too ambitious. Even the ardent Nazi, Model, saw the failure in the plan stating "The plan doesn't have a leg to stand on!"<sup>15</sup> The two, finding each other in the same corner, worked up their own plans for an offensive that was more in keeping with Germany's capabilities.

Rundstedt and his staff developed *Plan Martin*. It called for a double envelopment attack using the thirty divisions planned for *Wacht Am Rhein*. The Fifteenth *Armee* was to pin down the American forces while three panzer corps swept through the Ardennes on a

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<sup>12</sup> MacDonald, 29.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Parker, 22.

narrow front. The jaws of the two pincers would come together in the vicinity of Liege, thereby cutting off the First Army in the Aachen area to the north of the Ardennes.<sup>16</sup>

Model and his staff developed a plan that called for a single powerful armor force, made up of the Fifth and Sixth *Panzerarmees*, to drive over a forty mile front between the Hurtgen Forest and the road center of St. Vith. The Seventh *Armee* would follow behind, peeling off to provide flank protection. The goal, like *Plan Martin*, was to encircle and destroy the American First Army. The name they gave for this plan was *Herbstnebel* (Autumn Fog). On 27 October, these plans, called the “Small Solution,” were presented to Hitler, whereupon he rejected both. Even Jodl, who tried to persuade Hitler to be more realistic on the plans, was frustrated by the Führer’s unwillingness to concede changes.

Hitler’s faith in *Wacht Am Rhein* was based on misguided belief in equipment production and manpower numbers that were fed to him by his staff. Furthermore, Hitler believed in his divine destiny, likening himself to Frederick the Great and his great success in splitting the coalition of nations against him in the Seven Years’ War with a great military blow. Hitler told his Generals;

Our enemies are the greatest opposites which exist on earth, ultra-capitalist states on one side; ultra-Marxist states on the other; on one side a dying empire and on the other side a colony, the United States, waiting to claim its inheritance. Deal a heavy blow and bring down this artificial coalition with a mighty thunderclap.<sup>17</sup>

Rundstedt and Model, still convinced that they could change the Führer’s mind, combined their plans into one final alternative that closely resembled one of Jodl’s proposals. To help persuade Hitler, they enlisted the help of the generals who would be

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

leading the armies of the last offensive. However, they were not able to change the Führer's mind in any aspects of the plan, and as a result, Hitler issued a final statement that "there will be absolutely no changes in the present intentions."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 23.



Figure 2: Operational Plan for “Wacht Am Rhein”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Parker, 23.

## A Failure of Intelligence

The failure of Allied intelligence to learn of the German counteroffensive, is one of the greatest military intelligence blunders in the history of modern warfare. This was due to overconfidence on the part of the Allies, and the subsequent failure of the intelligence corps to analyze properly information gathered by ULTRA. This over-confidence in the weakness of the German military was a major contributing factor to the destruction of the two regiments of the 106<sup>th</sup> Division by German forces in the Schnee Eifel (Snow Mountain) area.

The Allied armies were seven months ahead of schedule by December of 1944. The ease at which the Allies were moving across the western front led to serious miscalculations of the German's capabilities. Allied intelligence believed that their strategic bombing campaign had severely crippled German industry. They felt that the Germans could not possibly produce the war materials needed to do more than support a limited defense. However, as studies would later show, Albert Speer was so successful in organizing war production that despite Allied bombing, most aspects of German war manufacturing actually reached peak levels of production only in the fall of 1944. One example was German tank production that peaked in December 1944, reaching a figure of 598 per month, which was more than 5 times the production figure of 1942.<sup>20</sup>

A second reason for this over-confidence was the Allies' belief that the *Wehrmacht* was in full retreat and that it was unable to mount an organized defense let alone a massive counter-attack. In fact, many held the belief that the war in Europe could conceivably be

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<sup>20</sup> Parker, 14.

over by the start of the new year. The Twelfth Army Group, under command of General Omar Bradley, in its summary for 12 December expressed this belief when it reported:

It is now certain that attrition is steadily sapping the strength of the German forces on the Western front and that the crust of defenses is thinner, more brittle and more vulnerable than it appears on our G-2 map or to the troops in the line.<sup>21</sup>

Even Field Marshal Sir Bernard Montgomery, commander of the 21<sup>st</sup> Army Group, the master of the set battle and always worried about moving too fast said,

The enemy is at present fighting a defensive campaign on all fronts; his situation is such that he cannot stage major offensive operations. Furthermore, at all costs he has to prevent the war from entering on a mobile phase; he has not the transport or the petrol that would be necessary for mobile operations. The enemy is in a bad way.<sup>22</sup>

In a friendly bet between Ike and Monty, Ike bet five pounds that the war would be over by Christmas. Monty would later pick up his bittersweet prize.

This over-confidence on the part of the Allies allowed for sloppy gathering of information and lax defensive measures. ULTRA, the Allies top secret ENIGMA code-breaking device, provided much valuable information about German intentions. However, many field commands ignored the intelligence gathered in the weeks prior to the attack. The American army had had little need for information from its intelligence camp because during the drive across France, Belgium and Holland, many of the local civilians gladly informed on the German army in their area. However, when the American armies began to reach the German frontier, all these resources dried up, and the military brass failed to take measures to replace this lost information. Instead they began to put all their faith in ULTRA, and this required proper interpretation of information and further investigation.

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<sup>21</sup> Gerald Astor, A Blood-Dimmed Tide: The Battle of the Bulge By The Men Who Fought It (New York, Donald I. Fine, Inc., 1992), 76.

The Germans, wanting to do everything possible to deceive the Allies about their plans, conceived a deception plan called *Abwehrlacht im Westen* (The Defensive Battle in the West). This plan was casually leaked on the radios knowing that the Allies would pick it up. Although this information would support the Allies' belief about German capabilities, there were other pieces of intelligence gathered which should have raised a yellow flag and required more investigation.<sup>23</sup>

ULTRA deciphered many urgent requests from Army Group B for aerial reconnaissance of the area around the Eifel. One such request was for reconnaissance of roads along the Prüm-Houffalize axis, which was one of the most important routes, via St. Vith, into and through the Ardennes. There were further requests for reconnaissance of crossings of the Meuse River. ULTRA also picked up calls that were made for air protection of the railroads in the Eifel region and to fly counter-reconnaissance flights to prevent any Allied planes from flying in the area. On 7 December, Army Group B wanted fighter cover for virtually the entire Eifel region.<sup>24</sup>

In early November, the cryptanalysts began to break the codes of the *Reichsbahn* (German railroad). With this code, ULTRA began picking up signals on almost half of the 800 trains used to move men and equipment into position, which indicated a massive movement to the front. ULTRA also picked up information on movements of the *Luftwaffe* to the Western front as well as troop movement. ULTRA had given a lot of information,

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Parker, 39.

<sup>24</sup> MacDonald, 65.

but it failed to give specific information, to say exactly why troops and aircraft were being moved.<sup>25</sup>

Even MAGIC, the American code-breaking machine for deciphering Japanese diplomatic code, picked up important information regarding German intentions on the Western front. On 4 September, Japan's ambassador to Berlin, Baron Hiroshi Oshama, visited Hitler and expressed his government's concern about Germany's ability to continue the war. Hitler responded by telling Oshama that he was planning a large-scale counter offensive in the West to be launched after the beginning of November. Oshama relayed this information back to Japan, which the U.S. intercepted and decrypted, however, it never made it past the Pentagon. Again, on 15 November, Oshama talked with German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop about this offensive and if it was still in the works. Oshama was reassured, and he sent two cables to Tokyo about his talks. As before, these messages were intercepted and sent to the Pentagon, where they sat untouched.<sup>26</sup>

The Allies also failed to use conventional intelligence. Although air reconnaissance was grounded most of the time due to bad weather, it did detect heavy rail traffic and troop movement in the area of the Eifel. However, it was accepted that this was just the movement of troops up to the front for the defense of Germany. Other sources proved just as reliable but were overlooked. On 9 December, the 83<sup>rd</sup> Division took a prisoner who said there were strong rumors that the Germans would launch an all out attack in the next few days. The 4<sup>th</sup> and 106<sup>th</sup> Divisions also captured German soldiers who made the same

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 24-25, 48-49.

claims. Even the Allied POW camps reported that the German prisoners that they were receiving had much higher morale than those captured prior to December.

Troops in the front line also reported increased activity across from their positions. They noticed an increase in enemy patrols in the Ardennes area, especially the Schnee Eifel area. American patrols reported seeing troops that were dressed in new uniforms, were much more organized and that there was “much saluting and double-timing of guards.” Some patrols even stumbled on German encampments. However, senior intelligence officers ignored most of this information. In one case, soldiers of the 106<sup>th</sup> Division reported that they were hearing “the sounds of vehicles all along the front after dark—vehicles, barking dogs, motors.” When this was reported to the VIII Corps, they were told not to worry, that the Germans were just playing records to scare them.<sup>27</sup>

Only two people high up in the allied command believed that the Germans were planning an offensive. They were Major General Kenneth Strong, Eisenhower’s personal G-2, and Colonel Benjamin Dickerson, G-2 of the First Army. Dickerson, after looking over the reports that had come in from the front, was very concerned about a German offensive in the Ardennes region, but because his peers saw him as such a doomsayer, no one took his estimates seriously, not even General Omar Bradley commanding the 12<sup>th</sup> Army Group. Long overdue for a leave, Dickerson was sent on leave to Paris on orders, and his remarks continued to be ignored. General Strong strongly believed that a German attack was coming because he noticed that in the first week of December, nine panzer divisions had disappeared from the eastern front and that signified enemy movement was in progress. He sent out his summary to the senior Allied commanders, stating his belief that

the attack would come through the Ardennes. General Dwight D. Eisenhower, overall commander of Allied armies, finding some reasons for concern, sent Strong to Bradley's headquarters in Luxembourg City to discuss the possibility of an attack in the Ardennes. Bradley, considering Strong something of a worry-wart, brushed the warning aside and said, "Let them come."<sup>28</sup>

The Americans even fooled themselves. The 23<sup>rd</sup> Special Troop was disguised as the 75<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, which was still in England, to fool the Germans into believing that troop strength was higher in the region than truly existed. However, this did not fool the Germans but instead caused havoc for the Americans. When Headquarters of VIII Corps read a report from the front of increased enemy radio and vehicular traffic, they truly believed that it was in response to the deception operation and that Germans were moving troops to bolster up the line. Even after the attack had started, some troops of the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division in the line in Luxembourg were later to wonder why the 75<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division never came forward to help them.<sup>29</sup>

Probably the biggest blunder of intelligence in the days before the attack was the failure to take seriously the information given to them by a Luxembourg woman by the name of Elise Delé. The Germans had picked her up when she was crossing the front and took her to Bitburg for questioning. That night, she left the town and began a long journey back to her village of Bivels. As she worked her way through the lines, she noticed a sharp increase in military traffic, piles of military supplies along each side of the road, and large

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>28</sup> Parker, 41.

<sup>29</sup> MacDonald, 74.

concentration of troops, some of which she recognized as SS troops. On the morning of 14 December, two men from the underground picked her up. When she told them what she had seen, they took her to the Hotel Heintz, where the American Intelligence and Reconnaissance (I&R) Platoon of the 28<sup>th</sup> Division's 109<sup>th</sup> Infantry was billeted. The Americans showed much interest in her story, and they took her further back to Diekirch for more interrogation. From there she was taken to VIII Corps in Bastogne, with the intent to move her to Spa. However, she would spend quite a long time in Bastogne, hiding in a cellar as the Germans encircled the city. In what was the biggest tip off of German intentions, the Allies had wasted their time because of red tape.<sup>30</sup>

Hitler's deception worked, but not because of Germany's ability to hide such a mass concentration of troops, instead the Allies bungled their intelligence to such an extent that the information of an attack was in front of them but they were blinded by their own over-confidence.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 14.



## CHAPTER IV

### All's Quiet on the Western Front

The Allied armies were, by December, seven months ahead of their projected schedule. This rapid advance had caused a serious supply problem. In September the Allies were using 20,000 tons of provisions, 6 million gallons of gas and 2,000 tons of artillery ammunition every 24 hours. All this had to be trucked over a 300-mile trip from Cherbourg and Normandy.<sup>31</sup> The Allies had captured Antwerp intact in early September, however, the Germans still dominated the Scheldt Estuary that controlled the movement of ships into Antwerp. Until this area was secure, and Antwerp used for supplies, there was no way to maintain an advance all along the front.

Another problem facing the Allies was the fact that they were strapped for soldiers. The losses in battle, the lack of speed with which troops were being shipped to Europe and the length of the front, required that some areas be thinned so that others could be bolstered. One such area that was thinned was the Ardennes region in Belgium and Luxembourg. The Americans, especially Bradley, did not believe the Germans would attack in the Ardennes during the winter. They still held the pre-World War II belief that the Ardennes was unsuited for armor, and that the Germans could do nothing more than stage local attacks. When Eisenhower discussed his apprehension concerning the Ardennes, Bradley called the thinning of the lines a “calculated risk,” and convinced Ike to accept the risk.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Parker, 31.

<sup>32</sup> MacDonald, 68.

The lack of men and the over-confidence also led the Allies to develop no formal strategic reserves, or any plans for defensive measures. This would play an important role later, in the first days of the battle. Instead of keeping raw divisions and units behind in reserve while they finished their training, they were stationed along the front in areas where the Allies did not feel the Germans would attack. In fact, in a memo for VIII Corps to the 106<sup>th</sup>, the division was scheduled to participate in field exercises and maneuvers as well as other combat training from 13 December through 3 January.<sup>33</sup>

Because there was no fear of a German attack in the Ardennes region, the divisions, which were thinly spread over front, took on a lax attitude. The Germans units in the area could see that the Americans were careless in the region, and German reconnaissance reported that the American sentries stayed on guard for one hour after dark then retired only to reappear one hour before dawn. Dick Byers, a part of a field artillery observation team, confirmed this by saying, "Before the Bulge, we were a nine to five army in the Ardennes."<sup>34</sup>

Had American units in the Ardennes not been allowed to become so careless in their sentry duty and general front line military procedure, the attack that was to come may not have been such a surprise. This would have helped in the organization of defenses after the attack had begun. This would also have interfered with the ability of the German artillery to pinpoint targets for the initial bombardment. Again, the Allies over-confidence in the deteriorating situation of the *Wehrmacht* and the belief of Germany's inability to mount a major attack, all contributed to this slack attitude.

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<sup>33</sup> 106th Infantry Division, G-1 Reports, "General Orders." File 3106-1.1.3, National Archives, Suitland, Maryland.

<sup>34</sup> Astor, 78.

## Arduenna Silva

For centuries, the Ardennes has been viewed as an impenetrable forest that was of no use for offensive military purposes. The Ardennes region contains some of the roughest terrain in Europe. The terrain is extremely varied with ridges, plateaus, valleys, steep ravines, forests and clear plains. Although centuries of clearing land for farming had thinned the forest, the Eifel area still consisted of a complex of heavily wooded hills between the Rhine and Moselle Rivers.

The Ardennes averages 35 to 40 inches of rainfall a year, the heaviest in November and early December. All this rainfall saturated the soil and made off-road travel difficult if not impossible. Fog or mist, that failed to clear before midday and reappeared in late afternoon, often blanketed the region. Snow sometime accumulated up to a foot in depth—deeper on the Schnee Eifel and the drifts; and the raw wind sweeping the heights brought the wind chill factor in December down below freezing. Roman legions described the *Arduenna Silva* as “a frightful place, full of terrors.”<sup>35</sup> Legend tells of how the four sons of Duke Aymon held out in the depths of the Ardennes for eight winters against Charlemagne. Even in modern times the Ardennes was viewed with a sense of fear. Field Marshal Ferdinand Foch summed up the military assessment of the region as “impenetrable.” A French officer warned in 1914, “If you go into the death trap of the

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<sup>35</sup> Parker, 49.

Ardennes, you will never come out.”<sup>36</sup> Even the Maginot Line, which had been planned to stretch the entire French border, was stopped before the Ardennes for lack of money, and more importantly because it was still believed that the region provided protection from a rapid mobile attack. In 1944, with Allied armies on the German border, there was little thought of the Ardennes being a launching point for a German attack. It was felt that if there was going to be an attack, then it would be to the north or south of the Ardennes.

The Ardennes is made up of areas from Luxembourg, Belgium and Northern France. Although there were, and still are, no cities in the region, there were numerous small towns and villages that dotted the countryside. These quiet, picturesque villages, were a favorite tourist spot for the wealthy of Europe and America to visit before the war. Spa, the most famous of these spots attracted thousands of people a year to its medicinal hot mud baths.

One such town was St. Vith. This small Belgian town, on the border of Germany, had a population of approximately 2,000 people in 1944, and was just 12 miles behind the silent front line. St. Vith was part of Germany until the treaty of Versailles changed the borders. This may have changed the citizenship of the inhabitants but for many, their loyalties still lay with Germany.

St. Vith is situated on a low hill surrounded on all sides by slightly higher rises. On the southern side, Braunlauf Creek swings past the town. To the east, about a mile and a half away, a large wooded hill rises and serves as a screen. This hill is cut by the road to Schönberg, which then travels down into the Our Valley and follows the north bank of the

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

river until the Schönberg bridge is reached approximately six miles away, where it crosses the river before heading into St. Vith.<sup>37</sup>

St. Vith was important because it was the center for six paved roads running around the dense wooded hill area of the Schnee Eifel that fanned out towards the North, south and west. However, the Schnee Eifel range served as a buffer that diverted heavy highway traffic so it passed to the north or south of St. Vith.

Lying to the East of St. Vith is the Eifel Plateau, with its three distinct protruding ridges or ranges, the central range being called the Schnee Eifel. The Schnee Eifel itself is a wooded ridge in the Eifel that was crested by the German West Wall fortifications. At the northwestern foot of the Schnee Eifel runs a long narrow valley, known as the Losheim Gap, incised in the Eifel Plateau. On the west side of the Losheim Gap runs the Our River, and to the west of the river, the plateau reappears. Running between the Our River and the Schnee Eifel, is one of the few good roads moving from Roth to Schönberg in a southwesterly direction. The Losheim Gap is cluttered by abrupt hills, some bare, others covered by fir trees and thick undergrowth, which makes travel off the road extremely difficult. To the south, the Schnee Eifel is terminated by a corridor called the Valley of the Alf, a small creek that makes a horseshoe bend around the Schnee Eifel east to the village of Pronsfeld.<sup>38</sup>

The roads in the area were characteristic of the Eastern Ardennes, winding, with many blind turns, and at points squeezing through narrow village streets. The roads would dip abruptly and then rise suddenly as they crossed ravines or hills. Traveling on the roads

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<sup>37</sup> Hugh M. Cole, *The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge*, US Army in World War II (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1965), 272.

in the Ardennes during the summer was challenging enough, but during the winter it was a more difficult task. The paved stretches of roads required constant mending and the dirt roads quickly sank away and needed shoring up with logs and stones.<sup>39</sup>

There were three main roads that ran through the Schnee Eifel area: two paved roads ran around the Schnee Eifel while the center road, of secondary construction, ran through the Losheim Gap.<sup>40</sup> For General Manteuffel, the control of these roads was crucial if there was to be any hope of his Fifth *Panzerarmee* making a rapid move to the Meuse River.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 137.

## CHAPTER V

### The Golden Lions Move In

The 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, named the “Golden Lion” division because of the gold lion head on the division’s insignia, was activated on 15 March 1943 at Fort Jackson, South Carolina and was assigned to XII Corps of the Second United States Army. Brigadier General William C. McMahon was originally designated to be the commanding general of the 106<sup>th</sup>. However, prior to activation, General McMahon was named commanding general of the 8<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. To replace McMahon, Brigadier General Alan W. Jones was named commanding general of the 106<sup>th</sup>, and Colonel Herbert T. Perrin was designated assistant division commander.<sup>41</sup>

The 80th Infantry Division provided many of the officers from company commanders up as well as the enlisted cadre for the new division. The new recruits were from almost every state in the union and their average age was lower than previous recruits. Of the entire enlisted personnel of the 106<sup>th</sup>, three-quarters of the men were 25 years and under, and two-thirds of the infantry were 22 years of age or younger.

From 29 March to 10 July 1943, the division went through basic training at Fort Jackson. Unit training followed this from 12 July to 2 October and combined training from 3 October to 8 January, also held at Fort Jackson. The division then spent the next three months amid persistent rain in the Cumberland Valley in middle Tennessee for maneuvers with the rest of the XII Corps which also included the 26<sup>th</sup> and 78<sup>th</sup> Infantry divisions and the 17<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division. There were eight operations, involving attack, defense, and river

crossing problems. In the seventh operation, the 106<sup>th</sup> opposed the other three divisions and held a defensive position so well that the operation had to be terminated arbitrarily on the fifth day.

Between the time of the Tennessee maneuvers and the final training period at Camp Atterbury, developments occurred that would later prove to hamper the effectiveness of the 106<sup>th</sup>. During this period, some of the trained men from the division were pulled out and sent overseas to act as replacements for divisions which had lost troop strength during their push across Europe. The division was replenished with soldiers transferred from the Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP) schools. The ASTP was like the ROTC program, but was to train enlisted men in specialized military fields. However, these men were seriously lacking basic tactical skills, and when the rest of the division were receiving advance training, the former ASTP men were receiving their basic training.<sup>42</sup>

Starting on 7 October and continuing through 10 November, the 106<sup>th</sup> was moved out of Camp Myles Standish, in Taunton, Massachusetts in four movements to the Oxford-Cheltenham vicinity in the south midlands of England. Once there, the division continued its training and was issued the necessary equipment before their cross-channel movement. This movement began on 26 November and the final units closed its concentration area in the vicinity of Limesey, France on 6 December. The division immediately began moving to the Schnee Eifel area by truck, and finished its movement on 10 December. As per VIII Corps orders, the 106<sup>th</sup> began immediate preparations for relieving of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry

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<sup>41</sup> 106th Infantry Division, *General Historical and Operational Reports. "The Story of the 106th Division."* File 3106-0. National Archives. Suitland Maryland. 1.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.



Division that needed a rest after fighting a tough battle in the Hurtgen Forest. The 106<sup>th</sup> assumed responsibility for the defense of the sector at 1900 on 11 December.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 2.

## The Fifth Panzer Army Prepares

From the first time *General der Panzertruppen* Manteuffel heard about Hitler's planned offensive, he did not believe that his army, let alone the entire army group, could reach the objective of Antwerp. He believed that the German armies would need more armored and infantry forces than Hitler had allotted for the task. Also, these forces needed to be better trained since many of the divisions were new and many of the replacement men in the other attached divisions were not battle-tested.<sup>44</sup> With the lack of good infantry divisions, the crucial early objective of seizing the important road nets was made that much more difficult. The control of the road nets was crucial for Manteuffel and the other field generals, because of the need to move armor quickly.

Tanks had become much wider and heavier since the Germans' successful blitzkrieg of 1940. The new Panzer V and VI tanks had many advantages over the early predecessor, but they also had some disadvantages that made the control of the road nets vital. First, these new tanks, some of which weighed over 70 tons, needed hard roads or ground on which to operate. They no longer could cross the soft ground nor use the narrow forest trails that their 1940 predecessors used. Second, if one of these wide, heavy tanks broke down on the road, it effectively blocked all other vehicles, for the snow, slush and mud, which lay on the side of the road, kept the vehicles from driving off the road for fear of getting trapped.<sup>45</sup> Therefore it was crucial that the few good roads be seized as soon as

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<sup>44</sup> Peter Elstob, *Hitler's Last Offensive, The Full Story of the Battle of the Ardennes*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971), 88.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

possible and that the four major road networks controlling the cities be captured and held. These were Malmédy, Houffalize, Bastogne and St. Vith.

Manteuffel had planned to take St. Vith by the second day. To do this, he planned to start his part of the offensive early on the morning of the 16<sup>th</sup> by sending specially trained “shock companies” to infiltrate the American line like “rain-drops.”<sup>46</sup> Later, at about 5:30 a.m., the German artillery would bombard the American positions followed by the main German assault aided by artificial moonlight created by bouncing searchlights off the clouds. It was hoped that many of the American soldiers would scramble to their positions only to find that the Germans were not only in front of them, but also to their rear.

For the attack toward St. Vith, Manteuffel planned to encircle the untested 106<sup>th</sup> Division with his LXVI *Armee Korps* under the command of *General der Artillerie* Walther Lucht. The LXVI *Armee Korps*, unfortunately for Manteuffel, was a weak one even by 1944 standards. It was composed of two partially experienced units, the 18. *Volksgrenadierdivision*<sup>47</sup> and the 62. *Volksgrenadierdivision*, each about 20,000 men in size; a meager allotment of corps artillery, and 42 assault guns.<sup>48</sup>

The 18<sup>th</sup> VG Division was somewhat seasoned. The unit was formed in September in Denmark on the ruins of the 18<sup>th</sup> Air Force Field Division, earlier destroyed in the Mons Pocket. Commanded by *Generalmajor* Hoffmann-Schönborn, the 18<sup>th</sup> VG Division was reconstructed from *Luftwaffe* and Navy units as well as *Volksdeutsche* and workers drawn in by the new draft laws. When the unit formed, there was a serious lack of trained non-

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<sup>46</sup> Parker, 75.

<sup>47</sup> Hereafter *Volksgrenadierdivision* is referred to as VG.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

commissioned officers and officers. However, the 18<sup>th</sup> VG Division was located in a quiet sector of the west wall, along the northern reaches of the Schnee Eifel. Locating the unit in a quiet sector had allowed time for the unit to train for battle while protecting them from battle losses.<sup>49</sup>

The 62<sup>nd</sup> VG Division, commanded by *Generalmajor* Frederich Kittel, bore the number of an infantry division that had been destroyed on the Eastern Front. Although the 62<sup>nd</sup> VG Division was fully manned and its equipment was new and complete, this green unit had never seen action since its formation in October.<sup>50</sup> Even the quality of the men filling the ranks showed the toll that five years for war had taken. The US Weekly Intelligence Summary for the week ending 23 December made the following report; the unit “was composed of poor physical specimens – men with a glass eye or crippled arm being not uncommon – recruited from all age groups and all types of units.” The unit even contained many Czech and Polish conscripts who spoke no German.<sup>51</sup>

General Lucht’s LXVI *Armee Korps* was to form the right wing of Manteuffel’s Fifth *Panzerarmee*. The LXVI *Armee Korps* was split in two, in order to bypass the Schnee Eifel on either side, seize the road net at St. Vith and move in column formation to and across the Meuse River. The 18<sup>th</sup> VG Division, having already been stationed in the area since late October, and having better knowledge of the terrain was made the main assault unit. Their role was to split in two, with the right wing of this attack to be made by the 294<sup>th</sup> and 295<sup>th</sup> regiments of the 18<sup>th</sup> VG Division circling around the Schnee Eifel, with the main objective

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<sup>49</sup> Cole, 142.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Headquarters Twelfth Army Group, “Weekly Intelligence Summary No. 20 For Week Ending. 232400 December 1944,” National Archives, Washington D.C.

being the Schönberg bridge. The left hook of the planned encirclement was to be carried out by the 293<sup>rd</sup> regiment of the 18<sup>th</sup> VG Division, converging with the other two regiments at St. Vith.<sup>52</sup> The 62<sup>nd</sup> VG Division was to create a break-through on the left of the 18<sup>th</sup> VG Division in the Gross-Langenfeld-Heckhuscheid sector. 62<sup>nd</sup> VG Division was to advance on a broad front, clearing the Pronsfeld-St.Vith road, and seize the Our River crossing at Steinebrück. *Generalmajor* Kittel was ordered to concentrate on the objective of the Our River crossing and leave the capture of St. Vith to the 18<sup>th</sup> VG Division while providing a block for attempted western and southern exits.<sup>53</sup>

With U.S. observation posts on the Schnee Eifel overlooking the German positions, Manteuffel ordered that everything possible be done to avoid raising excitement in the American lines. This included all patrolling, which was banned from 10 December onward. However, when the 106<sup>th</sup> Division arrived, and the Germans sensed how new and inexperienced this division was, the order banning patrols was relaxed. This relaxation of the ban would prove to be a very beneficial move for the German command, for patrols on the night of 12-13 December, in the Losheim Gap, discovered that the two thousand yards separating Roth and Weckerath was unoccupied and the two villages were weakly held.<sup>54</sup> With this new information Manteuffel and Lucht made quick changes in the plans to exploit this newly discovered weak spot in the allied lines.

As the days drew closer to *O-Tag* final preparations were made for the attack. Men, tanks, and equipment were moved into place. Artillery units moved their guns up into

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<sup>52</sup> Parker, 75.

<sup>53</sup> Cole, 143.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

positions, aimed them at the American artillery positions, which had been located by a German observation team earlier, and made final calibrations. For the majority of the German soldiers in the west, morale was very high, and they were ready to, in the words of von Rundstedt, “Give everything to achieve things beyond human possibilities for the Fatherland and the Führer.”<sup>55</sup> Everything was ready for the assault, and at midnight on 15 December, at Rundstedt’s headquarters in Ziegenberg Castle, that final entry for the day was made in the *OB WEST* War Diary, which said: “Tomorrow brings the beginning of a new chapter in the campaign in the west.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> MacDonald, 97.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER VI

### A Baptism of Fire!

The early morning of 16 December was the same as the previous mornings to the soldiers of the 106<sup>th</sup> Division on the Eifel Plateau. Most of the men were still asleep at 0525, since a quiet sector provided this luxury. Soldiers who were unlucky enough to have guard duty held their posts in the freezing temperature of the early morning. About 0530 some of the men on guard duty noticed a strange sight to the East. They saw countless flickering pinpoints of lights on the horizon and for a brief moment there was a sense of wonder as to what they were. This was answered in seconds by the ear piercing explosions of artillery rounds coming from those flickers of lights. For almost all the men of the 106<sup>th</sup> Division and its supporting troops, including its officers, this would be their baptism of fire.

The Germans opened with over 2000 guns, ranging from 3-inch mortars to giant 16-inch railway guns and hit the entire length of the American front in the Ardennes region. The bombardment caught the Americans both in the line and back at headquarters by complete surprise. As the artillery barrage moved off to the American rear positions, giant searchlights flickered on and their beams were directed to the clouds where the light reflected off them, provided an eerie kind of moonlight. The forward shock troops began to infiltrate the American positions, trying to get behind the lines to create more confusion when the main force began its move.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Colonel R. Ernest Dupuy, *St. Vith: Lion in the Way. The 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division in World War* (Washington, Infantry Journal Press, Inc., 1949), 21.

By 0615 the shelling stopped and the motor and track sounds of German tanks began to fill the early morning air. Many American units were cut off from each other and from headquarters because the shelling had ripped to pieces the phone lines that were hardly buried, if at all. This had the effect of causing much confusion among the units on the line and regimental and divisional headquarters. Although some units still had partial contact with headquarters, most were now on their own to try to slow the German onslaught, unable to coordinate with the other units in the area concerning defensive moves. In many instances, the loss of communications meant the loss of the units.

The last thing Major General Troy Middleton's U.S. VIII Corps was expecting in the middle of December was an assault by German forces. Those higher in the command structure did not expect any move by the Germans in the Ardennes when they sent Middleton's four divisions, the 4<sup>th</sup>, 28<sup>th</sup>, and 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Divisions, the 9<sup>th</sup> Armored Division, and 14<sup>th</sup> Mechanized Cavalry Group along with a reconnaissance regiment, to hold almost a 90 mile front. As mentioned earlier, the terrain was so difficult that this made it hard for these units, already stretched thinly by the length of their front, to form a contiguous front. As John Strawson described it;

Because of his frontage, Middleton had no proper system of mutually supporting dug-in defensive positions in depth, but rather a series of widely separated defended points strung out along river lines, such as the Our, with large gaps between them, gaps which often included the roads themselves.<sup>58</sup>

Even though these strong points had plenty of hardware, and most of these units were fully motorized, the lack of a continuous main defensive position, that could be manipulated as a whole in accordance with some master plan, led to uncoordinated fighting

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<sup>58</sup> John Strawson, *The Battle for the Ardennes*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972), 78.



by each strong point.<sup>59</sup> A further problem was the philosophy of the U.S. Army, which was one of training for powerfully supported, improvised and speedy attack, not for dogged, patient defense. This was especially true for those men of the 14<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Group, which is not meant for, and had not therefore been trained for, defensive actions. For other units in the area, inactivity had bred ill-preparedness. Therefore what was to happen in the course of the first few days of this battle were “many examples of low level resistance, determined on and executed by young lieutenants and sergeants with a handful of men and without benefit of either inspiring direction from above or adequate artillery support from behind.”<sup>60</sup>

The northern thrust of Manteuffel's LXVI Corps came through the southern edge of the Losheim Gap where the 14<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Group under command of Colonel Mark A. Devine Jr., was placed. Attached to his group was the 32<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, twelve 75mm. towed guns and two reconnaissance platoons of the 820 Tank Destroyer Battalion and the self-propelled 105mm howitzers of the 275<sup>th</sup> Armored Field Artillery Battalion attached to the 106<sup>th</sup> Division but detailed to support the 14<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Group. The eight hundred men from these units had to sacrifice the one genuine asset of lightly armored mechanized cavalry, and that was mobility. Instead, they occupied “little islands of defensive positions, mainly in widely separated villages.”<sup>61</sup> Most of these villages were built in depressions called “sugar bowls” by the G.I.'s stationed in them. They provided good defensive positions but poor maneuverability. The 14<sup>th</sup> Cavalry

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>61</sup> MacDonald, 103.

Group and its accompanying units garrisoned six of these small hamlets in the Losheim Gap. These men were to feel the brunt of the attack, as *SS-Obersturmbannführer* Joachim Peiper's 1<sup>st</sup> SS Panzer Division vied for room with *Oberst* Hoffman-Schonborn's 18<sup>th</sup> VG Division. The 14<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Group and the 32<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron were no match for either of these divisions, let alone both. Fighting was fierce in five of the six villages as American troops stubbornly held on to their positions until either they were forced out or until the order finally came to withdraw. At Kobscheid, two platoons of cavalry managed to hold on to the village for much of the day, although the fighting ebbed back and forth many times during the battle's course.<sup>62</sup>

Roth, which lay next to the most direct route to the Our River, was a village the Germans needed to control to help with the movement of reinforcements and supporting guns. The Germans greatly out-numbered the lone platoon of cavalry under Captain Stanley Porché, and the Germans were further strengthened by the assault guns assigned to them, compared to the two 75mm howitzers that Porché's platoon had. Colonel Devine tried to send a platoon of light tanks to help the situation, however they found the road blocked by those *grenadiers* that managed to slip around Roth. As the morning progressed, the situation facing the men in Roth was deteriorating rapidly.<sup>63</sup>

Further north at Weckerath, only a few men from Troop C were in the village but a contingent of light tanks quickly arrived to help the situation. Those in Weckerath saw the main thrust of the 18<sup>th</sup> VG Division march through the gap between Weckerath and Roth. Although the Americans opened fire, as did the artillery located on the ridge further back,

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

the German soldiers continued to move methodically on as the northern pincer made its way around the Schnee Eifel in their planned encirclement of the 422<sup>nd</sup> and 423<sup>rd</sup> Regiments of the 106<sup>th</sup> Division.<sup>64</sup>

At Krewinkel, the next village to the north, a platoon of cavalry and a platoon of attached reconnaissance troops were successful at repelling the first attack by the Third *Fallschirmdivision*, which was attached to the Sixth *SS Panzerarmee*. In a small version of Brig. General Anthony McAuliffe now famous response to the Germans demand to surrender at Bastogne, 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant Kenneth Ferrens, in response to a German soldier's shout to "Take a ten minute break, soldier. We'll be back." responded, "And we'll be waiting for you - you son of a bitch!"<sup>65</sup> The two platoons were able to hold the village while only suffering two wounded and one killed. In front of them lay the dead bodies of about 150 German soldiers. The troops at Afst also were able to put up a fight and managed to hold on to the small village after the first assault by German units.

Although the action at the other five villages was a valiant attempt during a very dim situation, the fighting at Lanzerath is a story of questionable action. The small garrison of reconnaissance troops and the crews of two 75mm anti-tank guns of the 820<sup>th</sup> Tank Destroyer Battalion "bugged-out" very shortly after the shelling by the Germans stopped. This is supported by the fact that they left all their equipment behind intact, even their radios. This action may have been one of self-preservation, because even had they stood their ground, the first shot from a 75mm gun at an entrenched position was usually its last one. Either way, the withdrawal seems most likely to have been premature. Although they

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

would have been shortly outnumbered, had they stayed, it would have helped to slow down the German advance in that sector, even if only by couple of hours. Instead, the Germans walked in, finding the village empty except for the local townspeople.

Colonel Devine realized the serious nature of the situation his troops were in. He had two choices, one was to leave his men committed to be either annihilated or captured, or to save what men he could and pull back to a more defensible position further back. His decision was to have his men fight another day, and so at 0930, without orders from the 106<sup>th</sup> Division, Colonel Devine ordered all the 75mm guns to pull back to the vicinity of Manderfeld. His decision meant that the northern flank of the 422<sup>nd</sup> Regiment was now exposed and, more importantly, it speeded up the Germans' ability to encircle and capture the 422<sup>nd</sup> and 423<sup>rd</sup> regiments on the Schnee Eifel. His decision to withdraw his troops led to his immediate relief from command of the 14<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Group. By noon, the German column was passing through Auw on its way towards Schönberg to meet with the southern arm of the pincer movement.<sup>66</sup>

When the bombardment hit the 422<sup>nd</sup> and 423<sup>rd</sup> regiments on the top of Schnee Eifel, the shells ripped into the giant fir trees, sending large branches crashing to the forest floor, and sending splinters of wood, like shrapnel, flying through the air from the tree bursts. Most of the positions occupied by the men of the two regiments, however, were in sturdy fortifications covered with logs, which greatly reduced the number of casualties. The heavy shelling also hit the villages behind the ridge line, particularly Schlausenbach and Bucket, sites of the command posts of the two regiments on the Eifel. Shelling was also

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<sup>66</sup> Cole, 148.

heavy on the road junctions in the rear, especially Schönberg and St. Vith, which took a pounding from big railway guns.

After the shelling stopped, the two regiments on the Eifel faced little pressure from German units directly in front of them, little more than a division's field replacement battalion. This frontal attack by the Germans, was an attempt to try to hide the fact that the main German force in the area was moving around the Eifel on both sides in an attempt to encircle the two regiments on the ridge.<sup>67</sup>

Units of the 422<sup>nd</sup> and 423<sup>rd</sup> regiments easily repulsed the Germans attempting to climb the steep slopes. The men of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division had warned their 106<sup>th</sup> counterparts that the Germans would send strong patrols out to test the new front line unit, and because of the size and the weakness of the attack, many of the men believed that this frontal attack was just such a test.

Other than the shelling and the weak frontal attack by the Germans, the 422<sup>nd</sup> missed the main shock of the pre-dawn attack. However, with the withdrawal of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 32<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry units, the door was open for the 294<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the 18<sup>th</sup> VG Division to move around the rear flank of the 422<sup>nd</sup> Regiment. By noon, the first grenadiers were beginning to move through this gap toward the village of Auw. Auw was the billeting area for Company A of the 81<sup>st</sup> Engineer Combat Battalion. Despite the early morning shelling, the engineers showed up for work on the roads as usual. However, when the enemy were spotted approaching Auw, the engineers hurried back to the village, set up their machine guns and engaged the German column. Supported by self-propelled assault guns, the Germans were able to shell the engineers out of their positions. By the time the last

American units were making their way out of the village, American artillery batteries were sending shells into the German positions in the village. This stopped the German advance for the time being<sup>68</sup>

About noon, the 294<sup>th</sup> regiment once again became active. This time their task was to neutralize the American artillery units located astride the Auw-Bleialf road. These units were the 589<sup>th</sup> Medium Field Artillery Battalion and the 592<sup>nd</sup>, a 155mm howitzer battalion. The *grenadiers* brought the positions under crossfire from small arms fire, while mortar crews and gunners worked on knocking out the field pieces. Auw was now the keystone for the protection of the rear flank of the 422<sup>nd</sup> Regiment, and Colonel Desscheneaux, the regimental commander, knew that. He immediately dispatched a small task force made up of Company L, (the cannon company) and part of an antitank company, to counterattack towards the hill village of Auw from which the Germans were coming.<sup>69</sup> As the task force started its way to Auw, a sudden snowstorm began which made the situation even worse. When the force made contact with the Germans near Auw, they received orders to immediately return to the regimental command post at Schlausenbach, which was now being threatened.

The Germans themselves had stepped up their drive to take over the artillery positions, by sending in assault guns to do the work. However, the American cannoneers were determined to stay with their guns, and put up a strong fight, firing

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<sup>67</sup> MacDonald, 107.

<sup>68</sup> Cole, 155.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 156.

shells with the shortest fuse possible. Other troops worked their way to within bazooka range of the enemy assault guns. The German drive halted and retreated after three assault guns were knocked out. The Germans then returned to the “softening up process” and waited until nightfall. When night came, the Germans resumed their attempt to destroy the artillery.<sup>70</sup>

Earlier, Jones had released the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 423<sup>rd</sup> Regiment, which was in reserve, to move through St. Vith to Schönberg. By 1730, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was at Schönberg setting up defenses. Three hours later, Jones ordered Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Puett to immediately attack the German forces at Auw, in hopes of permitting the two hard pressed artillery battalions to withdraw southward. After getting on the wrong road, and heading the wrong way, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion finally found its way over the dark countryside and reached the artillery units. Meanwhile, Colonel Descheneaux had swung his left battalion, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion around to face north, expecting to link up with the reserve battalion.<sup>71</sup>

Closer to the southern pincer movement of the 18<sup>th</sup> VG Division the fighting picked up in intensity. At Bleialf, a battalion of *Volksgrenadiers* attacked the village, thrusting back the bulk of the anti-tank company stationed there. Knowing that if Bleialf was allowed to fall, the 423<sup>rd</sup> Regiment would be cut off from the 422<sup>nd</sup> Regiment to their north, Colonel Cavender, commander of the 423<sup>rd</sup> Regiment, called General Jones asking for the return of his 2d battalion, which had been held at Born as the mainstay of the division reserves. Jones refused to release the troops, not fully understanding the scope and gravity of the situation all along the front. Cavender, unable to

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 157.

get the men he needed from Jones, was left with assembling a makeshift counterattacking force built around his Service Company (the regimental supply troop), a company of the 81<sup>st</sup> Engineering Battalion, men from Headquarters Company and the remainder of anti-tank company, all fighting as infantry. These soldiers of the 423<sup>rd</sup> Regiment were able to retake the village, only to be repulsed a short time later by a German counterattack. They mounted one last attempt to retake the village, and after house-to-house fighting, and as the sky began to darken, they had control once again of the village.<sup>72</sup> Although the determined efforts by those units to hold on to Bleialf were successful, little did they know that to their south-west, the order had been given to the 18<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Squadron to withdraw. The withdrawal of the 18<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Squadron meant that the right flank of the 423<sup>rd</sup> was now totally exposed.

In the sector of the front held by the 424<sup>th</sup> Regiment, the 62<sup>nd</sup> VG Division, with two regiments, side by side, attacked in two sectors. The main force was directed at Eigelscheid and the capture of the road to Steinebrück. The other force made a supporting attack just about two miles south of the main force, with the aim of gaining the high ground next to the village of Heckhuscheid. The 3d Battalion of the 424<sup>th</sup> Regiment was deployed at Heckhuscheid in the shape of an “inverted L.”<sup>73</sup> The Germans quickly seized a cluster of houses early in the attack, which allowed them to give support fire to a second assault against the positions held by Company L. The attack pushed Company L back to the next ridge line, where they were able to hold until the 3d Battalion’s reserve company arrived, allowing both units to counterattack and regain the ground lost.

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<sup>72</sup> Charles Whiting, *Death of a Division*, (New York: The Berkley Publishing Group, 1991.), p.44.

<sup>73</sup> MacDonald, 119.



Meanwhile, Company K was able to repel several attacks by the 62<sup>nd</sup> VG Division, and in the process, they captured a wounded German officer. The German officer was carrying a map case and inside were documents that dealt with the subject: *Unternehmen Greif*.<sup>74</sup> The documents told of the German operation in American uniforms, and explained how they were to identify themselves to other Germans. This shocking information was immediately rushed up to the division G-2 where it was forwarded to those higher up. It would prove to be information that would put a quick end to the effectiveness of the *Greif* mission.

Further south, near the village of Grosskampfenberg, it was dawn before the first German units struck the other forward positions of the 424<sup>th</sup> Regiment. They were from the 116<sup>th</sup> *Panzerdivision*, spilling over from their thrust against a neighboring regiment of the 28<sup>th</sup> Division. They were moving on the road leading from Lützkamper to the rear of the 424<sup>th</sup> Regiment. To prevent them from coming around the back of the 424<sup>th</sup> Regiment, a bridge over the Our River at the village of Burg Reuland, had to be held. A reserve company was positioned astride the road to meet the German movement. Shortly after taking up positions, five Mark VI tanks appeared. The American unit opened up with small arms fire, which forced the tank commanders to close their hatches. Two tanks were immediately knocked out of action and the other three fell back. This ended the threat to the 424<sup>th</sup> right flank for the time being.<sup>75</sup>

Meanwhile, back at Eigelscheid, located on the road to Steinebrück, and the main attack route of the 62<sup>nd</sup> VG Division, *Generalmajor* Kittel, the commander of the division,

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

hoped for a swift penetration. When this was achieved, he hope to commit a battalion on bicycles to seize St. Vith and capture trains loaded with gasoline.

Soon after daylight, the American defenders at Eigelscheid saw reminiscent of the First World War. Coming toward them, in the early morning light, were German troops advancing in bunches standing erect. They were firing their weapons wildly without taking aim at a target. Meanwhile, squad leaders were yelling at them to move forward quickly, while whistles and bugles were sounding in the background.<sup>76</sup> Although the advancing German units suffered heavy casualties from artillery fire from the 591<sup>st</sup> Field Artillery Battalion, as well as machine guns and small arms fire, the number of men advancing made their movement formidable.

Early on in the attack, Captain Freesland requested the release of a reserve battalion located near Steinebrück. He learned that Jones had designated that battalion as part of the division reserves, and Colonel Alex Reid, the commander of the 424<sup>th</sup> Regiment, could only release the battalion with Jones' approval. Reid sent the request to Jones, but as with Colonel Cavender, the answer was no.

By the time the answer came down, the situation at Eigelscheid had gotten considerably worse. The collapse of the 106<sup>th</sup> Reconnaissance Troop at Grosslangenfeld, just over a mile to the North, allowed another German force to advance on Eigelscheid from that direction. What the men at Eigelscheid saw come down the road were four self-propelled 75mm assault guns. Once again Freesland asked for the release of the reserve. By this time the assistant divisional commander, Brigadier General Herbert T. Perrin, had come to Winterspelt, the first village behind Eigelscheid, to see the situation first hand. Freesland

told Perrin of the situation and on his own decision, Perrin released a rifle company from the reserve, Company C. Shortly after noon, Perrin gained Jones' approval to move the rest of the battalion, but by the time they were all assembled and ready to leave Winterspelt, the defenses of Eigelscheid were about to collapse and Winterspelt itself was under attack from German troops moving up from Grosslangenfeld.

The sheer size and weight of those German units attacking Eigelscheid, were beginning to take a toll on the troops holding the village. German soldiers were beginning to penetrate the village, and by early afternoon, the surviving American troops were making a fighting withdrawal back to Winterspelt, where they were to join the rest of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion and a company of the 81<sup>st</sup> Engineer Battalion.

Other than the withdrawal at Eigelscheid, the 424<sup>th</sup>'s defenses were still intact and the German plans for a swift thrust to St. Vith were ended. However, the situation was grave, the 591<sup>st</sup> Field Artillery Battalion had fired over 2,600 shells in stopping the Germans advance, and this was about all the ammunition they had on hand.<sup>77</sup>

Shortly after nightfall, troops of the 62<sup>nd</sup> VG Division renewed their attack, striking again at Winterspelt. A crisis was developing close to the south flank of the 106<sup>th</sup> Division, but it was nowhere near the serious situation that was developing on the division's northern flank. With the withdrawal of the 14<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Group, the northern flank of the 422<sup>nd</sup> Regiment was now exposed to the Germans coming freely through the gap. If the 18<sup>th</sup> VG Division spearhead could not be blunted, then the 422<sup>nd</sup> and 423<sup>rd</sup> Regiments would be trapped.

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>77</sup> MacDonald, 121.

By the end of the first day the 106<sup>th</sup> Division had lost relatively little ground during the daylight hours. However, the Germans had succeeded in creating a shallow salient in the Winterspelt sector, between the 423<sup>rd</sup> and 424<sup>th</sup> Regiments. Also, because of the opening in the Losheim Gap, they were able to uncover the left and rear flanks of the 422<sup>nd</sup> Regiment. Therefore, through the night, the 18<sup>th</sup> and 62<sup>nd</sup> VG divisions continued to push into these sectors, while fresh troops moved up with heavy equipment for the next day's attacks.

There was no doubt at this point what the Germans were attempting to do. The intelligence section of the 106<sup>th</sup> Division analyzed the enemy plan correctly, and in its report on the night of 16 December stated; "The enemy is capable of pinching off the Schnee Eifel area by employing an VG division plus armor from the 14<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Group sector and one VG division and armor from the 423<sup>rd</sup> Infantry sector at any time."<sup>78</sup>

General Lucht was satisfied with the events of the first day, even though the left wing of his attack had failed to break through. He was relieved that the superior weight of the American artillery had not been utilized in the early and crucial hours of the assault. Furthermore, he was surprised that the defenders on the Schnee Eifel had not made a single move to threaten the weak and grossly extended center of the 18<sup>th</sup> VG Division. The failures of these two actions were inexplicable to the German commanders. Although General Lucht expected the Americans in the sector to mount a counterattack the next day, he knew that it would come too late and the encirclement would be complete.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Cole, 157.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

By the night of 16 December, General Jones had committed all the reserves available to the 106<sup>th</sup>, except a battalion of engineers at St. Vith. Because Jones had been promised more reserves from Middleton, which included the Combat Command B of the 9<sup>th</sup> Armored Division and the entire 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division, he decided to leave the two regiments on the Schnee Eifel instead of pulling them back across the Our River. However, a severe underestimate of the time of arrival of the 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division led to some troop decisions which would prove to be costly. Ultimately, command decisions based on inaccurate information would lead to the loss of the two regiments on the Schnee Eifel over the next two days.

Figure 3: Battle of Schnee Eifel<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Dupuy, T., 75.

## CHAPTER VII

### Encirclement

By the morning of 17 December, the situation was becoming critical. Colonel Reid, commander of the 424<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment was fearful that his group would be encircled. His left flank was exposed and he had lost communications with his right flank. The 62<sup>nd</sup> VG Division had brought up tanks in the night and were attacking in considerable force. The 424<sup>th</sup> Regiment had its back to the Our Rivers and if the 62<sup>nd</sup> VG Division were to capture the bridge at Steinebrück and move along the west bank, Colonel Reid knew that it would be hard to make a withdraw westward.

An hour before dawn, elements of the 62<sup>nd</sup> VG Division made a big push in the area between the 424<sup>th</sup> Regiment and the 112<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the 28<sup>th</sup> Division, with Company G of the 424<sup>th</sup> Regiment taking the brunt of the attack.<sup>81</sup>

The major attack however, came farther north at Winterspelt. During the night, units of the 62<sup>nd</sup> VG Division had taken the eastern half of the town and with the addition of reinforcements, they would be able to drive the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion from Winterspelt at daybreak. However, shortly after noon, the German assault came to a stop when elements of the Combat Command B (CCB) 9<sup>th</sup> Armored Division, came across the Steinebrück bridge. The 27<sup>th</sup> Armored Infantry Battalion under command of Captain Glen L. Strange and the 14<sup>th</sup> Tank Battalion, both attached to CCB counterattacked and had success pushing the Germans back to Elcherath, which they took around 1530. They were preparing to

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<sup>81</sup> Dupuy, T., 89.

attack Winterspelt with elements of the 424<sup>th</sup> Infantry, when orders came for General Jones to pull back across the Our Rivers.<sup>82</sup>

The right regiment of the 62<sup>nd</sup> VG Division was able to move along unopposed north of Winterspelt. They pushed the left flank of the 424<sup>th</sup> Regiment out of the way which caused the units to fold back toward the south and west until First Lieutenant Jarrett Hudleson, Jr. was able to form a task force and hold this flank and extend it as the enemy moved. Colonel Reid, seeing the importance of this force, kept adding whatever troops he could find to hold this flank. Units of the 62<sup>nd</sup> VG Division still appeared to be working their way around the left flank of this small task force.<sup>83</sup>

Around 1530, orders came from General Jones to Colonel Reid and Brigadier General William Hoge, commander of the 9<sup>th</sup> Armored Division that they could proceed with their planned attack, however they were to pull back to more defensible position across the Our Rivers during the night. Hoge saw no reason to take back lost territory at the cost of lives only to relinquish the land later and so ordered the 27<sup>th</sup> AIB and the 14<sup>th</sup> Tank Battalion to prepare to pull back. Plans were hastily made and beginning in the evening of 17 December and continuing through the night, both the CCB and the 424<sup>th</sup> Regiment made successful withdrawals across the river. However, the 424<sup>th</sup>, in its hurried fallback, had to leave much of its equipment behind.<sup>84</sup>

With the withdrawal complete, CCB held the area from Weppelerand (northeast of Steinebrück) south to Auel, while the 424<sup>th</sup> held an area from Maspelt in the north to a

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<sup>82</sup> Headquarter, Ninth Armored Division, Public Relations Section, U.S. Army, "History of the Ninth Armored Division." File APO 259. National Archives, Washington, D.C., 41.

<sup>83</sup> Cole, 159.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 160.



point midway between Burg Reuland and Beiler in the south.<sup>85</sup> Although the intervention of the CCB did not achieve the results for which it was originally sent, CCB was instrumental in helping contribute to the successful withdrawal of the 424<sup>th</sup> Regiment. Both were successful in one very important area; they further delayed the timetable of the 62<sup>nd</sup> VG Division, which was now 24 hours behind schedule.

The northern sector of the 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division steadily deteriorated over the course of the day. By the morning of 17 December, the 14<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Group had been pushed back to new positions stretching five miles from Andler on the south to Hepscheid on the north. The 18<sup>th</sup> Reconnaissance Squadron, which was attached to the 14<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Group had only E Troop and F Company intact, its reconnaissance troops had been smashed during the 16 December. The 32<sup>nd</sup> Squadron fared better, losing only Troop A at Honsfeld during the night.<sup>86</sup>

By dawn of 17 December, the enemy was moving down the Krinkelt-Büllingen-St. Vith road, as well as westward from Honsfeld. All contact with the 99<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division on their northern flank had been lost. Troop B of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron in a fight at Andler had lost contact with the 106<sup>th</sup> Division on their southern flank.

At about 0700, King Tiger tanks, the largest tanks to operate during the war, of the 506<sup>th</sup> Heavy *Panzerbatallion* had appeared outside Andler. The 506<sup>th</sup> was part of the 6.

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<sup>85</sup> Dupuy, T., 89.

<sup>86</sup> Dupuy, R.E., 68-69.

*Panzerarmee* but had traveled outside the army boundary in search of a road that could handle the big tanks and merely stumbled into the fight for Andler.<sup>87</sup>

With the situation rapidly growing worse, Captain Franklin P. Lindsey, Jr., in command of Troop B asked permission from 14<sup>th</sup> Cavalry HQ to fall back and establish a roadblock on the road to Schönberg. While waiting for approval, fire from the approaching tanks drove part of his troop to the west. With this, Lindsey ordered the rest of his unit to head for Schönberg. While enroute to Schönberg, Lindsey learned that Bleialf had fallen, and so decided to keep moving through Schönberg to the village of Heum, two miles behind Schönberg along the road to St. Vith. The 18<sup>th</sup> VG Division following close behind, without the King Tiger tanks nevertheless took Schönberg and the bridge over the Our Rivers at 0845.<sup>88</sup>

Although the two regiments and supporting units to the east were unaware of this fact at the moment, they were now cut off from their main escape route. This would become evident to them shortly as the 106<sup>th</sup> Division artillery units positioned in the area tried to retreat across the Our Rivers. For the 422<sup>nd</sup> and 423<sup>rd</sup> infantry regiments and their supporting artillery battalions, the situation grew worse as 17 December progressed. Up to the north, the 18<sup>th</sup> VG Division was pushing towards Schönberg, in an attempt to capture a main road junction leading to St. Vith and also closing off one of the only withdrawal routes for the 422<sup>nd</sup> Regiment.

During the day of 16 December, elements of the 18<sup>th</sup> VG Division had put pressure on the three field artillery battalions, 589<sup>th</sup>, 590<sup>th</sup> and 592<sup>nd</sup>, which were located on either side

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<sup>87</sup> MacDonald, 314.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

of St. Vith – Diekirch highway, better known as “Skyline Drive” by Americans, near the hamlet of Laudesfeld. Colonel Descheneaux, concerned about his supporting artillery battalion, sent Company L along with portions of his Antitank and Cannon companies to retake Auw in an attempt to block access to “Skyline Drive”. However, at about 1400, as they were assembling, three German assault guns began moving south from Auw along the little “Skyline Drive”. The Assistant S-3 of the 589<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Battalion, Captain Huxel, ordered a bazooka team to fire on the first gun. The bazooka round hit the track of the first vehicle immobilizing it. Huxel also ordered the howitzers from Battery A, 589<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Battalion to fire on the lead vehicle. Two hits were scored and the vehicle burst into flames. He then adjusted his sights on the second assault gun and damaged it. The second and third assault guns were able to fall back to a point in the road where they were out of view.<sup>89</sup>

Battery A, B and C were able to hold the Germans at bay during the day of 16 December. However, under cover of darkness German units were able to advance to a ridge overlooking the gun positions of Battery C, effectively blocking the exit from their position.

At about 1930, General Jones, also fearing the loss of the 589<sup>th</sup> and the 592<sup>nd</sup> battalions, ordered half of his division reserve, the 2d Battalion, 423<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Regiment, commanded by Lt. Colonel Joseph P. Puett, to move from their waiting position in Schönberg up to “Skyline Drive” to help the 589<sup>th</sup> and 592<sup>nd</sup> battalions displace. By

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<sup>89</sup> 589th Field Artillery Battalion, 106th Infantry Division U.S. Army, “After Action Report.” File 3106-FA(589)-0.1 27061. National Archives, Washington, D.C., 4.

midnight on 17 December, Puett's battalion had reached the artillery positions.<sup>90</sup> After deploying the units and patrolling to determine the enemy's positions, orders were given at 0400 by the division artillery commander, Brigadier General Leo T. McMahon to displace to positions near St. Vith. They were to be followed by the 590<sup>th</sup> Battalion. The 592<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was successful in moving through Schönberg during the night and setting up in their new positions before dawn, just north of St. Vith, near the division artillery airstrip. Of their twelve 155mm howitzers, they had lost only two, one to mud and another that missed the turn-off and was destroyed by enemy fire.<sup>91</sup>

Batteries A and B, as well as a portion of Headquarters Battery succeeded in pulling out of their positions although they were shelled with white phosphorous shells during their move. They were able to move all of their 105mm howitzers except one that was lost when the prime mover ran off the road. Battery C was unable to get out of their positions and were forced to join units of the 422<sup>nd</sup> and 423<sup>rd</sup> regiments and the 590<sup>th</sup> Battalion.<sup>92</sup>

Around 0715 on 17 December, Batteries A and B were almost in position about one mile east of Schönberg on the Schönberg-Bleialf Road. Although they were successful in pulling back to new positions, just before dawn, units of the 18<sup>th</sup> VG Division overran a small force in Bleialf. With this town in enemy hands, the Schönberg-Bleialf Road was open to the 18<sup>th</sup> VG Division advance on Schönberg, the only exit for the 589<sup>th</sup> Battalion.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> MacDonald, 124.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 313.

<sup>92</sup> 589th Field Artillery Battalion, n.d., 5.

<sup>93</sup> MacDonald, 313.

Just before full daylight, a truck from the battalion's service battery raced down the road from the direction of Bleialf warning the batteries that the Germans were right behind him. Communications had been lost with battalion commander Lieutenant Colonel Thomas P. Kelly Jr., who was still trying to save Battery C, and so battalion executive officer, Major Arthur C. Parker III took command and ordered the remaining units of the 589<sup>th</sup> to evacuate once again to new positions west of St. Vith. Under the constant harassment of small arms fire, Battery A was able to get three of its howitzers on the road, however they lost one to the thick mud. They raced down through Schönberg and across the Our Rivers only minutes before elements of the 18<sup>th</sup> VG Division entered the village from the direction of Andler.<sup>94</sup>

Meanwhile, the battery executive officer of Battery A, 1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant Eric F. Wood stayed behind in an attempt to free the fourth howitzer. After about a half an hour, they freed the gun then raced down the road towards Schönberg. However, by this time, the Germans were in full possession of the town. Lt. Wood and his men tried to race through the town only to be stopped by a tank blocking the road out to St. Vith. Wood dashed for the woods, however his men had no other choice but to surrender.

Battery B had difficulties moving their howitzers from the mud and ended up destroying three of them when the advancing German units came in too close to the Battery B positions. Captain Arthur C. Brown, the battery commander, and his men got on their remaining trucks and followed Lt. Wood and Battery A's last gun into Schönberg.

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 314-315.

Like Wood's truck, Battery B were surrounded in Schönberg, and had little choice but to surrender.<sup>95</sup>

The surviving units of the 589<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Battalion made their way into St. Vith around 1200 on the 17<sup>th</sup>. The Service Battery of the 590<sup>th</sup>, which had been cut off from its own outfit and was waiting in St. Vith, was attached to the 589<sup>th</sup>. They were then ordered into firing position north of St. Vith, with an anti-tank position protecting the roads to St. Vith. There they bivouacked until about 2400 when orders came once again to move out into new position west of St. Vith in the vicinity of Poteau.<sup>96</sup>

Unfortunately for the 590<sup>th</sup>, they were unable to move out before the German column cut them off from their escape route. They were forced to move in closer to the 422<sup>nd</sup> Regiment and deploy some of their men in defense of the perimeter for the encircled group.

For the 422<sup>nd</sup> Regiment the second day was one more of anxiety rather than fighting. Colonel Descheneaux had reported to the division that morning that rations would last one more day and that they had lost contact with the motor pool. The only upside was that the regiment had a complete unit load of ammunition. With the elimination of the 589<sup>th</sup>, he had no artillery support.

Although Jones had sent out a message to both regimental commanders at 0945 ordering them to: "withdraw from present positions if they became untenable" and that the division expected to clear out the area "west of you" with reinforcements during the afternoon, this message was delayed in transit so that Colonel Cavender received it around

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<sup>95</sup> Dupuy, T., 87.

<sup>96</sup> 589th Field Artillery Battalion, n.d., 6.

1500 and passed a copy on to Colonel Descheneaux which he received just after midnight. Time delay was critical, for during the time between when the message was sent and when it was received, the 18<sup>th</sup> VG Division was able to constrict their hold, by deploying along the Bleialf-Auw Road.<sup>97</sup>

The seriousness of the situation was obvious to the regimental commanders and their staffs, however, the men in the line had little knowledge of what was happening around them. Word had begun to circulate among the troops that the armored divisions were coming to reinforce their positions. Although this was a comforting thought, the reality of the matter was that the 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division was still bogged down in traffic miles from the two regiments.

One bright spot for the commanders was the fact that a message from division headquarters had reached the two commanders informing them to expect an airdrop of supplies in the vicinity of Schlausenbach that night. The commanders thought that with these supplies, they could hold on to their positions long enough for the armored units to open an exit for the two regiments. They began making immediate preparations to receive the drop.

During the night of the 17 December the 422<sup>nd</sup> and 423<sup>rd</sup> regiments formed a perimeter defense in their respective areas. The 422<sup>nd</sup>'s defenses was centered south of Schlausenbach, while the 423<sup>rd</sup> was assuming a similar stance on the high ground around Oberlasheid and Buchet. There was no shortage of rifle ammunition and there was a basic load for the mortars, but the 590<sup>th</sup> Battalion had only about 300 rounds for its 105mm

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<sup>97</sup> Cole, 165.

howitzers. There was approximately one day's worth of K rations left, but surgical supplies were very short. Luckily, casualties had been very low.<sup>98</sup>

At 1610 Colonel Descheneaux had summed up his situation in a message received at divisional headquarters around 0840 the next day:

Third Battalion (less L Company) and composite companies in original positions. They report no activity except enemy cleaning artillery at 035835. Only contact with 423d Infantry is by patrols. 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion is in original positions except one platoon of C Company, withdrawn to close gap between 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> composition companies. 3d Battalion, attached to [1<sup>st</sup> Battalion] is astride the Ridge road vicinity of 035869. No activity reported. 2d Battalion is in position generally along Schlausenbach. L Company plus 30 engineers [3d Platoon of Company A, 81<sup>st</sup> Engineers] is at 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion command post.<sup>99</sup>

This optimistic view was ended with Jones's orders, sent at 0215 on the morning of the 18 December, which ordered the two trapped divisions to fight their way out and in the process destroy German units along the Schönberg-St. Vith road. When this mission was accomplished, the regiments were to move to the St.Vith-Wallerode-Weppler area where they were to organize and move west to St. Vith.<sup>100</sup> This message reached the 423<sup>rd</sup> at about 0730 and the 422<sup>nd</sup> one half hour later. Upon receiving this message, Colonel Descheneaux lowered his head and in almost a sobbing tone said, "my poor men--they'll be cut to pieces."<sup>101</sup>

The message was ambiguous and furthermore, Jones had failed to designate an overall commander for the breakout attempt. Although Colonel Cavender had seniority to assume command, he choose not to assert this authority and instead the two of them made every effort to coordinate their plans. This would be very difficult since the only avenue of

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<sup>98</sup> Cole, 166.

<sup>99</sup> Dupuy, T., 87.

<sup>100</sup> Cole, 167.



communications between them was by patrols. However, they were still able to formulate plans for the breakout. These plans called for the 423<sup>rd</sup>, which was closest to the Bleialf-Schönberg road, to take the lead in a column of battalions. The hope was to bring out the regimental vehicles that remained. Although the 590<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Battalion was running low of ammunition, it still retained enough to provide some artillery support for the 423<sup>rd</sup>'s attack. Meanwhile the 422<sup>nd</sup> was to follow the 423<sup>rd</sup> across the Bleialf-Schönberg road, and assemble a mile north of Oberlascheid and just short of "Skyline Drive".<sup>102</sup> However, after this agreement, there seemed to have been no further collaboration of efforts.

A thick fog and rain covered the woods as the men of the 422<sup>nd</sup> began to make the move from their positions. F Company of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion led this movement at around 0900. One by one, units made their way down the Schnee Eifel, with the last units clearing the original positions at around noon herding about 300 German prisoners of war before them. These units worked their way through draws and ravines until they were about one mile north of Oberlascheid where it was decided that the division would dig in for the night, in preparation for the attack towards Schönberg the following morning. The actual distance to the new position was only about three miles, however, those three miles required the tired and hungry men to splash, slip and slide in mud and slush, while loaded down with their weapons and ammunition. The trail was littered with discarded overcoats and other, at the time, non-essential items.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>101</sup>Dupuy, R.E., 121.

<sup>102</sup>MacDonald, 339.

<sup>103</sup> Dupuy, R.E., 122.

The movement was an additional problem to some units that found themselves lost from the rest of the regiment at different times. The Cannon Company actually ran into the 423<sup>rd</sup> column at Halenfeld but was able to re-link with the 422<sup>nd</sup>. Other units overshot the position and had to retrace their steps back to the bivouac area. By nightfall, the regiment was an intermixture of units that never got fully straightened out.<sup>104</sup> Still the much awaited airdrop of supplies had not materialized.

That night, while Father Cavanaugh, the unit chaplain, made his rounds trying to uplift the spirits of the troops, Colonel Descheneaux called a meeting of the regimental officers. Descheneaux informed them that the regiment would advance to Hill 504 above Schönberg, with the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion on the right, 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion on the left and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion in reserves. From there, they would capture Schönberg and Heuem and move west to meet the 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division that was coming to effect the breakout.<sup>105</sup>

The 423<sup>rd</sup> prepared for its move by destroying its kitchens and excess equipment and left the wounded with medical aid men in the regimental collection station. Once preparations were completed, the 423<sup>rd</sup> moved from its positions at 1000, 18 December, with Lt. Col. Joseph P. Puett's 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion in the lead, followed by the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion and the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion bringing up the rear.

At 1130, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion ran into a German unit near the Schönberg-Bleialf road. E and F Companies took heavy punishment, but were able to push the German units back and occupy the high ground, while G Company, committed about two hours later, was able to advance to the Bleialf-Schönberg road. By this time, the Germans were beginning to

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

send in reinforcements and Puett had lost contact with the 590<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Battalion, which had been providing what little support it could. Puett radioed regimental headquarters requesting that a counter attack be made by the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion against the enemy's right flank to the west, towards Bleialf.<sup>106</sup>

This message came in just minutes after Colonel Cavender received another from General Jones. The message from Jones came as a jolt to Cavender. It informed them that there was to be no counterattack by the 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division from St. Vith to Schönberg. Instead, Cavender and Descheneaux were to shift the direction of their attack to take Schönberg, then drive to St. Vith on their own. The two regiments that had left the cover of their prepared positions to meet and assist a relieving force now found themselves open and exposed, without a relieving force to help them. Furthermore, they were to attack a town that the Germans viewed as strategically important and fight their way back to St. Vith. Unfortunately, with communications in the state that they were in, there was no chance to argue the command with Jones, and so the only recourse was to obey the orders. Colonel Cavender immediately sent a messenger to Descheneaux to inform him of the change in orders.<sup>107</sup> Cavender went on to order the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Earl F. Klinck, to move past the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion on the right and proceed to Hill 504, overlooking Schönberg.

During the rest of the day, Puett's 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion put up a tremendous fight holding off the increasing German pressure. Finally, at about dusk, Cavender responded by

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<sup>106</sup> Dupuy, T., 94.

<sup>107</sup> MacDonald, 340.

committing the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion on Puett's left towards Bleialf. However, the attack made little progress against a now thoroughly aroused and re-inforced enemy.

By nightfall the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion had consolidated its position and dug in after a day of desperate fighting. The battalion had suffered about three hundred casualties and almost all mortar rounds had been expended. Nine machine guns had been destroyed and of those remaining, only 375 rounds remained per gun.<sup>108</sup> Colonel Cavender, late in the evening, pulled the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion back to Oberlascheid to prepare to join the drive on Schönberg the next morning. Company A was unable to disengage and was forced to stay behind.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, as ordered, moved north across the "Skyline Drive" towards Schönberg. Shortly after crossing Skyline Drive and heading down the northwestern slopes of Hill 536, L Company made contact with German units in the area. They were pinned down only a few hundred yards from the Bleialf-Schönberg road with anti-aircraft artillery and small arms fire. Upon hearing this, Klinck moved K Company to the right flank of L Company to help push back the enemy. It was not until part of M Company, a heavy weapons unit, joined in the fight that they were able to make any significant movement. The counterattack pushed the first enemy resistance aside, and they were able to work their way forward, under increasing pressure, until L Company was able to make its way across the Bleialf-Schönberg Road, and thus cut off communication between Schönberg and Bleialf. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion was able to consolidate its position only about a half a mile from Schönberg. It was here that a large portion of F Company, 422<sup>nd</sup> Regiment, the unit that overshot 422<sup>nd</sup> bivouac area, came moving in as did elements of

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<sup>108</sup> Dupuy, R.E., 127.

Puett's F Company. Klinck sent two runners back to regimental headquarters to report the situation. However, they never made it to their destination.

The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, under command of Lt. Col. William H. Craig, was the last to move towards Schönberg. Only a mile had been covered when the lead unit met German resistance between Holfeld and Oberlascheid. With the column halted, it set up defensive positions and sat in until 1600 when orders came to support the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion on their left flank. The Americans met stiff mortar and machine-gun fire as they made their way down into the valley. As the early evening wore on and with rifle ammunition almost exhausted, further advance became impossible, so by 2200 the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion withdrew towards Oberlascheid.<sup>109</sup>

By the evening of the 18 December, Colonel Cavender had moved his command post twice, finally deciding on a site just north of Radscheid. The 590<sup>th</sup> Battalion had moved to new positions just northwest of the regimental headquarters. The situation was tense. Although the artillery was in good position, it was almost out of ammunition. Two battalions were engaged facing southwest, in the opposite direction of the objective and all battalions were extremely low on ammunition. Despite radio and patrol attempts to make contact with the 422<sup>nd</sup> Regiment, no contact was made. At 2200, a message came from division headquarters ordering the regiment to "Attack Schönberg, do maximum damage to the enemy there, then attack towards St. Vith. This mission is of gravest importance to the nation. Good Luck. Brook."<sup>110</sup> Soon afterwards, another message from division came in

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Dupuy, T., 95.

with another promise of an early morning airdrop of food and ammunition in a spot just south of the 3d Battalion.

Cavender, after surveying the situation decided on the following course of action. He would disengage his 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> Battalions immediately and concentrate in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion area for an attack on Schönberg in the morning. So the exhausted men of the two battalions made their way in the dark to their new positions. The 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalions left behind hundreds of wounded and the overworked medical staff to help them. However, by dawn, they were in position for their attack on Schönberg.

### A Final Gasp

When the morning of 19 December came, division headquarters still hoped to resupply the two regiments by air. At 0610 division sent out a message instructing the 423<sup>rd</sup> Regiment to “display 50-foot panel orange at (P962867). Make every attempt to establish contact with the 422<sup>nd</sup> Regiment in regard to dropping supplies.”<sup>111</sup> This message was repeated every 15 minutes throughout the day and the following night, but no response ever came back.

Without word from the regiments and not hearing anything from Corps regarding the airdrop, division headquarters sent a message to the VIII Corps at 1430 to “Please advise at once if supplies were dropped to units this division in vicinity Schönberg.” At 2200 the grim news came back: “Supplies have not been dropped. Will be dropped

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<sup>111</sup> Dupuy, R.E., 134.

tomorrow, weather permitting.”<sup>112</sup> By time this message came in, it was too late for the men of the two regiments and the accompanying units. For them, the war was over.

The morning of 19 December found the 423<sup>rd</sup> Regiment huddled just east of Schönberg. The regimental strength was about half. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, on the left was near full strength since they had not suffered many casualties in the previous days’ fighting. The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion was on its right, which also had not suffered severe casualties, but had two companies lost in the Schnee Eifel from the night’s march. On the right of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion was the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, which had been in almost constant combat for three days and was now at about half strength. To complicate matters, the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalions were exhausted from their night march after fighting all day. Furthermore, all three battalions were about out of mortar and machine-gun ammunition, although they did have a decent amount of rifle ammunition. Just behind the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalions was the 590<sup>th</sup> Battalion, which had less than 300 rounds left for the pending attack. The 422<sup>nd</sup> Regiment was out there somewhere, but no one really knew where.

Colonel Cavender, with his plan for attack already pretty well thought out, convened his battalion commanders together at 0830 to relay the situation as he knew it and to issue his orders. The battalions were to attack in column echeloned to the right rear with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion leading the attack that was to commence at 1000. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, which was to bring up the rear as the reserve was to move in line with the other two regiments but was not to attack without orders.

Colonel Cavender had just coordinated the watches at 0900 when a German artillery battery in Schönberg dropped a volley on the regimental command post, killing Lieutenant

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

Colonel Craig, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion's commander and wounding several officers and men. The others ran for cover as the barrage continued for half an hour. At the end of the barrage, German infantry of battalion size began an attack from the direction of Bleialf and immediately overran the 590<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Battalion. Cavender ordered the battalion commanders to move covering forces to their left rear, but to continue the main attack.

With the attacking Germans putting pressure from behind, Klinck's 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion was still able to jump off at 1000. Company L, commanded by Captain J. S. Huyatt, moved out first. They did not make it to far up the Schönberg road when they ran into 88mm and 40mm antiaircraft artillery fire. The two lead platoons were blocked and pinned down, when the sound of gun fire came from the reserve platoon. The reserve platoon was in a fire fight with a company of German soldiers from the attacking units coming from the direction of Bleialf. They managed to repel the attack, but Company L only had 45 men left and were physically cut off from the rest of the battalion. They dug in. The Germans began pushing this tiny pocket again, but this time the ammunition began to give out and at 1330, the 32 men that were left were captured.<sup>113</sup>

I and K Companies were able to get to the outskirts of Schönberg, but without the support of artillery, they were at the mercy of enemy artillery fire and counterattacking units. Klinck moved his remaining companies up on the slop of Hill 504 off the Schönberg road and dug in.

With the death of Lieutenant Colonel Craig, Major Carl Cosby, the battalion's executive, took command. Company D had been broken up with many of its officers and men killed or wounded in the morning barrage and was unable to regroup for the attack.



Cosby moved the two remaining companies, B and C, to their starting positions. Word then came that Company C was to remain for regimental reserves. This left one rifle company (B) and the battalion command post group to carry out the attack.

Company B moved out but the command post group was soon separated from the rest of the company in the thick woods. Company B got to a clearing and was able to fight its way to the Schönberg road when they ran into direct antiaircraft fire and were pinned down. They were then surrounded and overrun by 1200. Cosby and a small group of men were able to make their way out of this situation and join up with K Company of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion.

2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion under Puett moved out on the right rear of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion. He could hear the fighting on his left and could see Schönberg from his position on top of Hill 504. Puett felt that he had a good line for an attack, but because he was in reserve, he could not move without permission. He sent word to regiment with his recommendations but communications were broken. At 1400, having not heard anything back from regimental headquarters, Puett decided to attack Schönberg by circling to the east.<sup>114</sup>

The battalion moved its way down the ravine of Linne Creek which ran into the Our Rivers about one thousand yards east of Schönberg. As they began to move towards Schönberg, they were hit with heavy fire from the east. Puett organized to counterattack when the battalion realized that the fire was coming from the 422<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Regiment. In a few minutes, the situation was clarified, but not before both units had been badly disorganized.

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 140.

By 1600 hours, Colonel Cavender assessed the situation as hopeless. His 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion was wiped out. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion's location was unknown and communications with them were non-existent. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, where Cavender was stationed, was under increasingly heavy German attack and the men were almost out of ammunition. There was no water and the men had not eaten in over twenty-four hours. German units, pushing on all sides would probably overrun the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion's position within a half hour. With no hope for getting out of this situation, and not wanting to sacrifice his men for no conceivable reason, Colonel Cavender reluctantly ordered his men to destroy their weapons and prepare to surrender. Ironically, one of the men he surrendered was the division's commander's son, Alan W. Jones Jr.<sup>115</sup>

The 422<sup>nd</sup> Regiment, which was undoubtedly under observation by German patrols, began to make their own plans for the 19 December morning offensive against Schönberg. Colonel Descheneaux planned to have the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalions in line, echeloned to the right while the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion would follow behind in reserve. He ordered the units to move out at 0730. The battalions crossed "Skyline Drive" only to come under enemy fire at about 0900.

The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, under command of Major William Moon Jr., who had replaced Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Kent who had been killed earlier, was the first to run into this German opposition. Hit by both 88s and machine guns, units of Company C managed to push to the high ground north of Ihren Creek. However, its forward motion was broken up by the attack and became badly disorganized. Companies A and B never got out of the jump-off area. Before they could move, tanks from the *Führer Begleit Brigade*, moving from

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<sup>115</sup> Astor, 188-190.

the direction of Auw towards St. Vith, drove into the right flank of A and B Companies. The two companies were destroyed although elements of Company A were able to escape to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion zone.<sup>116</sup>

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, under command of Lieutenant Colonel William D. Scales, made their way from the assembly area even though they were receiving heavy fire from German units in the area. G and H Companies were abreast from right to left with E Company in close support. F Company, which had been separated from the battalion the night before, was now with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion of the 423<sup>rd</sup> Regiment. The three companies made their way across "Skyline Drive" with little difficulty and continued on to the high ground occupied by the only surviving platoon of Company C. From there, they pushed on until they reached the open ground overlooking the Our Valley, east of the Linne ravine and a thousand yards east of Schönberg. Below, they saw the Schönberg-Andler road packed with vehicles, but they were mistaken for friendly vehicles. As Company G plunged northwestward toward the objective, small arms fire opened up on the far side of the ravine. As they paused on the hillside, the vehicles on the road began to spray the open hillside with fire. The supposed friendly vehicles were actually German anti-aircraft half-tracks. Up the slope, Company H, began to fire back at the German vehicles below with machine gun and mortar fire. The anti-aircraft guns at such close range had a devastating effect on the battalion. All of Companies H machine guns and two of its mortars were destroyed by direct hits. What was left of Company H moved back over the hill for shelter. They were followed shortly by the remnants of Company E. Reorganized on the other side of the hill, Lieutenant Lewis Walker, now in command, reviewed the situation. He had 199 men left

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 142.

from fifteen different units; he was cut off from the rest of the regiment and had German units pushing on all sides.<sup>117</sup>

Three hundred yards across a ravine, on Hill 575, was the regimental motor pool under command of Lieutenant Hartley. Walker sent a patrol to verify that it was still in American hands. When word came back positively, he moved his group, under enemy fire, into its perimeter. Later they were joined by some 150 men of what was left of Company G, which had also fallen back from the debacle in the Linne ravine. Although they made it back, the situation was grim and it was only a matter of time before the German units pushing on the perimeter eventually overran the position.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, under command of Lieutenant Colonel Donald Thompson, made its way up to the high ground to the west of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion. From there, they moved down to the Linne Creek ravine where they saw men moving on the other side. Believing them to be the enemy, the unit open fire on them. This group on the other side was Puett's 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion of the 423<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Regiment. After this mishap was resolved, the two units joined forces. As this was taking place, Puett sent out patrols to look for a covered route to Schönberg. The patrols reported back at about 1430 that about 1500 yards to the right that some 30 or more German tanks and self-propelled guns were massed. Furthermore, there was strong armor to the front in the valley and the more artillery was moving in across the river.<sup>118</sup> Puett, believing that there was a way out, went out himself to survey the situation.

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

Colonel Descheneaux, who had been with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, decided to put his forces into a perimeter defense at about 1530. The Germans were closing in on all directions and Descheneaux's force could neither go forward nor back. The Germans were sweeping the hill with machine gun fire and the wounded were covering a large area beside the command post. The wounded were lying there with no food or water and neither dressings nor blankets.

Descheneaux began to sum up the situation now facing his troops. His men had not eaten in over 24 hours, they were out of machine gun ammunition, there was no food or water, small arms ammunition was almost depleted and the remainder of his regiment were being butchered before his eyes. Furthermore, the promise of the 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division and the airdrop of supplies had never materialized. Colonel Kelly, the commander of the 598<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Battalion who had joined the regiment after failing to get out of the pocket with his battalion, described the situation facing Descheneaux.

The situation was hopeless, but some of us were in favor of holding out until dark and attempting to get out in small parties. I thought that had been decided upon and went to dig a slit trench when Descheneaux sent out the white flag. If his command post hadn't been the regimental aid station he could have stood it a while longer - he had been right up with the leading elements in the attack that morning. It's just as well, I guess, that he surrendered -- it was just a question of time and we weren't even a threat.<sup>119</sup>

What seemed to change Colonel Descheneaux's mind was when there was an appearance of tanks behind him on "Skyline Drive". For a brief moment there was hope that these were tanks from the 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division, which had been promised from division HQ before the ordeal began. However this hope died shortly when it was learned

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 144.

that these were German tanks. In fact these were tanks again from the *Führer Begleit Brigade*, who were again on their way to participate on the attack on St. Vith but were traveling by way of “Skyline Drive” to Andler in an attempt to avoid the bottleneck at Schönberg.<sup>120</sup>

With this final glimmer of hope gone, Colonel Descheneaux had no other choice. He called his staff together at the command post, and upon hearing the moans of the wounded men said, “My God, we’re being slaughtered!” He went on to assert the he had no wish to die simply for glory, then he asked this commanders what they thought. All were reluctant to surrender but saw no other choice. Some did suggest that with darkness only a couple of hours away, maybe they should wait and try to escape in small groups back to American lines. Descheneaux rejected the suggestion stating that “as far as I’m concerned, I’m going to save the lives of as many men as I can, and I don’t care if I’m court-martialled.”<sup>121</sup>

With this the word went out to begin preparing for surrender. As the men were smashing their weapons, Colonel Descheneaux broke down and cried. Several young officers gathered around the Colonel, and when he looked up, all he saw was the cold stares of their eyes. He asked himself, was it out of pity or hate?<sup>122</sup>

When Puett came back from his reconnaissance of the situation, he learned of Colonel Descheneaux’s decision. Puett, never one to give up, asked Descheneaux if he could take his battalion out in an attempt to make it back to American lines. Descheneaux, fearing that the Germans would make it harder on the rest of the group if they found out

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<sup>120</sup> Cole, 170.

<sup>121</sup> MacDonald, 344.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

about this attempt after the surrender, refused to hear of the idea and ordered Puett to remain. Puett, knowing that he had to remain because of orders, still told his men that if any of them wanted to attempt to go it alone, they should do it now. Approximately 75 men vanished into the woods.

Lieutenant Colonel Nagle, the regimental executive officer, who had volunteered to carry the white flag, went off to complete his mission. At 1600 with guarantees of food and medical aid from the Germans, the terms of surrender were complete.

By the evening of the 19 December, the 422<sup>nd</sup> and 423<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Regiments, as well as their attached units: the 589<sup>th</sup>, 590<sup>th</sup>, 592<sup>nd</sup> Field Artillery Battalions; Companies A and B of the 81<sup>st</sup> Engineering Combat Battalion; Battery D, 634<sup>th</sup> Antiaircraft Artillery Battalion; Company C, 820<sup>th</sup> Tank Destroyer Battalion; Companies A and B, 331<sup>st</sup> Medical Battalion; the 106<sup>th</sup> Reconnaissance Troop; and Troop B, 18<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron had been lost since the opening days of the Battle of the Bulge.<sup>123</sup>

None of the sources used can give a definitive number for troops that captured or killed. Charles MacDonald pinpoints the loss from the 106<sup>th</sup> Division alone at 6,879.<sup>124</sup> However the official U.S. Army History on the Battle of the Bulge states that all told, at least seven thousand men were lost in the Schnee Eifel, although the figure was probably closer to eight or nine thousand, and the loss in equipment was no less significant.<sup>125</sup> This was the worst loss by American arms during the European Theater of Operation.

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 345.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Cole, 170.

Although the surrender had taken place, the fate of the two regiments was not immediately known to the General Jones, his staff and the VIII Corps. The last message they received from the regiments was dispatched by radio at 1535 on 18 December. It simply stated that the regiments had started to comply with the orders for an attack to the northwest. It was received at St. Vith on the morning of the 19<sup>th</sup>. By the night of the 20 December, all hope for the two regiments must have been lost with German reinforcements massing in front of St. Vith from the east. However, one last attempt was made to contact the 423<sup>rd</sup> Regiment two days later.

Although the majority of the troops on the Schnee Eifel had surrendered by the evening of 19 December, there were still small groups, of various sizes, of American soldiers who opted to attempt to make their way back to the Allied lines. R. Ernest Dupuy split these roving units into three groups. First there were those very small groups or as individuals that fought and sneaked their way back to the American lines. The second was those who fought in larger groups and were able to keep up the fight for nearly another 48 hours before they too had to surrender. Finally there were those who, wandering through the woods, hopelessly cut off from regaining contact with the American lines, fought on in a guerrilla style for weeks until, “as far as is known, every last one of them was hunted down and killed.”<sup>126</sup>

### A Question of Air Supply

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<sup>126</sup> Dupuy, R.E., 145.



What happened to the air supplies promised to Jones and his two trapped regiments? This has been a question that many historians have attempted to answer over the years with little success. The issue has been determining where the failure to get these supplies to their destination took place in the chain of command. The problem in answering this question lies in the fact that most of these messages were handled by telephone communications and so records of these messages do not exist. However it is agreed upon by all written accounts that General Jones did attempt to get air supplies to his trapped units and the weather on 18 December did permit planes to fly over the Schnee Eifel. However, although the drop would possibly have resulted in a few more men making it back to St Vith, it would not have resulted in the two regiments' long-term survival.

The request for air supplies to the two regiments came from General Jones early on 17 December. Although the 423<sup>rd</sup> Regiment had asked an airdrop for the morning of the 17 December, General Jones had already asked the VIII Corps air office to arrange for a supply drop. The VIII Corps air officer, Lt. Colonel Josiah T. Towne, relayed the request through the IX Fighter Command to the IX Tactical Air Command. From this point forward, the sequence of events become less clear, which makes it all but impossible to determine where the communication breakdown took place.

The IX Tactical Air Command would normally have transferred the request to the First Army for clearance. The report of the G-4 at First Army Headquarters simply states that the plight of the two of the regiments was made known by telephone on the afternoon of 17 December, and that preparations for re-supply by air "were promptly set in

motion.”<sup>127</sup> The carrier planes needed for such a mission were based in England and therefore required the involvement of the Combined Air Transport Operations Room (CATOR) at Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF). It has never been ascertained how many calls the First Army made before reaching CATOR.

The IX Troop Carrier Command received orders from CATOR in the early morning of 18 December, to prepare “forty plane loads of ammunition and medical supplies.” The 435<sup>th</sup> Troop Carrier Group, at Welford, England, was assigned the mission. In the first phase, they were to fly to Florennes, Belgium where they were to receive a final briefing and meet up with its fighter cover. Of the forty C-47 transport planes, only 23 took off from Welford before low cloud cover closed the base in.

As the transports approached Florennes, they were redirected to an airfield near Liège because the airfield at Florennes was “too busy to take care of the 435<sup>th</sup> formation.”<sup>128</sup> The wing commander and his wing man did land at Florennes with the purpose of receiving the final briefing, however to their surprise, they discovered that there was no information waiting on the map coordinates for the drop or the fighter escort that was supposed to be waiting for the final leg of the mission. Furthermore, unknown to the wing commander, his squadron was once again redirected from Liège to an airfield in Dreux, France. At the airfield outside Dreux, the planes of the 435<sup>th</sup> Troop Carrier Group sat until 23 December, their original mission on-again then off again daily.

During this time, additional requests for supplies came from the 106<sup>th</sup> Division that swelled the original request of 40 to 138 planeloads of supplies. Because of this growth in

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<sup>127</sup> Cole, 171

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 172

size, the operation was delayed again in order to make this larger drop with more planes located back in England. The original mission was canceled on 22 December in order to support the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division at Bastogne.

On the morning of 19 December, the 106<sup>th</sup> Division sent a message to the VIII Corps asking if the supplies had been dropped. A reply was not received until late that evening stating, "Supplies have not been dropped. Will be dropped tomorrow weather permitting."<sup>129</sup> However, unknown to either the 106<sup>th</sup> Division Headquarters or the VIII Corps Headquarters, the men of the 422<sup>nd</sup> and the 423<sup>rd</sup> regiments were already moving deep into Germany as POW's, which made any future drop attempts futile.

When the question of blame is looked at, it appears that the responsibility rests mainly on the senior commanders. They had accepted the awkward defensive positions on the Schnee Eifel in the belief that nothing ever happened in the Ardennes, so they had failed to provide adequate air re-supply contingencies in the event of a sudden need for such action. In their minds, except in pre-planned airborne operations, nobody ever got surrounded. This was evident in the fact that the supplies for airdrops had to come from England, although Allied troops were at the German border. General Jones also seems to shoulder some responsibility. His orders for the two regiments to attempt a breakout only complicated the ability of IX Troop Carrier Command to re-supply by air. Had the regiments held their defensive positions originally, any drop attempts would have been easier and more effective. The next question is could the regiments have held their defensive positions long enough to receive these drops?

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

Although of little comfort to the men of the 422<sup>nd</sup> and 423<sup>rd</sup> regiments, attempts to prevent a similar debacle were initiated in a matter of days. On 22 December, Lt. General John C.H. Lee, commanding officer of the Communications Zone, requested SHAEF to set up stocks of ready packed supplies, capable of air delivery, at airfields strategically located on the continent. The proposal was accepted.<sup>130</sup>

### St. Vith and the Fortified Goose Egg

As the men of the 422<sup>nd</sup> and 423<sup>rd</sup> regiments were fighting for their survival, German units were beginning to put pressure on the town of St. Vith. The 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division, which had been originally sent to rescue the two encircled regiments, now found itself the centerpiece of the defense of the small town.

The battle for St. Vith began on 17 December when German units began to test the perimeter defenses, little did they know that they could have overrun the town in one large concerted attack. At this time, the hastily created defenses consisted of engineers, artillerymen, cavalrymen, signalmen, the division defense platoon and numerous other men from various broken units. It was not until well after nightfall on the 17 December that the first units of the 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division began to roll into town. Brigadier General Bruce Clarke, commander of CCB, 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division requested command of the defense of St. Vith. Jones agreed and during the night, the defenses were strengthened into a horseshoe-shaped line that formed around St. Vith stretching approximately 15 miles.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Goolrick, 113.

By the morning of 18 December, the taking of St. Vith had become very important to the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Panzer Armies. Dietrich, commander of the Sixth *SS Panzerarmee*, was becoming extremely impatient because his Panzer divisions needed the road net in order to follow the 1<sup>st</sup> SS Panzer Division on its drive to towards the Meuse River. Dietrich communicated this frustration to Model, who passed it on to Manteuffel. This action forced Manteuffel to reluctantly divert his attention from the successful breakthrough achieved by his LVIII and LVII Panzer Corps in the 28<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division sector. Manteuffel ordered Lucht to expedite the seizure of St.Vith by his LXVI Corps.<sup>132</sup>

While Lucht was preparing to carry out Manteuffel's orders, General Jones, realizing that his division command post in St. Vith was now on the front line, ordered it moved to a safer position at Vielsalm. Meanwhile, the rest of 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division, and the units attached to it, continued to strengthen the defenses in an attempt to stop or at least slow down the German advance.<sup>133</sup>

Meanwhile, units of the 18<sup>th</sup> VG Division made half-hearted attacks against the American defenses, and although some of the fighting was heavy, they were never able to make a breakthrough. *Generalmajor* Hoffmann-Schönborn was still too concerned about the two large regiments, the 422<sup>nd</sup> and 423<sup>rd</sup>, which, while encircled in his rear, were still a danger.<sup>134</sup>

By 19 December, General Hasbrouck and General Jones were becoming increasingly worried about the “peninsula” that was developing with St. Vith at the tip. The

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<sup>132</sup> Dupuy, T., 148.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

concern was that if the German spearheads that were racing on either side of the St. Vith defenses decided to close on each other, the units in the peninsula would find themselves in the same predicament as the two trapped regiments of the 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. Luckily for Hasbrouck and Jones, *Generalmajor* Hoffmann-Schönborn spent most of his day focusing on the situation on the Schnee Eifel and the last gasp efforts of the 422<sup>nd</sup> and 423<sup>rd</sup> infantry regiments. It was not until later when the units finally surrendered that he focused on St. Vith.<sup>135</sup>

The 424<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, which was the last surviving one of the 106<sup>th</sup> Division, had pulled back to a more defensible line on the high ground between Bracht and Burg Reuland. There, they were able to hold their position against the movement by the 62<sup>nd</sup> VG Division. However, they had lost contact with the CCB/9 to the north and the 112<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment of the 28<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division to the south. They were also at about 50 percent effectiveness for a regiment.

Later, that night, a combat patrol of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 424<sup>th</sup>, made contact with the outposts of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the 112<sup>th</sup> Regiment near Beiler. The 112<sup>th</sup> had itself been cut off from the rest of the 28<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. When word get back to Jones of the contact, he issued an order assuming the command of the 112<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment and sent his assistant divisional commander, Brigadier General Herbert T. Perrin “to organize the southern flank”, and to establish a strong link with the 424<sup>th</sup> Regiment. At this time, B Company of the 112<sup>th</sup>, which had been fighting with the 424<sup>th</sup> for three days was returned to regimental control.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 152.

Figure 4: Battle for St. Vith<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Dupuy, T.,146.

By the morning of 20 December, it had become obvious to the German High Command that the Ardennes offensive would have no hope of succeeding unless the St. Vith salient was immediately eliminated so as to gain control of the vital road net it offered.<sup>138</sup>

During the day, intensive fighting flared up along the southern perimeter of the salient, while the northern side was relatively quiet. The 62<sup>nd</sup> VG Division continued to try to penetrate the gap between CCB, 9<sup>th</sup> Armored Division and the 424<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment but with little success. By the end of the day, little had changed along the salient. The only major development of the day was that the 112<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment had firmly established the southern section of the St. Vith defensive line between Beiler and Leithum and they were now firmly linked with the 424<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment.<sup>139</sup>

By the morning of the 21 December the situation was as such: the total strength defending the St. Vith salient was approximately one armored division plus two-thirds of an infantry division – about 22,000 men holding a 33 mile perimeter. This defensive, dug-in position began to receive the name of “the fortified goose-egg”.<sup>140</sup>

Opposing the American defenders was a German force totaling approximately two armored divisions and one and a half infantry divisions – about 54,000 men, all prepared to move against this annoying goose-egg. In addition to these units, there were another two panzer divisions and almost two infantry divisions within easy striking distance if needed.

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 155.



This put the total to 4 panzer divisions and three and a half infantry divisions, well over 100,000 men, available for the assault on St. Vith.<sup>141</sup>

With the dawn of 21 December, activity increased along the eastern front of the salient. German artillery fire was heavy in and around St. Vith. German units also began to make probing moves against the CCA of the 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division in the north and the 424<sup>th</sup> and 112<sup>th</sup> infantry regiments in the south, with all being easily repulsed.

At 1500, German artillery began an extremely heavy barrage in the Prümersberg area that continued until shortly after dark. At 2200, the 18<sup>th</sup> VG Division, with support of armor, began a powerful, carefully planned assault on the town. By midnight, the German units had taken most of the town, forcing General Clarke to withdraw his command post from St. Vith to Crombach.<sup>142</sup>

With St. Vith falling into the Germans hands on 22 December, General Jones sent warning messages to General Hoge, commanding CCB 9<sup>th</sup> Armored Division, Colonel Reid, commanding 424<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, and Colonel Gustin M. Nelson commanding the 112<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, informing them that they needed to prepare for a withdrawal to the predetermined positions or risk being encircled. The official withdrawal orders were issued at 0900 and during the course of the day, the units involved withdrew to their assigned positions. There was very little German interference with the march of the 424<sup>th</sup> and 112<sup>th</sup> Infantry divisions and by nightfall, the units were in position and secured links with each other.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Parker, 157.

<sup>143</sup> Dupuy, T., 157.

General Hasbrouck seeing the danger that faced the units in the salient appealed to General Courtney H. Hodges and General Matthew B. Ridgway to allow an orderly withdrawal to safer ground. General Ridgway responded with an order to form a complete defensive circle and to defend until relieved by the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division. Even as the orders were received, German units continued to make penetrations in weak areas of the defensive line. This prompted General Hasbrouck to send another dramatic message to General Ridgway, with the words, "In my opinion, if we don't get out of here and up north of the 82<sup>nd</sup> before night, we will not have a 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division left."<sup>144</sup>

This was the situation on 22 December when Field Marshall Montgomery, who two days earlier had been given command of all forces to the north of the penetration by General Eisenhower, was briefed on the situation in the salient. Field Marshall Montgomery, not seeing the benefit of sacrificing the equivalent of two divisions to defend the salient, overruled General Ridgway and General Hodges, to their disgust, and ordered that all troops in the salient be withdrawn behind the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division. Shortly after midnight on 22 December, General Ridgway passed on the orders to General Jones and General Hasbrouck.<sup>145</sup> General Ridgway later met with General Hasbrouck at his command post in Vielsalm and summoned General Jones and General Perrin and told them that the withdrawal was to be complete by noon on 23 December, just fourteen hours hence. General Ridgway also informed General Jones that he would become deputy commander of the XVIII Airborne Corps. At General Ridgway's request, General Jones designated General Perrin as the commander of the 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. This left General

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<sup>144</sup> Cole, 412.

Hasbrouck as the single commander in the salient, which up until that time was not the case and was a point of command confusion. Near the end of the meeting, General Jones collapsed of a heart attack and was rushed to the field hospital in Liège where he later recovered.<sup>146</sup>

Immediately after the meeting, General Hasbrouck and his staff prepared and issued orders to begin the withdrawal at 0600 on 23 December. Artillery, tank and heavy engineering units were the first to move, with the infantry units making their preparations to start their final dash for the rear at 1600.

CCA of the 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division held the northern flank against increasing German pressure while the CCB of the 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division began its withdrawal to the Salm River. The withdrawal was helped by a heavy freeze during the night that permitted the use of forest tracks that would otherwise have been impassable to vehicles. CCA and CCB of the 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division completed their withdrawal across the Salm River to the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division sector in a series of leapfrog movements.

CCB of the 9<sup>th</sup> Armored Division had received their orders at 0605 to move at 0600. This was further complicated by the fact that German units were beginning to attack. They mounted a counter attack that halted the enemy and then resumed their phased leapfrog withdrawal.

The 424<sup>th</sup> had very little interference with its withdrawal, running through the villages of Maldingen, Beho, Rogery and Cierreux to the bridge at Salmchâteau across the Salm River. Many of the men were able to hop a ride with the tanks of the 9<sup>th</sup> Armored

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<sup>146</sup>Robert E. Merriam, *Dark December: The Full Account of The Battle of the Bulge*. (New York: Ziff-Davis Publishing Company, 1947) p.157.

Division, and by the time they reached their destination, “men were clustered on them like flies.”<sup>147</sup>

The 112<sup>th</sup> had the toughest withdrawal of all because they were heavily engaged with German units of the 62<sup>nd</sup> VG Division. Their orders were to hold the last battalion in position as a covering force until Colonel Nelson received radio orders from General Hasbrouck personally to withdraw. At 1530, Colonel Nelson reported that all units had cleared out behind his covering force and that enemy tanks were closing in. He asked for permission to withdraw his 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, unfortunately, communications were lost. At 1630, with no word from General Hasbrouck and German tanks within 200 yards of his command post, Colonel Nelson ordered the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion to withdraw at once.<sup>148</sup>

The daylight withdrawal of the units in the salient was also helped along by clearing skies, which allowed allied fighter aircraft to appear over the battlefield. Although they could not engage because of the close nature of American and German units in the salient, their mere presence made the Germans be more cautious in their moves.

As darkness fell, the roads to the two bridges were clogged while enemy was pressing from behind. Covering units to the south managed to keep the German units off until the last units were crossing. At this point, the 2<sup>nd</sup> SS Panzer Division's Reconnaissance Battalion, under command of Major Ernst Krag, struck the withdrawing Americans from the west. Although seriously damaged, units of Task Force Jones and the 112<sup>th</sup> Infantry

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<sup>146</sup> MacDonald, 481.

<sup>147</sup>Dupuy, T., 161.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

Division were the last units to cross the bridge at Salmchâteau and with that, engineers of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division demolished the bridge.

To the north in Vielsalm, General Hasbrouck and General Perrin were finishing checking off reports from withdrawing units to make sure that all units were getting out. As the final tally was made, they were informed that German tanks had entered the town. As they left, a German tank came around the corner and destroyed a half-track. The other jeeps and half-tracks dashed down side streets and out of town for the bridge. The small detachment of airborne engineers, that had prepared both the road and rail bridges for demolition, waited as long as they could for any last minute stagers. When they pulled the fuses, to their surprise, nothing happened. They reset the explosives and set a thirty-second fuse. This time the rail bridge went up but the road bridge remained intact. A third attempt was made with the same results. Finally, the fourth time the engineers fired a bazooka into the charges to make sure it went off. The charge did, but it blew only the deck off, leaving the supports intact. For almost an hour, paratroopers held the Germans away from the remains of the bridge until new explosives were in place. This time the engineers had so much explosives under the joists that when the explosives went off, “the earth shook and fragments went high into the sky.” With this, the bridge was blown up and the St. Vith Salient was eliminated.<sup>149</sup>

Two days later on 26 December, the RAF carried out a 1,270 ton raid on St. Vith, nearly obliterating the town and destroying its road and rail value. Thereafter, German traffic was routed around the town.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> MacDonald, 486.

<sup>150</sup> Merriam, 157.

Although losses were severe, especially if one includes the 422<sup>nd</sup> and 423<sup>rd</sup> Infantry regiments, this loss must be measured against their accomplishments. The units in the salient had met an overwhelmingly superior force expecting an easy victory and halted the force in its tracks. The defenders had blocked one of the Germans' main communication and road lines and forced days of delays on the westward movement of troops, guns, tanks and supplies for two German armies. They gave the XVIII Airborne Corps badly needed time to gather for a coordinated and effective defense. And finally, they were able to carry out a successful withdrawal under the most difficult conditions only to return to battle at a later date.<sup>151</sup>

The actions of the units in the St. Vith Salient led Field Marshal Montgomery to send a message after the withdrawal orders were issued saying: "They can come back with all honor. They come back to more secure positions. They put up a wonderful show." Even the Supreme Allied Commander, General Eisenhower, understanding the importance of what they had done, sent a letter of commendation to all the units. The simplest message was the four word solidarity message sent by the 30<sup>th</sup> British Corps, which said, "*A bas les Boches!*" (Down with the Germans)<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Cole, 422.

<sup>152</sup> MacDonald, 487.

## CHAPTER VIII

### Battle Over, But not the War

Although the fighting was over for the approximate 7,000 captured men of the 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, the next few months as POW's would prove to be even more trying. Although the POW accounts of men from the 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division vary slightly, the common theme was hunger and cold.

After the surrender, the men were kept together, in groups, and checked for all forms of weapons. For almost all, this search included the confiscating of all valuables, money, keepsakes, tobacco, pipes, and cigarettes. Once stripped of all these articles, the men were marched, often double time, behind enemy lines into Germany. When going through towns, Americans were forced to put their hands behind their heads for the edification of the German people. Frequently, the men would be met with stones, over-ripened fruit and garbage from even the town's smallest residents. During the 50-kilometer march to Gerolstein no food was given them and the only water available was from piles of snow on the side of the road.

Once at German rail stations, most of the POW's were packed 65 to 90 in cars that were meant to hold 40, while others were marched further into Germany. For many, they made the journey in cattle cars that had animal excrement and a little straw on the floors. At the beginning, each soldier was given 6 slices of ersatz bread and nothing else for their 5 to 6 day trip. Water was unavailable and soldiers were forced to relieve themselves either on the floor or in their helmets that were then dumped out one of the four small ventilation openings in the upper corner of the car. These conditions led to an epidemic of diarrhea

and infections.<sup>153</sup> Although the trains would make stops to refuel, the men were never allowed to get out of their cramped cars during the entire trip.

For most of the soldiers of the two regiments, their new home was Stalag IX-B, located on top of the mountain outside of Bad Orb. Stalag IX-B was for privates and private first class personnel. Officers were later transported to a camp in Hammelburg, while the NCO's were moved to Stalag IX-A outside Zeigenhain. Once in Stalag IX-B, they were crowded, 60 to a barrack meant to hold 40. The men received none of the usual prisoner issues of clothing, blankets, or Red Cross POW packages. The only item issued was a small thin blanket about the size of a terry cloth towel. The men would carry their meager blanket with them at all times, otherwise it would have been stolen.<sup>154</sup> Because of the overcrowded conditions, many of the men slept on the cold floor with only their small blanket for warmth and one heating stove that only took some of the chills out of the bones.

All the men went through an interrogation process. Duward Frampton, in his personal memoirs talked about his interrogation.

The interviewer made it very clear to me that I was presently classified by friend and foe alike as "Missing in Action". Whether I was finally classified as "Killed in Action" or "Prisoner of War" was his decision to make.<sup>155</sup>

The diet of about 1000 calories a day consisted of a cup of sugarless imitation coffee and the day's supply of six slices of imitation bread for breakfast. Lunch was a liter of soup made of such thing as rutabagas, potatoes, vegetable peelings or turnip greens and maybe a

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<sup>153</sup> 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division Association, "Bad Orb Atrocities," The Cub, vol. 4, no.5, June-July, 1948.

<sup>154</sup> Duward B. Frampton Jr., "Ich Bin Ein Kriegsgefangener Und Still Singing the Praises of General George S. Patton, USA," Private Collection, 1988, 9.

<sup>155</sup> Frampton, 8.



dash of animal lard, along with a half-pound portion of meat from a Red Cross POW pack divided among 22 men. Dinner was a cup of imitation coffee or tea and a piece of black bread.<sup>156</sup> The meals were the main event of the day.

The daily routine started with the overhead lights coming on at 0600, followed by inspection and roll call at 0630. If all went well, two men from each group would go to the kitchen for breakfast. Another group was dispatched to the kitchen at about 1130 to bring back the tubs of whatever kind of soup was being served. The evening meal called for an extra man in the crew because bread was part of the meal. The evening meal would end around 1800 with lights out by 2000.<sup>157</sup>

Morale was good considering the situation they faced. Soldiers organized religious groups and educational programs. A soldier who had been a newspaperman gave a series of 21 lectures on American History from memory. Anywhere from 50 to 500 would attend. He also organized a weekly quiz show that drew up to 1,000 at times.<sup>158</sup> American POW's would also find entertainment in trying to "screw up" the roll call every morning and evening. The men also kept their time occupied by playing games such as "20 questions" or carving soap.

The Germans were not generally brutal or sadistic toward American prisoners, however that was not true for all the prisoners in the camp, especially the Russians. "There was absolutely no mercy shown by the Germans towards the Russians."<sup>159</sup> They were

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<sup>156</sup> 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division Association, "Survivors of Berga," The Cub, vol. 6, no.1, August-September, 1949.

<sup>157</sup> Frampton, 14.

<sup>158</sup> 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division Association, "Bad Orb Atrocities," The Cub, vol. 4, no.5, June-July, 1948.

<sup>159</sup> Frampton, 12.

kicked down flights of stairs and beaten senseless with clubs for crimes as small as spilling a little soup from the tubs they were hauling.

The Germans had a swift form of justice when an American prisoner committed a serious offense. Duward Frampton remembers one time in particular. One night an American prisoner had been surprised inside the kitchen area and had killed the guard in the fight that ensued. The next morning, all the American POW's were assembled in a very formal formation outside. The commandant explained what had happened. He went on to say, "he was sure that whoever did this horrible crime would be willing to confess and turn himself in for punishment." Failing to get such a confession, the commandant went on, "that he would arbitrarily pick ten POW's for execution instead ...the first day, and twenty the next day, and so on, until he either ran out of bullets or prisoners." There was no second day, because the man turned himself in and was never seen again. It can only be assumed he was executed and buried.<sup>160</sup>

The Germans also had different plans for those prisoners of the 106<sup>th</sup> that were of Jewish ancestry. About two weeks after the men arrived at Stalag IX-B, an order was posted requiring all soldiers of "Jewish Blood" to report to Headquarters Barrack for segregation. All of the American prisoners convened and refused to permit the Jewish men to obey this first order. Then came a second order, drastic and death promising. "All Jewish violators, when caught, would be summarily shot and all others in the same barrack with the guilty culprit would be punished by decimation (the shooting of every tenth man by lot)."<sup>161</sup> The Jewish soldiers decided to obey rather than subject their comrades to the

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>161</sup> 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division Association, "Survivors of Berga," The Cub, vol. 6, no.1, August-September, 1949.

possibility of such drastic punishment. When they reported, accompanying them were about 350 non-Jewish American prisoners. However they were detected and beaten back by German guards. In all, 125 men plus another 150 troublesome prisoners and another 100 men selected at random were put on freight cars and shipped to Berga-am-Elster, about 500 kilometers northeast of Bad Orb.

Although labeled by the Germans as part of Stalag IX-C, in reality it was a slave labor camp. Its inhabitants, made up of many nationalities, were forced to labor excavating a large underground slate mine for a future factory. The living conditions were worse than before. Men slept two to a single bunk with no blankets for the winter cold on mattresses teeming with vermin and filth. The only sanitary provision was a slit trench in the open. Like the other slave laborers, the few men of the 106<sup>th</sup> sent there worked ten-hour shifts in the mines and marched the four miles round trip. Punishment took on a different tone. For the slightest provocation, men were beaten by guards.

The daily diet also was greatly reduced. Where it had been a meager 1000 calories at Stalag IX-B, the diet at Berga was reduced to 400 calories. Soldiers of the 106<sup>th</sup> lost from 70 to 100 pounds in a short time. Illness, injuries and the imposed starvation began to take its toll of the American POW's shortly after their arrival. Daily deaths were routine, and by the beginning of March, men were dying at a rate of 20 per week.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

While most of the men from the 106<sup>th</sup> were sent to Stalag IX-B and IX-A, some were sent to other camps around Germany, including Stalag XII-A in Limberg, Stalag IV-B in Mühlberg and Stalag VIII-A in Görlitz.

When Allied forces on both front began to apply pressure to the German borders, some of the prisoners found themselves on forced marches by the Germans in an effort to avoid the Russian and Americans. For Sergeant John Kline, this was a 415 mile march over the course of two months from Stalag VIII-A to Helmstedt. He was liberated on 13 April 1945 at 1000. In his diary he entered,

An American artillery captain just walked into the infirmary with a large box of cigarettes, chocolate and K-rations. He says he is happy to see us. If he only knew how happy we are to see him. I couldn't help it, I had to cry.<sup>163</sup>

Duward Frampton found himself liberated on Friday, March 30 when units of George Patton's Third Army rolled into town. Frampton remembered;

These G.I.'s could hardly believe what they saw in us. Yes, they saw us as G.I.'s, but walking skeletons with sunken eyeballs and bony cheeks and jowls. Skinny hands and legs. And even though they loved us as one of their own, they couldn't get over how bad we smelled. They nearly gagged.<sup>164</sup>

The liberating units reported what they had found and then left to continue their chase of the enemy. Two days later, the Medical and Transportation Corps' arrived to evacuate them back to safer ground. Most of the men of the 106<sup>th</sup> were sent to Camp Lucky Strike or hospitals for initial care. Some of the men who were liberated by advancing Russian units were evacuated via Russia.

Although most of the men of the 106<sup>th</sup> Division made it back home, many members died while Prisoners of War. After liberation, an American medical officer was asked if the

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<sup>163</sup> Chuck Haga, "Ex-POW Lifts Shame of Surrender", Minneapolis Star-Tribune, January 7, 1990.

<sup>164</sup> Frampton, 22.

deaths were due to natural causes? The officer responded; “Yes, but in my opinion malnutrition and exposure were contributing factors. These men were healthy when they came here. Now they are skin and bones.”<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division Association, “Bad Orb Atrocities,” The Cub, vol. 4, no.5, June-July, 1948.

## CHAPTER IX

### Eliminating the Bulge

After the elimination of the St. Vith salient, the *Wehrmacht* had limited success in their race towards the Meuse until finally the American forces were able to regroup and put a concerted stop to their forward movement. The 23<sup>rd</sup> of December saw a dramatic change in the weather. For almost the first time since the beginning of the German offensive the day broke with clear blue skies. Within two hours, the skies over the Ardennes were filled with Allied planes. Over 3,100 Allied fighters and bombers attacked the German salient attacking troops, roads, rails, and towns. During the day, many German soldiers hid in foxholes or cellars while tanks and artillery pieces hid in the woods. The effect of 1,200 Allied bombers on the German rail system was devastating, bringing to a stop most of the rail traffic west of the Rhine. Hitler's luck had run out, the Allied air power was back and its superiority was undeniable.<sup>166</sup>

The German plan, both bold and daringly executed began to fall apart from the first days of the attack. The multitude of small, yet important events, including those at St. Vith, had taken its toll on the German offensive. The Sixth *SS Panzerarmee* in the north had all but stalled. They had finally shifted far to the west in an attempt to open a new hole beginning 23 December, after the fall of the St. Vith salient, only to find the hole sealed by the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division.<sup>167</sup>

The Fifth *Panzerarmee's* northern panzer corps pushed along until it reached the Ourthe River on 21 December where it was blocked by the first of the new First Army

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<sup>166</sup> Parker, p. 177.

divisions being rushed to the east to stop the German offensive. The southern panzer corps, headed by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Panzer Division had the most success of the campaign. The reason for the division's success was simple: they avoided prolonged entanglement. They went for the gap between St. Vith and Bastogne and cleared the gap of Americans in a day of heavy fighting. When they realized that Bastogne would not fall easily, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Panzer Division skirted the town. On 23 December, they worked around the town of Marche and by the evening its lead elements were within 15 miles of the Meuse.<sup>168</sup>

The success of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Panzer Division also exposed it to danger. It had outdistanced its flanking forces, the 116<sup>th</sup> Panzer Division on the north and the *Panzer Lehr* Division to the south. Manteuffel realizing the precarious situation, but also obsessed about reaching the Meuse, ordered the *Panzer Lehr* Division to break off its attack in the Bastogne area and move forward to join the 2<sup>nd</sup> Panzer Division. Although they made it up to about 15 miles of the Meuse, the 116<sup>th</sup> Panzer Division was still having difficulty moving forward. In an effort to spur the division forward, Manteuffel made a personal visit to the unit but it was too late. Before daylight on 24 December, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Armored Division, under command of Major General Ernest N. Harmon, attacked the 2<sup>nd</sup> Panzer Division with devastating results. With the help of rocket-firing allied fighters, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Armored Division almost destroyed the 2<sup>nd</sup> Panzer Division and crippled the 116<sup>th</sup> and *Panzer Lehr* divisions. By 25 December, the last major offensive threat for the Meuse had ended.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Merriam, 191.

<sup>168</sup> Goolrick, 179.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

The reality of the situation had been realized by Christmas day. *Generalfeldmarschall* Model had foreseen the present situation when planning the offensive: the German army had been stopped short of the Meuse and no sizable Allied forces had been destroyed. However, for Hitler, he struggled to find optimism out of the circumstance, even going as far as expressing the possibility of still annihilating the American force east of the Meuse if adequate supplies of fuel could be made available and if the weather situation was such as to prevent Allied aerial commitment.<sup>170</sup>

*Generalfeldmarschall* Rundstedt, in his own sharply worded message, informed Hitler that German units in the offensive were defeated beyond recovery and that the army should pull back to a defensive position at the West Wall. Even Heinz Guderian, former Chief of Staff of the Army, pleaded with Hitler to suspend the attack and give the reserves to the Eastern Front. “We Prussians have had to fight the eastern people for 700 years” pleaded Guderian “For those of us from Prussia, it is a question of holding ground which was German since the time when America was peopled by the red men.”<sup>171</sup>

Hitler refused all talk of switching to the defense and would instead commit 5 more panzer and *volksgranadier* divisions into the bulge before it was finally over. He also continued to devise and execute plans for continuing his drive towards Antwerp. One such plan, called “The Great Blow,” had hundreds of fighters, most of the remaining *Luftwaffe*, attack Allied airbases in the west. The goal was to eliminate the air power that was so deadly in the Ardennes. The attack took place at 0800 on 1 January and lasted for over two hours. It was a success in that a number of bases and planes were destroyed, however the cost to

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<sup>170</sup> Parker, 200.

<sup>171</sup> Merriam, 191.



the *Luftwaffe* was enormous. The *Luftwaffe* lost 300 planes and 253 trained fighter pilots. The damage was such that the *Luftwaffe* would never again take to the skies in any great numbers.<sup>172</sup>

Another of Hitler's plans, called *Nordwind* (North Wind), was a diversionary scheme to lure the American Third Army away from Bastogne by striking elsewhere far to the southeast. The attack that started on 1 January did not divert troops and petered out in less than three weeks.<sup>173</sup>

On 3 January, the Allied armies began to take the offensive with units of the First Army striking a 35 mile front from the north and elements of the British 30th Corps attacking from the west. By 9 January, the Germans had given up taking Bastogne after almost two weeks of tenacious fighting in an attempt to take the town. Hitler was even denied this prize, which was the last objective Hitler had placed his hopes on.

On 8 January, Hitler seemed to come to the self-realization that his grand scheme of destroying the American and British forces in the west had failed and ordered the withdrawal of the tip of the salient to a line just west of the Bastogne – Houffalize road. Furthermore, he ordered the release of the Sixth *SS Panzerarmee* from the defensive line so that it could be sent back for refitting and re-supply in preparation for the coming Allied attack.

12 January was to completely end any hope of a renewed offensive. The Russian Army left their winter quarters and initiated their long-awaited winter offensive to the east. As Soviet troops opened large holes in the German lines, Hitler ordered the release of the

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<sup>172</sup> Goolrick, 185.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

entire Sixth *SS Panzerarmee* for transfer to the Eastern Front. This was quickly followed up by an order to send the two *Fürher brigades* and at least three infantry divisions to the east. All that the German generals could hope for was an orderly and gradual retreat back to the West Wall.<sup>174</sup>

On 16 January, units of the Third and First armies met in the town of Houffalize, completing the goal of eliminating the tip of the German penetration. With this, both armies wheeled east and started operations towards the West Wall. The bulge was being eliminated.

#### Ironic End

The 424<sup>th</sup> Infantry regiment and the attached 517<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry regiment, the remnants of the 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, were part of the XVIII Airborne Corps reserve in the Stavelot-Trois Ponts area. The 424<sup>th</sup> had a new commander, Colonel John R. Jeter, who replaced Colonel Reid on 18 January. On the 20 January, the 106<sup>th</sup> was attached to the 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division. They moved on the 23 January from their bivouac area and joined the 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division north and east of St. Vith, where they set up bivouac in and around Diedenisberg, just north of Born, and about eight kilometers north of St. Vith. The orders for the 106<sup>th</sup> was to prepare for a dawn attack on 25 January.

The orders called for the 424<sup>th</sup> to move into position on the extreme left of the 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division covering an area just west of Amblève in the north to just northwest of

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<sup>174</sup> Merriam, 206.

Wallerode. On its right was the 517<sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry regiment, which was in the center of the 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division line. To the north of the 424<sup>th</sup> was the 16<sup>th</sup> Infantry regiment.

The objective for the 7<sup>th</sup> Armored Division and its attached units was to seize the high ground of the St. Vith Forest so as to establish a point of departure for the major offensive into Germany scheduled to begin on 28 January. The 424<sup>th</sup>'s immediate objective was to bypass the German strongpoint in Amblève and capture Meyerode and the high ground to the north and east of the village.

At 0715, on 25 January, the attack began and by the evening, after a day of bitter fighting, the 424<sup>th</sup> had seized its day's objectives, occupied the village of Medell, reached the outskirts of Meyerode, and pushed into the western slope of the St. Vith Forest. The next day Meyerode was occupied and the objective area consolidated.<sup>175</sup>

It is not known if the men of the 424<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment realized the importance of their position on the 26-27 of January to the events 6 weeks earlier that shattered their division. On the far side of the ridge they had just captured, approximately two and a half miles away, was the village of Schönberg, and the sites where the 422<sup>nd</sup> and 423<sup>rd</sup> infantry regiments had surrendered on 19 December. They themselves were within six and a half miles of the area their regiment had defended so staunchly in mid-December.

The 424<sup>th</sup> Infantry regiment, which had played a major role in the opening battle of the Ardennes campaign, was also a major player in the last engagement of that campaign. The entire campaign, from the initial attack to the way back had been a long, grim and costly struggle. Now a new battle and campaign were about to commence. At dawn 28 February, the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division attacked eastward through the 424<sup>th</sup> and 517<sup>th</sup>

regiments to begin the renewed Allied offensive into Germany. The Battle of the Bulge had ended.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Dupuy, T., 356.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 358.

## CHAPTER X

### Epilogue

For Hitler and Germany, operation *Wacht am Rhein*, was a complete strategic and tactical failure. Not only did German troops not reach Hitler's lofty goal of Antwerp, the offensive did not reach the Meuse River, which his generals saw as a reasonably realistic goal. All Hitler accomplished was to assure the swift success of the Red Army's renewed drive in the East; delaying the Allied drive into Germany by a few weeks and speeding up the timeline for his country's ultimate collapse. Hitler, as he had done throughout the war, severely underestimated the ability of his enemy while greatly overestimating his own means. Germany was hard pressed to replace the losses of men and equipment, while for the Allies, such losses suffered in the Battle of the Bulge were replaced in a matter of weeks.

The *Wacht am Rhein* did postpone the planned Allied offensive by at least six weeks. The German offensive made infantry replacement problem a major dilemma. Likewise, the millions of gallons of fuel that had been stockpiled for the drive to the Rhine was consumed during the defensive, later offensive, actions of the Allies. Over a million rounds of artillery were fired and thousands of vehicles of all types were lost. For the manufacturing might of the U.S. war machine, these losses were easily replaceable. This was not so for German industry, which could no longer make good on replenishing the military arsenal.

The damage inflicted on both sides was substantial. In all, the Ardennes Campaign reduced the Allied rifle strength in the West by ten percent. Weapon losses were probably double that percentage. According to the official U.S. account, losses in the Ardennes Campaign totaled 80,987 men, with 10,276 killed, 47,493 wounded, and 23,218 missing. Of

this total, 41,315 were lost from 16 December through 2 January, with the difference reflecting the losses up to 28 January. These losses were primarily American; of the total only, 1,408 were British, including 200 dead. Most of the Allied casualties were in the First U.S. Army, with some 21,000 casualties in the Third Army. Nearly 7,000 of the Allied losses were the men of the 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division who were captured in the Schnee Eifel. Although both sides committed a large number of tanks, the terrain and poor road net put the bulk of the fighting on the shoulders of the infantry. This was evident by the U.S. First Army's note that of its total casualties, over 90% came from the infantry in the regular infantry divisions and the infantry battalions in its armored divisions.<sup>177</sup>

The German High Command estimated its losses between 81, 834 and 98,024 men for the period 16 December through 28 January, although the previous number has become the accepted figure. Of the 81,834 in casualties, 12,652 were killed; 38,600 wounded and 30,582 were missing. Dietrich estimated that his Sixth *Panzer Armee* alone had lost 37,000 men. If one adds the losses of the *Luftwaffe*, the estimated number climbs to approximately 100,000. Many of the inexperienced units sustained devastating losses. The 560<sup>th</sup> VG Division reported only 700 riflemen available on New Year's Day. On 5 January, the 326<sup>th</sup> VG Division reported only 300 combat ready men. The 212<sup>th</sup> VG Division lost over 3,000 men in the first two weeks of fighting.<sup>178</sup>

The losses of equipment in the campaign were also high. The American forces lost some 733 tanks and tank destroyers. The First Army alone reported losses of 237 tanks, 1,284 machine guns, 542 mortars and 1,344 trucks as of the end of December 1944. The

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<sup>177</sup> Parker, 291-92

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 292

German Army lost a total of 600 - 800 tanks and assault guns which was close to half the number used in the Ardennes and nearly one-fourth of Hitler's remaining panzer force. This loss of armored vehicles was not all due to battle. Many tanks and armored vehicles were left behind due to mechanical failures, lack of fuel or tank recovery vehicles.<sup>179</sup>

Air losses also affected both sides, but with the Germans suffering the most. From the beginning of the offensive until mid-January, the Allies reported losses of 592 planes, which was but a small fraction of the total Allied air forces involved. The Germans on the other hand lost nearly 800 aircraft, about ten percent of their total force. Although the German war machine could replace these losses in a short time, the shortage was in trained, experienced pilots to fly them. Of the nearly 2,800 pilots who participated in the offensive, about 700 of them were killed or captured. The lack of aviation fuel stocks only made the bleak outlook worst. As Adolf Galland said, "in the Ardennes the *Luftwaffe* received its death blow."<sup>180</sup>

The clear winner in the Ardennes Campaign was the Red Army. When the Soviets launched their offensive in January, they found no respectable German forces to oppose them. The Ardennes Offensive had depleted the final German reserves that could have been used against the Russian juggernaut in the east. The success for the Red Army in January provided Stalin with a strong position at the Yalta Conference in February, where he won important concessions from Churchill and Roosevelt.

Hitler's generals, already believing the war to be lost, saw the handwriting on the wall as the offensive turned into a defensive operation. Hitler, however, chose to hide

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 295

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 296

behind a fantasy world that would become ever more psychotic as the end drew near. Hitler only entertained facts that supported his fantasies and reprimanded his generals who suggested otherwise. Whatever the nature of Hitler's delusion, it would not matter, for it all ended on 7 May 1945. As the aging Prussian *Generalfeldmarschall* von Rundstedt observed after the war, the Ardennes Offensive for the German army was "Stalingrad number two."<sup>181</sup>

### Reasons for German Failure

After the war, Allied historians interviewed many of the German generals and staff personnel that were involved in the campaign. Their comments, though varied, expressed many of the same underlying themes. *General der Panzertruppen* Hasso von Manteuffel felt that the major reasons for the failure were:

not enough troops, the unexpected quick reaction of the Allied forces, the failure of supply and the improper allocation of reserves. It was a brilliant plan, but it depended on a number of conditions for it to succeed. The German forces depended on a strict time table, unbroken source of supplies and complete surprise.<sup>182</sup>

Carl Wagener, Manteuffel's chief of staff, put the responsibility for the failure on the lack of driving technique and road discipline, as well the failure to clear critical road nets staunchly held by Allied forces.

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 300.

<sup>182</sup> Hasso von Manteuffel, interview with, September 1944 – January 1945, ETHINT 45, National Archives, Washington, D.C.



*SS-Obergruppenführer* Joseph Sepp Dietrich placed blame for the failure on five areas. He said, “it was mainly bad preparation, lack of fuel, supplies and training, plus the time of year – in that order.” Dietrich’s chief of staff, Fritz Krämer saw the failure as caused by the quality of the men and leaders at the stage of the war, the diminished mobility of the German army, bad roads and bad driving and the effects of the U.S. air force.<sup>183</sup>

*Generalfeldmarschall* Gerd von Rundstedt placed the failure on three areas.

The failure of the Offensive may be attributed to the following reasons: a. the chief fact was the improper grouping (by the High Command) of troops and the insufficient number of divisions placed at the disposal of the army commanders; b. inadequate fuel supplies and unsatisfactory transportation; c. the absolute supremacy of the Allies in the Offensive and rear sectors was a decisive factor...<sup>184</sup>

Hermann Göring summed up the failure in the simplest yet striking way with the comment: “It was no longer 1940.”<sup>185</sup>

Post-war assessments by various authors have stated many reasons for the failure of the Ardennes offensive. Most cite common reasons for the German failure, yet almost all point to Cole’s reasons for the failure of the campaign. Cole gives six reasons: 1. The initial American defense was tougher than expected. 2. Supply lines failed to keep pace with the advancing units. 3. The denial of free use of critical road nets by the German army, such as St. Vith and Bastogne. 4. The failure of the flanks to keep pace with the salient of the offensive. 5. The lack of depth to the attack due to the slow commitment of reserve forces.

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<sup>183</sup> Parker, 289.

<sup>184</sup> Gerd von Rundstedt, interview with, 3 August 1945, “The Ardennes Offensive,” ETHINT 47, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

<sup>185</sup> Parker, 289.

6. The tactical reaction of the American forces and their commitment of reserves had been more rapid than anticipated.<sup>186</sup>

The men of the 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, although not intending to, played an important role in the failure of the German campaign. Greatly outnumbered and new to combat, the three regiments and the units based in St. Vith put up strong resistance in the area which upset the critical timetable required of the offensive. Units under the command of Manteuffel's Fifth *Panzerarmee* and Dietrich's Sixth *Panzerarmee* were forced to slow their forward pursuit in order to end resistance in the immediate area. This in turn kept German infantry from adequately supporting the panzer units that were meeting their own heavy resistance.

The 424<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, the only one of the three regiments of the 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division to survive, helped to slow down the southern flank of the German offensive. Although eventually having to fall back to avoid the same fate as its two sister regiments, it helped to slow the advance by contributing to the development of a weak underbelly in the German offensive. It was this weak underbelly which General George S. Patton's Third Army was able to exploit. According to *Generalfeldmarschall* Rundstedt, "this delay influenced operations, especially as it resulted in *Panzerarmee's* left wing becoming more exposed than before."<sup>187</sup>

Finally, and probably most importantly, the units making up the defense of St. Vith denied for a few critical days the use of this important road hub by the German units. This action slowed down the offensive's forward movement by forcing the German units that

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<sup>186</sup> Cole, 670.

<sup>187</sup> Rundstedt, 10.

were supposed to use these road nets to either slow down their forward movement or further crowd roads to their maximum capacity. Although Bastogne has received more glory over the years for their staunch defiance of intense German encirclement and pressure; the resistance at St. Vith played a very significant role, if not more so, because St. Vith delayed the main thrust where Bastogne delayed the southern flank. In an interview with *Generaloberst* Alfred Jodl, conducted by the army after the war, he stated, “St. Vith was more of a key position, as it blocked the road and we could not by-pass it as we did [at] Bastogne.”<sup>188</sup>

Although it cannot be said that by these actions the German units were prevented from reaching their final objectives, the actions of the 106<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division and supporting units did play an important role in slowing the advance of German units and supplies, disrupting the critical offensive timetable and providing more time for Allied forces to react and meet the German offensive.

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<sup>188</sup> Genobst Alfred Jodl, interviewed with, 31 July 1945, “Ardennes Offensive, ETHINT 51, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

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