

By Capt H. B. Sigband

INTRODUCTION

The account of the 30th Infantry Division participation in the Battle of the Belgium bulge (as the German counter offensive became known) was divided into two distinct phases. The first, and more colorful and spectacular phase was the defensive activities of the Division from 17 to 26 December. The second, was the offensive drive that ran from 13 to 23 January. The latter was a hard, costly, drab, slugging match. It was the St. Vith offensive wherein the "Old Hickory" Division forced the enemy back, almost yard by yard for 12 slow moving miles. It was in that latter 10 day action that the Division lost almost 2,000 men; and extremely high price that is indicative of the tenacity of the enemy and his reluctance to surrender the Malmédy -St. Vith road net. ¹

The background leading to the 10 day offensive action, took place between 3rd January and "D" day, 13 January. It is therefore, imperative that the early days of January be recounted to set the stage for the primary drive.

At the opening of 1945, the 30th Division front line extended from a point slightly east of Malmédy to a short distance west of Stavelot where it joined the 82nd Airborne Division on the Salm River line. In that area, and the entire distance south to St. Vith, the terrain was much alike. Extremely hilly, steep valleys and ridge lines were

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numerous. It was on such terrain features that the enemy built his main lines of resistance.

Such points of vantage were valuable to the Germans, but he also received immeasurable aid from the weather conditions. Extremely deep snows, roads covered by ice and flanked by 6 foot snow drifts, made attacks by our forces extremely difficult. From elevated points of vantage, the Germans were in positions to observe the advance of the 30th Division troops as they plowed across country for designated objectives. It will be noted in the following narrative that almost every city taken in the Division zone in the advance to St. Vith, was dominated by a high point or ridge line ^{adjacent} to the ⁿenvirons of the community.

In addition to the ~~advantages~~ ^{advantages} gained by the enemy by the rugged terrain features pointed out, he was also favored by the heavily wooded areas. From such sections he frequently attempted to infiltrate small units into our lines, or he ^hid self propelled assault guns among the firs to ambush our vehicles as they moved by and also emplaced anti-tank weapons in ~~the~~ fire breaks. ^hose fire breaks ran thru the densely wooded Ardennes Forest and extended from eight to twelve yards in width. Besides using the fire breaks for points of vantage for anti-tank weapons, ^{emplacements,} the enemy utilized those lanes to bring armor and troops forward when their travel was prohibited because U.S. ^artillery or a 30th Division unit controlled a particular road. It was those

fire breaks, that the enemy used as roads to get thru an otherwise impenetrable forest.

From the division front lines and running south, there were adequate roads to launch a coordinated attack. However, those roads in addition to being snow and ice covered, became even worse of a hazard due to the fact that they were all severly canalized by the hill masses and wooded areas. Possession of a high point in the neighborhood of a road or a road junction, perforce equalled control of the road. Such terrain features were excellent for an employment of a delaying defensive action. For that reason special attention was directed at Houyire (K809006), Hauts Sarts (F825996), Wolfsbusch Forest (F833968), Dielburg (F810954) and Hannert (F797957). These were all points of excellent observation and good fields of fire. They contained fine opportunities for cover and concealment, possessed steep approaches and held command of the roads that passed between them.

The enemy defensive organization in this sector during January, 1945, were primarily pillbox and breastwork defenses, improvised out of logs and dirt. Trench lines were abundant and easily made to conform satisfactorily with the many rising ground areas. These trench lines and strong points when making up and MLR were on the forward slopes of steep rises. Mine fields were almost all hasty,

but because all traces of a buried mine were soon covered by the frequent snows, they proved exceedingly effective. Where roads rounded frequent turns in the Ardennes, the portion lost to view in an approach, were frequently ineffectively blocked by a series of felled trees straddling the road.

Laying the ⁶ground Work for the Division Offensive

On 3 January the VII Corps attacked in the area between the L'Ourthe and Lienne Rivers with Houffalize (P6172) as its final objective. ² At the same time, the XVIII Corps (Airborne) began, as a portion of the Corps Mission, "to conduct patrolling on D day (3 January 1945) properly supported by artillery, and in such strength as will lead the enemy to believe a general attack is being launched". ³ In the same letter, Maj. General Mathew Ridgway, XVIII Corps commander, suggested to Maj. General Leland Hobbs, an outline plan for operation that included ^{to capture of} several areas that later became 30th division objectives. ⁴ That was primarily the city and road net leading to St. Vith, that lay in the 30th Division sector.

The first phase, suggested above, patrolling and small movements, were designed to confuse the enemy as to where, in the 1st and 3rd Army sectors of the "bulge", the main American drive would be launched.

Deception was what was expected to be gained from patrol forces sent out by the 30th Division. ⁵ Those diversionary activities did not deceive the enemy to any great degree and the latter continued a careful withdrawal movement within the bulge. ⁶ First the armor was pulled out and replaced in the line primarily by Volksgrenadier units. In the 30th Division sector, as the offensive slowly began, there were no elements of the 1st SS Panzer Division to be found. The opposing unit was the 18th Volksgrenadier Division badly depleted, but nevertheless capable of a defensive rearward fight. ⁷

A diversionary activity is attempted

As 1945 began, the enemy, though definitely stopped from any further large scale drives to the west, was still to be reckoned with, insofar as the possibility of his launching an attack was concerned. In the 30th Division sector the 105th Engineer Combat Battalion had seven bridges mined for possible demolition. ⁸ Those spanned the L'Anbleve River and its subsidiaries. Roads were carefully guarded with anti-tank defenses, in the Malmedy (7804)-Stavelot (7107) sector, and in that role the 110th AAA Battalion (90mm), 823rd TD Battalion, 825th TD Company (both 3 inch) and the normal Division 57 mm AT guns were utilized.

Along with these precautions elements of the division constantly sent out reconnaissance and combat patrols. They had two primary purposes; maintaining contact with the enemy so that some idea of his activities ^would always be known and secondly, a constant drive to bring in prisoners so that identifications and possibly future plans could be gained from interrogation of the captured troops. 9

On 3 January, the main effort in the XVIII Corps was made by the 82nd Airborne Division which held a line on the immediate right of the 30th Division. To aid in diverting some of the enemy forces to the 30th Division front, the 120th Regiment of the division attacked at 0830. 3 January. At the same time, the 82nd Division moved off as the main effort in the XVIII Corps sector and met heavy resistance all along the line.

In the 120th Infantry zone, the diversionary activity was executed by three groups. Company I of the Regiment under 1st Lt. John A. Doyle seized their objective, an area of high ground, approximately 1500 yards southwest of Malmedy. Company B of the 526th Armored Infantry (attached to the 30th Division) moved off at the same time for the objective of Houyire (K807007), but met heavy enemy fire north of Hedomont, 2,000 yards from Houyire. They held that point of their furthest advance until 1800 hours of 3 January and then withdrew to their former line, slightly

south of Malmedy.

On the left of the above unit, the 1st platoon, Company A, 526th Armored Infantry seized the cross roads at X 814019, which lay immediately to the south of Baugnez. That unit withdrew to its original line at about midnight, and Company I of the 120th Infantry fell back at 1950 hours to the southern outskirts of Malmedy. That action by those three units served the worthwhile purpose of diverting some troops from the 82nd Division front. However, the results were not what was expected from the enemy in the way of artillery concentrations and troop and vehicle shifting.¹⁰ The only enemy troops contacted in the skirmish were the 2nd and 3rd Companies, 293rd Volksgrenadier Regiment, 18th Volksgrenadier Division.

30th Division crosses the L'Auibleve River

Following the small action on 3 January, the division began preparations for its consolidated offensive which began on 13 January. One of the primary needs before a concerted drive toward St. Vith could be considered in the 30th Division zone, was the necessity for gaining a firm line on the south bank of the L'Auibleve River. As the line stood on 4 January, the Division

line between Trois Ponts (675⁹87) and Mahedy (790045), was on the north bank of the River.

The plan was to first cross the L'Ambleve between Trois Ponts and Stavelot. After that right flank was secured, it was then contemplated that the drive south between the north-south grid lines of 76 degrees and 84 degrees would begin in force and not halt until St. Vith was seized.

On 4 January, XVIII Corps commander, Maj. General Ridgway, directed that plans be prepared for a crossing of the L'Ambleve between Trois Ponts and Stavelot and that a bridgehead be established in the angle which lay on the south bank of the L'Ambleve and the east bank of the Salm Rivers.¹¹ On the following day, 5 January, the 30th Division was instructed to accomplish that mission during the morning of ^{the following day.} 6 January.¹² For the operation the 112th Regimental Combat Team, of the 28th Division, was attached to the 30th Division at 051000A January.

The objective of the attack was to gain and maintain the area on the south bank of the L'Ambleve that was bounded by Spineux (K700958), Wanne (709967) and Wannerval (710975). On the right flank of the 30th Division the 82nd Airborne Division, had attacked south, and the 517th Regiment of the latter division, had possession of a line several thousand yards south of the L'Ambleve and west of the Salm River. It was therefore necessary for the 112th ROT to attack for the objectives outlined above to protect the left flank of the 82nd Division, plus giving the 30th Division a foothold on the south bank of the L'Ambleve for future operations. 13

The 112th RCT was given the burden of that operation and assigned in addition to their normal regimental attachments, Company G, 103rd Engineer Combat Battalion, Company C, 630th TD Battalion, 3 platoons (from companies D and C) 743rd Tank Battalion and in support of the entire operation, were seven field artillery battalions. ¹⁴ The tasks assigned and accomplished by the regiments of the 30th Division were, the bridgehead established by the 117th Regiment to aid the 112th RCT in their attack and the 119th Regiment and the 120th Regiment maintaining their defensive positions in the division sector.

The original plan stated that the 117th Regiment would establish two small bridgeheads at 0630 hours, 6 January and that the 112th RCT would pass thru them an hour later and seize the high ground in the vicinity of Montagnes (698995) and then continue to, and occupy Wannerenval, Wanne and Spineux.

Enemy forces opposing the 30th Division maintained their main line of resistance on the south bank of the L'Ambleve. In the zone of scheduled action, (west and south of Stavelot), the 1st and 2nd Battalions, ^{293rd VG} 294th Regiment opposed the U.S. Troops, while south of Malmedy the 1st and 2nd ¹⁶ Battalions, 294th Regiment were disposed, with the 295th in reserve. Those three units were

all elements of the 18th Volksgrenadier Division. Their defenses were along the ridge line and high points in the area. The roads were covered by assault guns, and blocks of felled trees, and dugouts at the sides of the roads that contained one or two men armed with an automatic weapon. The L'Ambleve, the narrow, was an extremely fast flowing river and was overlooked by a hill line in the possession of the enemy.

Under the cover of darkness, 6 January, Company G, 103rd Combat Engineer Battalion constructed foot bridges over the L'Ambleve at 684993 and 677991. Shortly thereafter, (0630) hours still under cover of darkness, Company G, 117th Infantry under 1st Lt. Charles W. Monerleff crossed at the two bridge sites established. They met no opposition and by 0700 the entire regiment was over the river and had taken up positions in the corner enclosed on the north by the L'Ambleve and on the east by the Salm River. At 0730, the 1st and 3rd Battalions of the 112th RCT, supported by 3 platoons of tanks from the 743rd Tank Battalion attacked to the south. Cities of Wanne and Wanneranval were objectives of the 3rd Battalion and Spineux and Le Tombeux goals of the 1st Battalion.


The 3rd Battalion advanced 400 yards to Grand Faye (698988), where it was halted by heavy automatic weapon and small arms fire. Cutting to the left, the battalion hit the enemy on the flank and-

captured a small number and by passed the main body of resistance. They then drove south through enemy opposition at Remiheid and immediately to the east of Aisemont, where they formed an 800 yard line to the east for the night.

The 1st Battalion on the right of the 3rd moved off at the same time keeping well along the Salm River. At Dorriere Spai (676982) they encountered an enemy strong point that overlooked the route of advance. Utilizing automatic weapons they eliminated the strong point and were in possession of the area by noon. The advance to the south continued for approximately 1500 yards, where at darkness they established a front line extending from 690960 to 699968. Contact was made with the 3rd Battalion on the left and the 517th Parachute Infantry, 82nd Division on the right.

At 0900, 7 January, the 112th RCT again attacked with the 3rd Battalion on the left, the 1st on the right and the 2nd in reserve in the vicinity of Aisemont. The 82nd Division advanced on the right of the 112th and received extremely heavy fire from Spineux. It was therefore, imperative that the 112th seize that strongpoint as early as possible so that the cross fire hitting the flank of the 82nd would be eliminated.

Aiming at Wanne, as the objective for the day, the 3rd Battalion moved south with Company L on the left and Company K

on the right. Overcoming stiff resistance, the battalion was on the outskirts of Wanne by 1900 hours. Shortly thereafter they were hit by a counter attack composed of 3 tanks supported by infantry that came in from the southwest in the vicinity of Spineux. The elements of the 743rd Tank Battalion, ^{that were} attached to the battalion engaged the enemy armor, destroyed them and lost one tank from enemy fire. With that hazard eliminated, Company K  drove into Wanne from the northwest and Company L from the northeast. When well into the city, another counter attack hit the 3rd Battalion coming from the direction of Spineux, and again the 743rd tanks aided in the driving ^{back} of the Germans back. Losses for the 3rd platoons of the 743rd, that were engaged, were four tanks. One from enemy tank fire, one from friendly artillery and two from mines. ¹⁵ By dusk, Company I had consolidated their position in Wanneranval with Company ^K in Wanne and Company L on the east of Company K.

112th RCT

The 1st Battalion, 112th RCT, had jumped off at the same time as the 3rd. They pushed southeast thru heavily wooded area for almost 1000 yards, and then reached and captured the towns of Spineux and Le Tombeux by 1800 hours of 7 January. Company A of that Battalion held the right, Company B on the left and Company C in the rear in support. The difficulties encountered, in addition to the enemy action, was the extremely heavily wooded area, and

the knee deep snow thru which the advance was made. The enemy utilized these natural obstacles unfamiliar to our troops, from which to attack and fight.

By last light of 7 January, Company A was securely consolidated in Spineux, Company B in Le Tombeux and Company C to the rear center of both. The 2nd Battalion, 112th RCT, remained thruout the day, as regimental reserve with Company F in the vicinity of Aisemont, Company E in the vicinity of Grand Faye and Company G to the rear and on the right flank of the battalion.

Thus, in a two day period, the L'Ambleve had been crossed, the enemy cleared out of the Salm-L'Ambleve pocket and the first step taken in the rapid, relentless drive of the 30th Division to the vicinity of St. Vith. At 081700, ^{January 14th} the 424th RCT, from the 106th Division, was attached to the 30th Division, and began to relieve the 112th RCT. Taking over the 112th RCT's attachments, which had reverted to XVIII Corps control, the 424th RCT was to relieve the former of its positions by 2400, 8 January. ¹⁶ Due to heavy snow, extremely poor road conditions and inclement weather, the relief took until the afternoon of 9 January before it was completed. ¹⁷