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St. Vith Offensive Phase III

The day of 21 January 1945 marked the termination of over a week of fighting for the 30th Division. In that time they had fought step by step, approximately nine miles. Their losses were high, the enemy a determined fighter and the weather conditions an extremely difficult obstacle. The military tactics had slipped into a pattern by that date, and for that reason, the line battalions had a rough idea of what to expect when they launched a battalion or two battalion attack. The small villages were usually defended most strongly on the outskirts from the protection offered by heavy undergrowth and dugouts. The cities themselves usually contained only a small number of troops who defended from behind the protection of any stone houses available. More difficult to capture were hills or ridge lines, ^{in the possession of the enemy.} ~~with well displaced positions and the support of mortar and artillery fire.~~ 30th Division troops very frequently found a great deal of difficulty in dislodging a stubborn enemy, ^{from well displaced positions that were supported by mortar and artillery fire.} An ever present obstacle were the anti tank mines that were buried in roads and covered over by snow and ice. As stated earlier, the "mine busters" were employed to good advantage.

The cold and wetness of the weather were combated by the use of little tricks the men had learned and what comforts were readily available. Commanding officers took advantage of all available cover for their troops, and the artillery battered farm houses did

not offer too many conveniences, they nevertheless blocked a good portion of the winter blasts. The regular enlisted type overcoat was frequently found to be a hindrance, rather than an aid in warding off the cold. Soldiers found that the coats easily became moist or even wet from contact with the snow, and shortly thereafter froze almost solid and had to be discarded. Digging foxholes or gun emplacements near or on the front lines in the frozen ground was not only very hazardous, but a back breaking job.

With the beginning of the last phase in the operation, the Division was tired, but near their final objective line which ran roughly 2,000 yards south of St. Vith along the Braunlauf river. The boundary line between the 7th Armored and the 30th Division in the area ran along in the vicinity of the 84th north-south grid line. *St Vith lay in the 7th Armored sector approximately 1,000 yards east of the boundary line.* ~~In the neighborhood of St. Bith, that meant it put that city within the 7th Armored sector by about 1,000 yards.~~

On 21 January, there was little advance made by any of the Regiments of the Division. In the 117th Infantry the 2nd Battalion remained in Recht, obtaining some much needed rest. The 1st and 3rd Battalions remained on the objective taken on the previous day with Companies A, K, L, and I, on the line from west to east. Company E on the right or west flank and Company B in reserve. Under cover of dusk reconnaissance patrols went down to Rodt (619889), Hundheim

(825889), and Steinerberg (828887), and reported them apparently well held.

The 119th Regiment on 21 January, for the most part consolidated on the position they had seized on the previous day. Company F, under Capt Edward O Arn occupied positions in Oberst-Drombach^h, and there ran into small elements of the enemy. They ^{German} were scattered in houses, but and were soon routed out of the city or captured by the attacking company. By darkness the area was firmly held with Companies E, F, L, I, and K holding a semi-circular line to the northeast and Company G in reserve.

To the left, in the 120th sector, the 3rd Battalion received a strong counter-attack. The Battalion occupied a position in the general area of 837922 near the Malmédy-St. Vith road. At 0958 the 1st Battalion, 352nd VG Regiment, 246th VG division, supported by three self propelled guns attacked on the front of Companies K and L.⁶² The enemy came up from Ober Emmels, using the available woods to furnish cover and concealment. The 1st Battalion, 120th Infantry had been occupying a position on the right or west of the 3rd. Thus when the attack struck, the 1st Battalion flanked the enemy on the right and the 3rd Battalion closed in on the left. By 1050 hours, the attackers retreated leaving eight PW's, 16 wounded an estimated 70 Germans killed, and one SP gun.⁶³ Later in the same day patrols from the 1st Battalion were sent south to

reconnoiter the next day's objective; Ober Emmels (827906) and Nieder Emmels, (898908). They were driven off, however, by strong enemy automatic weapon fire. ⁶⁴

On the left flank of the 30th Division, the 7th Armored drove south on 20 and 21 January in excellent coordination. ⁶⁵ The key city of Born (850935) had been cleared by Brig. General Hasbrouck's armor and the defending enemy troops fell back to St. Vith. The same was true in the 30th Division sector; the enemy retreated to St. Vith. On 21 January, large groups of Germans began to evacuate that city on the primary high way leading south. The road was jammed with troops, vehicles armor and guns and the IX Tactical Air Command had wonderful "targets of opportunity". Working with the 7th Armored, the 366th and 404th. Fighter Groups destroyed an enormous number of vehicles, tanks, artillery, troops, and horse drawn wagons, utilizing 500 pound general purpose and 200 pound fragmentation bombs for the job. ⁶⁶

The next day, 22 January, the 120th Regiment's objective was the area containing ^{Nieder} ~~Nieder~~ Emmels and Ober Emmels. The former was the larger of the two and had the St. Vith road running through it. In the early afternoon, the 2nd Battalion, supported by the fires of the 1st Battalion, attacked the city. Flanking the city cautiously, resistance from infantry and assault guns were met, but to no appreciable extent. By 1600 hours the city was in the possession of the 2nd Battalion. Company F, had left the mopping up of the city to Companies E and G and had proceeded, at 1515 hours, to the west to seize Ober Emmels. The company encountered resistance ^{however,} and was unable to advance.

896895, with the 7th Armored that had pushed down during the day to a line about 3,000 yards north of St. Vith.

The advance south continued all along the Division front and on the right flank the 119th Regiment made subsequent gains, keeping pace with the other two regiments of the Division. In a coordinated attack the 2nd and 3rd Battalions 119th Regiment, advanced from their line of departure at 0800, 22 January. The 2nd Battalion left the area of Missen Berg and ran into scattered small arms fire. The battalion advanced south through a wooded area and an hour after "jump off" time they had cleared the woods at 788878. Companies E and F advanced on a line, with the former Company on the right. Once under observation, the two companies came under extremely heavy automatic weapon and artillery fire that emanated from the high ground immediately south of Kapelle (785860). Artillery fire was called for and brought down on observed enemy locations. Support tanks of the 743rd Tank Battalion were brought up and the battalion assaulted Kapelle in the mid-morning. By 1315 hours the city had been cleared of the enemy.

The 3rd Battalion, which had jumped off with the 2nd at 0900, had as their objective the fairly large city of Hinderhausen (797877). Capt. George D. Rehkopf's Company I, led the attack and had elements in the city by 0845. Once on the outskirts of

the city, Company L on the right of Company I met strong small arms and automatic weapon fire. The enemy was cleared out of the houses, slowly and methodically, and it wasn't until noon that the 3rd Battalion had covered most of the city. Even then, artillery fire lit the city throughout most of the afternoon every once in a while, a particularly ardent Nazi would infiltrate back into Hinderhausen, or suddenly come to life and begin sniping from a second story window. However, such fire was only harassing in nature and contact was quickly made on the left with the 117th Regiment. On the right, the 2nd Battalion spread their line east from Kapelle and as darkness closed down on 22 January, the companies were displaced from west to northeast, E, F, L, and I. Companies G and K maintained a reserve position.

The enemy, throughout 22 January fell back to St. Vith as the 30th Division advanced. Ending at midnight 22 January, for the preceding 24 hours, the Division captured 286 prisoners. ⁶⁷ Interrogated at the PW cage, it was determined that most of them had been members of the 326th Volksgrenadier Division, with a small number from the 10th and 24th VG Divisions. Almost every one of the PW's were partially incapacitated insofar as his locomotive abilities were concerned. Frost bite and trench foot were prevalent. They all looked badly and many complained of

having been in the line for over a month. At least half of the dirty, unshaven Germans carried a loaf or a portion of a loaf of brown bread clutched under his arm or protruding slightly from his overcoat pocket. They of course, had no idea that they would, shortly after capture, be eating better than they probably had in the preceding 4 years. Those who were not killed or captured retreated toward St. Vith, and on 22 January, as on the day before, the roads leading out of St. Vith were hit by heavy 30th Division artillery concentrations and elements of the IX Tactical Air Command. 68

On the same day the 7th Armored advanced into the outskirts of St. Vith and during the next day, 23 January, drove into the city. Once the 30th Division had captured Rodt, Hinderhausen and Hundheim, the city of St. Vith was hardly tenable. Those last few cities seized in the 30th Division sector were situated on dominating terrain. From Rodt, one could easily look down on St. Vith and the Division artillery units were in a position of observation of the primary roads and the railroad leading into the city. It is not meant to imply that once the 30th Division "ringed" St. Vith on the north and west the 7th Armored had merely to walk into the city, and take possession. That was hardly the case, however, it is well to note the fact again that once the 30th Division captured the roads, villages, and ridge

lines 2,000 to 5,000 yards north and west of the city; the great retreat from St. Vith began.

St. Vith Offensive

The Final Drive

The "final objective" line of the XVIII Corps in the St. Vith operation, ran roughly along the Braulauf River. The River flowed from west to east about 2,000 yards south of St. Vith.

To reach that line in the 30th Division sector, required the "Old Hickory" outfit to attack south from their 6,000 yard front line for a distance of three to five thousand yards. The area that was to be captured was for the most part, open ground that contained relatively small sections of heavily wooded areas. The four objectives in the area were labeled with the code names of "Daisy", "The", "Little", and "Abner". Three of them enclosed dominating ground. One south of Weisten (803059), another south of Krombach, (810860), the third southeast of Neundorf, (329869), and the last was a section of high ground between Krombach and Neundorf.

"H" hour 23 January was 1,000 hours. At that time the 117th and 119th Regiments attacked abreast. The 120th Infantry had been

pinched out on the previous day and had returned to an assembly area for some well deserved rest and refitting. In the 117th Regiment the 2nd Battalion was given the primary mission of the day by Colonel Walter M. Johnson. The 1st Battalion secured the left flank of the Regiment and the 3rd Battalion remained in Regimental reserve. The 2nd Battalion under Major Benjamin T. Ammons attacked at 1000 hours with the town of Heunderf and the high ground to the southeast ^{of the city as objectives. The battalion hit the outskirts of the city} ~~with the town of~~ 1100 hours with Company G on the right, and Companies F and E on the left. The battalion, by noon, had taken up positions throughout the city and the enemy had withdrawn. Once the Germans were out of the city, the 2nd Battalion 117th Infantry, came under a terrific barrage of mortar fire. It proved to be extremely accurate and came from the high ground to the southeast of ~~the city~~ ^{Heunderf}. That was the area and not Heunderf, that was designated by the division as the regimental objective. About 1300, Capt. W. E. Barker led Company F to the east to seize the high ground. Company G advanced along with Company F, and attacked up the forward slope. The enemy employed machine gun and mortar fire in a desperate attempt to stop the slugging dough-~~fect~~ feet. However, the German position was flanked and most of them were taken prisoner. At 1650 hours the enemy counter attacked with a force of about 50 men and three tanks. They were repulsed by

our heavy machine guns and at least one tank was damaged. By late afternoon the objective had been completely cleared of the enemy. On the left of the 2nd Battalion, the 1st Battalion had cleared the woods of scattered German automatic weapon emplacements and held the left forward flank of the Division.

Over on the right, the 1st and 2nd Battalions, 119th Infantry, were directed to attack at 1000 hours by Colonel R. A. Baker. The 1st Battalion advanced for the high ground slightly south of Krombach. They met practically no resistance and were successful in taking over 20 PW's from the houses in Krombach. About 1500, Company C, under Capt. Floyd B. Spurlock, moved to the dominating ground and immediately made contact with outposts of the 117th Regiment on the left.

Jumping off at the same time, the 2nd Battalion encountered a strong enemy line on the northern edge of Weisten (vic 802855). An assault was made with Companies E and Q on line. Almost 30 PW's were captured and the push into the city completed. ⁶⁹ The battalion moved southeast out of Weisten and over the rail road line running northeast to St. Vith. At the road junction at 805847, Company E on the right flank was hit by German ^aArmor, supported by infantry. Division artillery fire was called for and at the same time tanks and tank destroyers, supporting the

2nd Battalion, moved into position.

With all that fire, plus automatic weapon fire directed at the enemy concentration, it soon dissolved and withdrew after leaving 26 PW's. With the possession of those final objectives, the 50th Division activities in the operation had been completed. Since 2400 12 January, 1,460 PW's were captured.⁷⁰ Losses had been heavy, however, and in the three regiments of the Division there were 1,151 officers and men, killed, wounded or missing in the 10 day period, 13 to 23 January. Plus that number there were 707 officers and enlisted men listed as non-battle casualties.⁷¹ A total of almost 2,000 men lost; certainly high for a ten day operation.

During the same day, 23 January, the 7th Armored Division had taken full possession of St. Vith and pushed to the south of it pursuing the enemy out of the remaining, but very small, area still left in the Belgium Bulge; ~~the ill-fated dream of Von Rundstedt.~~