

St. Vith Offensive

Phase II

By midnight of 15 January the first phase line, which had been designated as such in the Division plan, had been reached. That line ran roughly along the L'Ambleve River where it crossed the Division zone. The line that marked the completion of the second phase ran from east to west and was south of the L'Ambleve, on the left flank, approximately 8,000 yards and on the right flank, 11,000 yards. Within that area, 13 goose egg areas had been listed as objectives points. Of that number three were high points that ran in a rough east west line and possessed an elevation of 530 meters (Dillburg) 540 meters (Hunnert), and (Wolfsbusch) 590 meters. That line would probably have been utilized as a

main line of resistance by the enemy, if he had had adequate time for preparations. However, the rapid drive through extremely difficult natural ^e conditions, by the 30th Division, caught the enemy off balance and kept him in that condition all the way to St. Vith.

In a letter of instruction issued at 2200, 15 January, the 117th Regiment was directed to attack south, the following morning, to secure the ridge line situated approximately 2,000 yards south of its front. The 119th aimed to the west with the primary objective the MSR between Font and Recht.

The 1st Battalion, 117th Infantry with Companies A and C leading and Company B in reserve, attacked for Dillburg (812954). At 0900 the group left from the vicinity of Ligneuville and advanced against very light opposition to a point approximately 400 yards north of Dillburg. ^{about} Approximately 1,000 yards to the southeast and enemy concentration of armor and infantry was observed at the road junction at 823950. That road junction turned out to be an extremely hard nut to crack in the days that followed. It was the intersection of the Malmedy-St. Vith road with the route from Recht. On the 16th January, the enemy began to fortify that point as a road block in strength. That activity was noted and Division artillery put a concentration of fire on it from 105 mm and 155 mm guns, plus a good many rounds from eight inch howitzers fired by the 264th Field Artillery Battalion.

The 2nd Battalion, 117th Infantry, under Major B. T. Ammons,

moved south at the same time and on the right of the 1st Batt alion.
South of
~~Going through Bücken, a very small town south of Pont,~~ the Battalion advanced slowly through the exceedingly thick forest area. The base of Hunbert (795956) was reached by midafternoon and Capt. Sibbald's Company E out to the east slope of the hill, while Company G under Capt. Victor Salem, went to the west. Company ^F remained in battalion reserve throughout the day and followed midway between Companies E and G.

Meanwhile, the 3rd Battalion, 119th Infantry had been attached to the 117th Infantry, and under the latter's direction attacked in coordination with the 1st and 2nd Battalions of the 117th, the morning of 16 January. Advancing east from Ligneuville, a road block was established at 825983. The battalion was then disposed by Major C. E. Stewart with the three companies abreast. The advance was almost directly south with Company L on the left, I in the center and Company K on the right or east. By noon the base of the Wolfsbusch hill (830967) was reached. An attempt was made to advance up the slope, but it was pushed back by the enemy. Throughout the afternoon, fire fights continued and when darkness fell, the positions occupied by the 3rd Battalion, 119th Infantry, were essentially the same as they had been at noon. The 3rd Battalion, 117th Infantry remained in regimental reserve throughout 16 January. Just south of Pont, the companies were disposed from east to west, Companies L, K, and I respectively.

On the right, the two battalions of the 119th Infantry (the 3rd Battalion had been attached to the 117th Infantry) also did not make any great strides ~~or meet any stiff resistance~~. The 1st Battalion held a defensive position throughout the day, regrouping and refitting. Companies C and B maintained positions immediately southwest of Font and Company A attempted to get some rest on the north side of the L'Ambleve. The 2nd Battalion, on the right flank of the 30th Division, moved off at 0900 and advanced south almost 1,000 yards from Houvegniez. Company E led, and with Company F on the left, the heavy woods were searched. One tank of the 743rd Tank Battalion was lost from direct fire of an enemy self-propelled gun. Those SP's were met in some number in the next week and always proved troublesome. They were 75 mm guns mounted on a Mark IV chassis. Not too large they drove through the forest fire breaks easily and maneuvered without too much difficulty in the snows. In any event Company E pushed to 765959, where they made contact with the 517th Parachute Infantry, 106th Division, at ~~last~~ ^{at last night} light.

The activity of the 120th Infantry, on 16 January, was much like the other two regiments. Primarily resting and maintaining defensive positions. From slightly east of Thirimont to west of Hauts Sarts positions ^were held by the 1st, 3rd and 2nd Battalions respectively. Each had two companies in line and one in reserve. The following day, 17 January, there were ^{again} no great advances

made anywhere on the Division front. Again, as on the previous day, short movements were made, but regrouping and some rehabilitation were carried on primarily. In the 117th Infantry, Lt. Colonel R. E. Frankland's 1st Battalion further consolidated their position on the Dillburg hill 530. Companies A and C covered the entire elevation, clearing out a few of the enemy that had infiltrated during the night, and then took up positions in a line on the reverse slope. At 0915 an estimated 50 enemy infantrymen, supported by 5 light tanks, and designated Combat Team Hoffman, were encountered. A relatively short fire fight ensued, in which several PW's were captured and the enemy routed. Company B took up a position, in battalion reserve, slightly to the north of the other two companies. The 2nd Battalion, 117th Infantry attacked for Hunnert, which was more correctly the designation of a 540 meter high elevation. On the previous day, 16 January, the battalion had been unsuccessful in its attack on the objective. However, on the morning of 17 January, they again struck at the hill. Because the objective was in the center of an extremely heavily wooded area, the enemy found adequate cover and concealment. An estimated 50 troops defended the hill. ⁴⁶ They were broken into small groups and each group had an assault gun set up in either a dug out or a fire break. Companies G and E attacked and drove them off and then patrols went down to Reicht to make a reconnaissance ^{ance}.

The 3rd Battalion took a crack at the road ~~block~~ ^{strong point} at 820955.

but were no more successful on the 17 January than they were on the previous day. The difficulty in any attempt to ^{take} raise the block was not so much from the large amount of fire power set up, but from the tactical disposition and organization of the strong point. On the east side of the Malmedy-St. Vith road, in the vicinity of the road block, the undergrowth was very thick. Because of the ^{fact} factor it was quite impossible for troops of the 3rd Battalion to bring up any armor or heavy weapons on that flank. Further the enemy had a series of machine guns, light and heavy, set up among the trees and in the fire breaks. On the west side of the road, peculiarly enough, there was an open area which prohibited an advance in any force to cross it. Any attempt of that nature was immediately met by fire that came from the road block defenses. That fire, and fire on any friendly groups in the vicinity that came down the main highway or other approaches from the north, was observed from east of the road block on an elevated position. Such observations were then communicated to the gun positions at the road intersection. 47 That was the reverse of the usual situations where the observer was near the target and the guns in the rear. ~~In that case, the 3rd Battalion 117th Infantry attacking the road block, the enemy guns were in the proximity of the target and the observer in the rear.~~

In the 119th Regiment the only active battalion was the 2nd. ^{the} 1st assembled in Font and the 3rd, released from attachment to the 117th Infantry, closed into Malmedy. Companies F and G of the 2nd Battalion

maintained their position in the vicinity of Houvegnen. Capt. Wayne E. Parker's Company E sent out a strong combat patrol to establish a road block at Oehsenbaracks, (782953). That point was on the road from Pont to Recht and the ^{most} furthest advanced position of the Division. The Company pushed to the road block position slowly and carefully following ^{ed} a course through the woods. The strength of the road block was made up of a platoon of infantry from Company E, 2 heavy machine guns, two self propelled TD's and three anti-tank guns. ⁴⁸ Once the road block was set up and consolidated, outposts were sent out and contacted the 517th Regiment on the right and the 117th on the left.

¹On the 120th Regiment the 1st Battalion remained in the vicinity of Thirimont with Companies A and B in the line. A combat patrol was sent down to reconnoiter the objective that enclosed Lier Venn (vic 831940), some 2500 yards from Wolfsbusch. The enemy was met in force a good distance north of the objective, and the patrol was forced to return to their starting point.

The 2nd Battalion, 120th Infantry, took over the occupation of the Wolfsbusch hill and relieved the 3rd Battalion, 119th Infantry that had taken that objective on the previous day.

There was little other activity on 17 January, although more trouble was caused to our vehicles by road mines, that were laid in scattered patterns. From 13 to 16 January the 90th Division

had 15 tanks disabled by anti tank mines. ⁴⁹ The mines, buried under several inches of snow and ice were not located by mine detectors. Therefore a request was made of XVIII Corps for the use of "mine busters". ⁵⁰ These were secured and used to excellent purpose on the Division roads. They were valuable because of the effectiveness with which they performed their primary function; detonating AT mines. They were also of great aid for the psychological effect they had on jeep, tank and truck drivers. Those men felt the road was safe, once a "mine buster" had gone over it, and as such, their task of driving, with the nervous strain eliminated, was made easier.

The "mine busters" of the 738th Tank Battalion, utilized were of two types. One type had two sets of discs weighing 30 tons, mounted on the front of a medium tank. Each set contained five disks and each disk was almost nine feet in diameter. Each of the two sets were mounted directly in front of the tank's treads. Thus an empty space was present between the two sets and mines which lay below that area were not exploded. That was the primary fault of the M3. It was rectified by the T1E1 type that had three sets of disks mounted on the front of a standard medium tank retriever. These three sets contained six discs each, but their diameter was less than half of those mounted on the M3. They were mounted with a set in front of each tank tread and the third set to the fore of those, and in the center of the tank. Thus the road in the front of the tank was com-

pletely "rolled" and performed its task more satisfactorily than the E3.

There is a great deal of interest that may be attached to the tremendous number of AT mines that were found scattered in the Malmedy sector. Almost every one of these mines was found under heavy snow and ice. Inasmuch as the first heavy snow did not occur in that sector until 26 December, one may assume that the Germans abandoned the plan to attack through the Malmedy sector in the direction of Liege, by Christmas. 51

The Drive Continues

After two days, in which a short opportunity for some rest and refitting were snatched, the 30th ^D Division on 18 January again began to drive south. In a Division directive the 120th Regiment was assigned an objective labeled "q", (vic 825937). The goose egg shaped area enclosed a portion of the Malmedy-St. Vith road and also a hill 522 meters in height. The whole was approximately 2,300 yards east by southeast of Recht (796945) and also contained the tiny village of Lier Venn, (831939). The 117th Infantry, with the 2nd Battalion of the 119th attached, was to take Recht and if both regiments had

completed their assignments satisfactorily, they were to attack for Eackelsborn (810930), which was situated approximately 1,200 yards south by southeast of Recht. ⁵² To aid in the operation, and to insure coordination of movement on the Division right flank, the 517th RIF (minus 2nd Battalion) was attached at 1800 hours, 17 January. ⁵³

Before the 117th Infantry could attack for Recht it was perforce necessary to eliminate the road block which was, as stated earlier, near the junction of the Recht and St. Vith road. Lt. Colonel Samuel T. McDowell's 3rd Battalion was still attempting to knock out the road block at 820955. "K" Company under Capt. Hammonds, was not able to eliminate the strong point, however, elements of his company did infiltrate behind it and were successful in laying some AT mines. Under cover of darkness the enemy withdrew from that first position and set up an even stronger block about 300 yards south on the same road at 823950. Again mines were laid behind the road block and attempts were continued to force the enemy to withdraw. The resistance, if anything, increased and the number of assault guns and automatic weapons delivered an extremely punishing fire on the attackers. ⁵⁴ During 18 January the road block was not reduced and consequently the attack for Recht was not made. The 1st and 2nd Battalions of the 117th Infantry maintained their defensive ^{lines} positions on the elevated positions of Dillburg and Hunnert, respectively.

The 119th Regiment accomplished little during 18 January. The 1st Battalion remained assembled in the vicinity of Pont, and the 2nd Battalion retained their lines on the extreme right flank of the Division. Companies K and L of the 3rd Battalion remained in Malmedy and Company I under 1st Lt. John A. Doyle Jr., moved from there to take over the high ground of Huass Sart, relieving the 3rd Battalion 120th Infantry from that position.

There was much more activity in the 120th Regiment on 18 January. At 0930 the 1st Battalion advanced south for objective "Q" in the vicinity of 831939 and two hours later it was followed by the 3rd Battalion. The attack was made on the objective from the northeast, thus bypassing the enemy held road block at 823950. By early afternoon the area was captured and occupied by both battalions in a semi circular line by 1500 hours. Company I was placed on the extreme east slope and from east to west, Companies A, L, C, and B, were disposed with Company K in reserve. At just about dusk, the enemy counterattacked in strength from the south with an estimated seven tanks and at least 100 infantrymen. Artillery was called down on the infantry and they were broken up and scattered at 827939, a point on the St. Vith road approximately 400 yards south of the 1st and 3rd Battalion front line. Groups of our infantry fanned out and attacked the tanks with bazooka and small arms. Company C knocked out two, and three additional tanks were destroyed. ⁵⁵ Of the five, two were mounted with 105 mm

assault guns on a Mark IV chassis and the other three had 75 mm guns on the same type chassis. ⁵⁶ Though unusual, that illustrates that carefully directed infantrymen can destroy enemy light tanks with bazooka and small arms fire, ^{without any aid from armor.} While this counter attack was in progress, Company K, which had been in the rear of the line and consequently the nearest to the enemy road block at 823950, turned north to assist the 3rd Battalion, 117th Infantry in their attack on that strongpoint. Driving at the road block from the north and south, elements of Company K of the 117th and Company K of the 119th got scattered ^{groups} elements behind the road block and planted AT mines and harassed the strong enemy concentration, but did not eliminate it.

The 2nd Battalion, 120th Regiment, on 18 January maintained their position on the Wolfsbunch hill, via 833968, and aided in bringing up supplies to the 1st and 3rd Battalions. The following day, 19 January, the 2nd Battalion was relieved by the 1st Battalion, 119th Infantry. The second then moved south 2,000 yards, through the 1st and 3rd Battalions, 120th Regiment and at 1415 attacked for their objective, Eeckelsborn and the area in the vicinity. Eeckelsborn lay 1200 yards southeast of Recht on the Recht-St. Vith road. The attack was made after Recht had been captured that morning and the road block at 823950, eliminated. The 2nd Battalion with Company E on the east, Company F on the west, and Company G in the center met light resistance and was consolidated in the city by 1700.

The 1st and 3rd Battalions, 120th Infantry maintained their defensive positions in the vicinity of objective "Q". Company K, of the 3rd Battalion, under 1st Lt. Melton Smith, again assisted the 3rd Battalion, 117th Infantry in the final reduction of the road block at 823950 which took place during the morning of 19 January. 57

The 1st Battalion sent patrols to objective "T" to attempt to determine the size of the enemy force that was in possession of that important area. The goose-egg "T" enclosed the junction where the Ligneville-St. Vith road converged with the Recht-St. Vith road at 829917. From that area, reconnaissance was made 1,200 yards to the west by the patrols.

On the right of the 120th, the 117th Infantry on the morning of 19 January prepared to attack to seize Recht in compliance with Division instructions. 58 At 0600 the 2nd and 3rd Battalion, 117th Infantry attacked. The former left Hunnert with Companies E and F on line and in 20 minutes were on the outskirts of Recht. Resistance was light and consisted mainly of small arms fire. In a very short time the enemy troops defending Recht were driven out. Company K led by Cpat. Sibbald took a center route with Company G on the northwest. By 0930 the 2nd Battalion was in possession of the city and sent patrols to the east to assist the 3rd Battalion in the final reduction of the road block at 823950.

The capture of Recht in such a short time, was not wholly due

to the fighting capabilities of the infantry and the excellent tank and tank destroyer support. An exceedingly heavy artillery barrage was laid on the city prior to the attack. 9th Division artillery hit the town heavily in a well planned pattern. First the outlying section of the city was bombarded and then the shells moved south, catching the center of the city and the area of building concentrations. 59 Because of that terrific barrage, it was not surprising that the enemy who did remain to defend the city capitulated in approximately one hour.

In the 119th Regiment, as stated earlier, the 1st Battalion relieved the 2nd Battalion, 120th Regiment on the Wolfsbusch hill. The 2nd Battalion retained their position on the right flank and maintained contact with the 517th on the right and the 117th Infantry on the left. During 19 January new enemy troops were identified on the Division front that had most probably been brought in as reinforcements. 60

At 0800 the 1st Battalion, 117th Infantry Regiment, crossed their line of departure and attacked south for their objective. That was another goose egg area, about 2,000 yards south of Recht and enclosed an area of dominating terrain. The terrain it contained was very heavily forested and an advance on the objective was very difficult. However, the battalion met only small arms resistance and advanced easily against it. By early afternoon, consolidation on the objective had taken place.

At the same jump-off time, Lt Colonel Samuel T. McDowell's 3rd Battalion, 117th Infantry, moved south on the left flank of the 1st

Battalion, from the vicinity of Eeckelsborn. They advanced for an ^{approx.} area that measured approximately 600 yards in a north-south direction and 1,400 yards in an east-west direction. The objective was about 1,000 yards south of Eeckelsborn and enclosed a portion of the secondary Fecht to Rodt road. With 1st Lt. Gale Daugherty's Company L leading, and then Companies I and K, the battalion encountered a small amount of enemy fire just south of Eeckelsborn. Made up of about a company of infantry supported by three light tanks, they were easily routed and the 3rd Battalion moved on their objective. Once they consolidated, they were on an approximate 2,000 yard line with the 1st Battalion. At 1530, on division order, both battalions attacked to take a large area designated as "Willie" and "Willie", which lay about 500 yards south of the areas taken earlier in the day. The 1st Battalion hit it on the west and the 3rd Battalion on the east. The latter met very little resistance and was in control of their objective by 1730 with Companies K, L, and I, echeloned to the northeast. The 1st Battalion, with Companies A and C leading, met fairly stiff resistance consisting of approximately a company of infantry employing some automatic weapon, but primarily small arms fire. By last light they had possession of the reverse slope and had made contact with the 3rd Battalion by 1925 hours. The objective was important, for its center point was a steep elevation which provided observation of Rodt and led right into that city.

On the right of the 117th, the 119th Infantry swung into action early the morning of 20 January. Lt. Colonel Robert H. Herlong's 1st Battalion was relieved of the defensive position it held on the Wolfsbusch hill at 1000 hours by the 30th Mezz Recn Troop. Plowing through heavy snow a distance of approximately 5,000 yards the battalion at 1330, arrived at 782927, an area 1,000 yards southwest of Recht. The position straddled the road leading out of Recht, and was designed as a reserve point to back up the attack planned for the other two battalions of the regiment.

The 2nd Battalion, also moved by foot, from the vicinity of Houvegnex (765958) to an assembly area about 6000 yards to the south. The 3rd Battalion, working in coordination with the 2nd, left its rest area in the vicinity of Malmody and was transported by truck to a point about 1,200 yards northwest of Recht on the Pont-Recht road. There Major Hal D. McCown had his battalion detruck and led them south where they took up a position on the left of the 2nd Battalion. In that area two platoons each, from the 749rd Tank Battalion and 823rd Tank Destroyer Battalion drove into position and at 1415 hours a combined attack was launched. Striking to the south, the 2nd Battalion with armor attachments hit Wolkeshardt (782893), and drove as far south as Weisoy[~] Berg, (775884). The 3rd Battalion swinging in from the northeast, bypassed the second and captured Oberst Crcmbach (788885).

Both battalions met elements of the 18th VG Division whose resistance consisted primarily of small arms and automatic weapons fire. Their armor support was not well displaced and did not hold up our advance to any appreciable extent. Nevertheless, it was almost 1900 hours before the objectives were captured. The difficulties encountered were not only confined to the resistance of the enemy, ^{but also} The long march, ^{which} the men had undergone earlier in the day had sapped their strength to a considerable amount. It was not the distance of the march, but the weather conditions that proved such an obstacle. Plowing through a thickly forested area, through snow that was at least knee deep, and carrying heavy combat arms and equipment, the men were fatigued by the time they arrived at their line of departure. When the attack terminated, and consolidation was made during darkness, many hours were spent in digging fox holes and gun emplacements in frozen ground. The use of the trite phrase, "the attack was made under difficult conditions," was in this case, a definite understatement. In any event, this salient was the most advanced in the division sector at that time. The two battalions took up their final positions the night of 20 January in the shape of a rough "V", or echeloned to the north on the flanks. From west to east positions were held by Companies G, E, and F of the 2nd Battalion, and Companies L and I of the 3rd. Company K under the temporary direction of 1st Lt.

Robert J. Katz established a road block at 826894; a point approximately 1,200 yards north of Recht on the primary road.

In the 120th Regiment, the 1st Battalion at 0730, again sent patrols to objective "P", which they had reconnoitered on the previous day. That area as explained above, enclosed the two roads from Recht and Ligneville where they converged and ran into the St. Vith highway. The patrols found the objective held fairly lightly and at 1030 the battalion moved down to the attack. Companies A and C led and keeping along the Recht road, the objective was hit on the north west. Primary resistance came from self propelled 75 mm guns, which were attacked and driven off. By mid-afternoon the western portion was in possession of the 2nd Battalion and the companies began to "dig in". The 3rd Battalion then moved down the Ligneville-St. Vith road and occupied positions on the east side of the objective, with Companies L and I to the south and Company K echeloned to the northeast. By last light a line with the first battalion had been drawn up and consolidated.

The 2nd Battalion, 120th Regiment ^{remained} ~~received~~ in the vicinity of Eeckelsbern and ran down two self propelled guns that were in the rear of the front line and from hidden forest positions frequently fired a harassing round of ammunition. Company G took over the road block on the Milmody-St. Vith road at 826935 and relieved Company C, 1st Battalion, of the tank.

With all assigned objectives for 20 January captured by 30th Division troops, another phase in the drive on St. Vith had been completed. Through extremely dense woods and to untold depths of snow, the Division had plugged its way forward. Buried AT mines were a constant source of trouble and in the seven day period from 13 to 20 January, the 105th Engineer Battalion removed well over 200. ⁶¹ But the many hardship and unusual problems were met and solved. Snow caps, special winter clothing, sleds for evacuation and many other ingenious items were utilized and on 21 January the "Old Hickory" Division could almost see St. Vith.

All that remained to be captured in the last phase, were four objectives north and west of St. Vith and several to the south of the key city. On the right of the Division the 82nd Airborne Division had been pinched out by the 75th Division. On the left, the 7th Armored Division had just begun to move through the 1st Division, and over one of the roads in the 30th Division sector preparatory to positioning themselves for the strike on the "I lum", St. Vith.