

Preparation for the St. Vith Offensive

At 092400 January, the 112th RCT was reattached to the 30th Division. ¹⁸ Given Company C, 103rd Engineer Battalion, Company C, 630th TD Battalion and the 229th FA Battalion, the 112th RCT relieved the 117th Regiment ^{dissector 19}. The line held by the 117th extended from slightly east of Stavelot to the line held by the 424th RCT, which in turn went as far west as Trois-Pont. During the night of 10-11 January the relief was effected by the 112th RCT and the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd battalions of the 117th Regiment assembled in the vicinity of Sart (723147), Xhoffraix (818077), and Tiege (708151) respectively.

With that relief completed, control of the 424th and 112th RCT's passed from the 30th Division to the 106th Division. ²⁰ Thus, the line on the north shoulder of the Belgian bulge was held by the 1st Division on the left, 30th Division roughly between Malmedy and Stavelot ^{the newly formed 106th Division from slightly east of Stavelot} to the Salm River and on their right flank, the 82nd Airborne Division.

The main drive in the St. Vith offensive, insofar as the 30th Division was concerned, was to begin at 0800 as "H" hour and 13 January as "D" day. The front held by the Division was roughly five miles across and extended from the 75th grid line on the west to the 84th grid line on the east. The objective area ran south between those lines from the vicinity of Malmedy to slightly south, but excluded St. Vith. Thru the center of the

area ran the primary road from Malmedy, thru Ligneuville, Neider Emmels and into St. Vith. Cutting off from the main road, and then back into it again, secondary routes branched into Pont, Becht, Thirimont and Rodt.

During the counter offensive the 1st SS Panzer Division had been in the area, but when the initiative passed to the U.S. troops in the Ardennes Salient, what remained of the 1st SS was withdrawn early and replaced by second rate infantry units. The sector held by the 18th Volksgrenadier Division extended east from the Salm River at Trois Ponts (6798) to Baugnez (8101). The 294th VG Regiment was on the west, the 293rd VG Regiment on the east, with the 295th Regiment thought to be in immediate reserve. The strength of the first two regiments in contact estimated at 800 troops. In immediate reserve was a conjectured 1600 additional men from the following units attached or supporting the 18th VG division: Field Ersatz Battalion, Fusilier and Alarm Company, Engineer Battalion, 434th Construction Battalion, 1818th Anti tank Battalion, and OT Blomberg (Division Combat School). There were a further estimated 1700 men in the 1818th Artillery Regiment and 87th Nebelwerfer Regiment in direct artillery support of the 18 VG Division, but ²¹ ~~which were capable of being employed as infantry~~ ~~of being employed as infantry.~~²¹ That made a roughly estimated total of 4000 men that could possibly have been employed on the

Division front. However, that was not an integrated fighting force, but a scattered attempt to fuse a number of variegated units into an effective force. That there^o so called "scattered" forces^e proved determined, difficult to defeat, and caused the 30th Division an extremely large number of casualties, will be quickly evident in the account that follows.

The terrain in the area and the obstacles it presented were essentially the same as described in the early portion of this narrative. The extremely heavily wooded areas and the protection and tactical advantage it offered defending troops must be remembered while considering this operation. Further, it must be kept in mind the condition of the road net. Snow had fallen in the Ardennes region almost every day since shortly before Christmas, 1944. After some three weeks, high drifts had formed on both sides of every road. If the route was a fairly well ^{traveled} ~~re~~vealed one, it had become slick as ice. Lanes leading to points of vantage in a dominating piece of terrain, were hidden by the drifts and to gain such ground was possible only by slugging up the forward slope and knocking the enemy off.

Fortunately there were no great hampering bodies of water between the 30th Division ^{line} of departure and the final objective in the vicinity of St. Vith. The L'Ambleve River, which was met

further to the west, again crossed the division zone running from west to east near Ligneuville. It was not considered any obstacle of any large proportion for though it was a swift flowing river, it was only two to three feet deep at critical crossing points. Branches of it were so narrow that tactically, they were inconsequential.

One of the biggest obstacles, was of course, the weather and the effect it had on the physical condition of the men. Though every advantage was taken of shelters of any type, and a steady policy of rotating of companies within a battalion was followed, the men were frequently wet and cold for long periods of time that ^{often} frequently exceeded a day. The rate of frostbite was high, though the number of cases of trench foot was remarkably low.

The latter indicative of good command functions in watching the conditions of the men's feet and fostering care of the troops for their feet. In the 120th Regiment, the commanding officer, Colonel Branner P. Purdue, initiated a system where every front line man possessed a pair of "blanket boots". Those were curious affairs but extremely efficacious in keeping the feet of the men in good condition. Made by the battalion tailor, townspeople in Malmedy and other cities in the vicinity of the regiment, they consisted of a salvaged GI blanket folded to triple thickness and sewn into a boot shape and almost knee-high. They were worn over woolen socks when indoors. In the line shoes and overshoes were

removed at night and the blanket boot put on, and over them, overshoes.²²

A very small proportion of the men had snow capes or any other white camouflage type outer garments. They did whitewash or crudely affix whit sheets to hoods or sides of some vehicles. Helmets were frequently painted white and every effort was made by the troops to attempt to camouflage themselves by using whatever material was available.

On 12 January 1945, 30th Division issued Field Order 60, giving the objectives, troop attachments, etc that were concerned in the St. Vith offensive.

The three regiments of the division, 117th, 119th, and 120th, were supplemented by the 526th Armored Infantry Battalion, (less Company C), 99th Separate Infantry Battalion, 743rd Tank Battalion, 829rd Tank Destroyer Battalion (SP), 531st AAA (AW) Battalion, 110th AAA Battalion (90 mm, battery A and D only), 400th Armored FA Battalion, 401st FA Group (187th FA Battalion, and 809th FA Battalion; 155 mm howitzer), Battery A, 290th FA Observation Battalion, Company A, 86th Chemical Mortar Battalion. Additional artillery support came from 118th and 113th FA Battalions in general support, 197th FA Battalion in support of the 119th Infantry, and 230th and 76th FA Battalion in support of the 120th Infantry. These units received reinforcing fires from the 406th FA Group, and 211th FA Group.²³

The contemplated employment of the units were normal. The 531st

AAA Battalion furnished anti-aircraft protection, the 833rd TD Battalion with Batteries A and D, 110th AAA Battalion furnished anti tank support, 526th Armored Infantry Battalion (less Company C) attached the 99th Infantry Battalion to support the 119th Infantry and the Engineer and signal troops worked in their usual capacities. 24

The original plan, though an unexpected amount of enemy resistance caused changes to be made, called for the 119th Infantry to seize Medmont two hours prior to "H" hour and then continue south and capture Bellevaux, Lamcruville, ^{Borghenscheid, and establish bridgeheads at} and Fort, prepared to move to ^{transcherville} Houvegnex. On the left of the 119th, the 120th Infantry was to seize Huyen, Ligneuville, Hauts Sarts, and Thirimont. That was expected to be the first phase, through all of which the 117th Regiment was to remain ⁱⁿ reserve.

^{The 117th} It was then to attack to the south of the area taken by the 119th. 25
~~in reserve~~ From the 13 January to 23 January, the day the operation was completed, the plan of attack remained the same. The only alterations were in the employment of Division Units.