

The St. Vith Offensive

PHASE I

The first day, 13 January, of the ten day offensive was the most

costly for the division and an explanation in some detail is valuable for the picture it portrays of the type of German reaction met on the main line of enemy resistance.

At 0600 13 January, the 119th Regiment under the command of Colonel R. A. Baker, attacked south for its objectives of Bellevaux (783005), and Hedomont (795022). Pushing south at 0600, from the outskirts of Malmedy, the 3rd Battalion reached the northern edge of Hedomont by 0735 where it was halted by extremely strong resistance. That city, it will be remembered was to be captured before 0800, so that it would form a base for a further push south. As the situation turned out, Hedomont was not taken by darkness of the same day.

Supported by a company of tanks of the 743rd Tank Battalion, the 3rd Battalion, 119th Infantry reached a point at 794023, where mines damaged several tanks and held up the ^{armor.} error. The infantry received very heavy fire from the crest (500 ^{meter} feet) of the hill about 100 yards north of Hedomont. The infantry regrouped and with Company L striking out of the woods at the west side of the city and Company I attacking from the northeast, some gain was made. But in mid-afternoon the fire power of the defending troops drove the 3rd Battalion back.

The 1st Battalion had attacked for Hedmont at 0730, to support the unsuccessful 3rd Battalion. Advancing to the northern edge of the city, it could make no more progress than the 3rd Battalion. One platoon of tanks, supported by a platoon of infantry from Company B, attempted to edge into the city from the west side but were turned back with heavy losses. By 1800 hours a definite penetration of the city had not been made at any point and Companies L, K, and I of the 3rd Battalion, plus Company B of the 1st, were ^{in position} grouped around the northern side of the city. Companies A and C were withdrawn to the north as regimental reserves.

In a letter of instruction dated 2000 hours, 13 January, the 119th Regiment was directed to take Hedmont that same night. ²⁶
From 2200 to 2230 hours Hedmont received a terrific artillery barrage, at the conclusion of which Company I, under Capt George D. Rehkopf, again attacked from the east and Company L, led by Capt. Lawrence J. Gagliano, from the west, with Company K coming down from the north. Stunned to some extent by the terrific barrage, and the intensity of the infantry drive, the enemy fell back slowly and stubbornly. It required almost five hours of steady street fighting, but by 0920, 14 January, the 3rd Battalion was in possession of the city.

During the first days' offensive the 2nd Battalion, 119th Regiment did not experience the difficulty the other two battalions of the regiment encountered. At 0600 the 2nd Battalion moved off from its line of departure and keeping in the cover of ^{the} wooded area, proceeded 2500 yards. By 0800 they were on the outskirts of the city of Bellevaux, but received scattered fire from enemy elements who occupied portions of buildings. Throughout the day fire fights occurred in the city and at night fall, tiny enemy pockets were still ^{present.} ~~in the city.~~ At last light, Companies G, H, and K occupied positions from west to east, about 600 yards north of the city proper.

So much for the western part of the 30th Division attack on 13 January. It was the eastern portion that turned out to be so costly and even more difficult to penetrate.

The 120th Regiment attacked at 0800. The objective of the 3rd Battalion was Houyire, the dominating piece of terrain between Malmedy and Ligneuville and commanding the Malmedy-St. Vith road. The first ^{goal} for the 2nd Battalion was Thirimont and the 1st Battalion was to support those two battalions with its fire. Coming down the main highway as far as Baugnez, the 3rd Battalion cut to the west, through the woods and with Companies K, L, and I abreast, hit the forward slope of the hill and drove the enemy off

by noon. ^{By} 1400 positions were consolidated with a road block, emplaced, and with Company L on the south or reverse slope, Company K on the west and Company I on the east.

Also at 0800, 13 January 1945, the 2nd Battalion, 120th Infantry moved to the east, and then when north of Thirimont, ^{attacked} directly south toward the city. Thirimont was expected to be seized that day. That was not the case, however, and it took that day and almost two more, before the mission was accomplished. It must be remembered in following the action around Thirimont, that enemy resistance came not primarily from the city proper, or from forces coming in to reinforce the city from the south, but from the east; from the exposed left flank of the 30th Division. When the division moved off in the attack on the morning of 13 January, the 106th Division on the right flank, moved south in a complementary action. On the left flank, however, the 1st Division did not move and as elements of the 30th advanced south, their left flank was exposed to enemy artillery and infantry attacks coming from the direction of Ondenval (850001), and Faymonville (865017).

With Company G on the left, Company F on the right and ^{Company} Company E in reserve following closely, the 2nd Battalion attacked toward Thirimont. While it was still rather dark, Company G slipped past the

outer ring of defenses of the city and got into the city proper. Company F moved down the Weisner³ to Thirimont road, but was not as fortunate. Caught by a road-block set up in the road ^{at 831015} and on both flanks ^{at 831015}, the company, led by Capt John M. Jacobsen, was hit by small arms fire, automatic weapon and artillery fire. The artillery fire came from the east, estimated to be west of Faymonville by approximately 2000 yards. Because Hauts Sarts was a hill overlooking Thirimont and all approaches to it, it was logically assumed that enemy observers, from posts on the crests, 1800 yards south of Company F, communicated fire direction information to artillery, 2000 yards east. ²⁷

If Company F had had some armor support, they may have gotten by the road block. But the 2nd Battalion armor of one platoon of tanks and 2 platoons of tank destroyers were all held up near the line of departure when the lead vehicle hit a mine and stopped the entire column. Therefore the attack was launched with ~~no~~^{out} armor support. ²⁸ In any event, Company F slugged at the strong point at 831015 until about noon, and then badly depleted, they were forced to retire.

Company G, attacked to the left of Company F and bypassed the road block at 839011 and was in the city of Thirimont by first

full light. If the left flank had been secure, and German reinforcements could not have come from that exposed enemy held area, such a maneuver of bypassing a strong road block under the cover of early morning darkness would have been excellent. Once in Thirimont, Company G took up positions in the ^{cellars of buildings} building cellars. Fire fights were continued throughout the day and artillery fell heavily in the city. Enemy artillery came from the vicinity of Ondenval and Lt. Charles W. Moneriewick called for artillery fire by radio throughout the day. He directed that fire capably, and frequently called for concentrations that landed among enemy troops in the house next to the one he was occupying. ²⁹ Throughout the day, 13 January, attempts were made by the 2nd Battalion, 120th Infantry to reinforce Lt. Moneriewick's position. Company F could not get by the road block and enemy outpost positions in the vicinity of 839011. An attempt was made by 1st Lt. Walter A. Wert Jr., to push Company E through the woods and around the right of Company F to Thirimont. The woods were almost impenetrable and German troops in dugout positions effectively halted small groups from infiltrating.

The fighting in Thirimont continued throughout the day and Company G's casualties were mounting. In a telephone conversation made at 1215, 13 January, to the Corps Commander, General Hobbs said,

" I had come under the assumption that the big unit (1st Division) on our left would do something to relieve the pressure on our left. ~~---~~ If anything can be done to have some elements on the left push along and take the pressure off, it is essential." During the early hours of darkness small groups of Germans got into the city which they approached from the east. Then at approximately 2000 hours, under complete blackness, the enemy launched a counter attack of seven tanks supported by over 100 infantrymen. Monerieff called for artillery fire and posit type ammunition was utilized. It was very effective in eliminating the enemy infantry, but the tanks were not damaged to any appreciable extent. Shortly after the initial counter attack, larger groups infiltrated into Thirimont from Ondenval.

At about 2200 hours, Lt. Monerieff called back to Battalion requesting permission to withdraw from the city with the men that remained. Permission was granted and Monerieff led his Company back through the woods, along snow covered trails and in inky blackness. Approximately 40 officers and enlisted men returned, of the force of about 110 that had moved out with Company G at 1700 that morning.³⁰ The strength of Company G on 13 January was 163 enlisted men and 5 officers. On the 14 January it was 84 enlisted men and 3 officers. Included in

the 84 enlisted men was the company headquarters, cooks, mechanics, etc. 31

At about midnight, 13 January, the 2nd Battalion, 120th Regiment had withdrawn to their position occupied before the morning attack had been launched. At 0030, 14 January, the 1st Battalion, 120th Regiment, under Lt. Colonel Ellis W. Williamson attacked through the badly mauled 2nd Battalion, for the objective, Thirimont. The battalion encountered extreme difficulty in attempting to move through the blackness of the night, the woods, and the heavily falling snow. At almost 0600, 14 January, the battalion had advanced through the enemy outposts on the outskirts of Thirimont. The temperature was dropping steadily, and a further difficulty was encountered with radio communication. The cold caused the radios to malfunction in many cases and radio control of the units became difficult. 32 Coupled with the fact that enemy artillery still rained down, ^{German} from their positions in the vicinity of Ondenval, very little progress was made against Thirimont.

30th Division artillery played an important role during the 14th and leveled a large amount of artillery fire on enemy vehicles, batteries and infantry units. The fire was directed almost entirely by air observation and was doubtless costly to the enemy. From noon

of 13 January to noon of the following day, division artillery units fired almost 10,000 rounds of 105 and 155 mm ammunition. ³³ The use of the artillery Cub planes for directing the fire was profitable and as Colonel Purdue, CO of the 120th pointed out, the planes also called back by radio important enemy movements, the results of friendly artillery fire, and served to keep enemy artillery batteries silenced for fear of being spotted by Cub plane observers, who in turn would call down artillery fire on such batteries. ³⁴ Throughout 14 January, the 1st Battalion, 120th ^{Regiment} Battalion, supported by the 2nd Battalion, hammered away at Thirimont unsuccessfully. An attempt was made to strike at that city from the west by the 3rd Battalion, with Hauts Sarts as the base. Groups of the enemy had infiltrated, during the night of 13 and 14 January, from the east, and had reinforced the already strong group on the steep hill that over looked Thirimont. The Germans maintained communication back to Ondenval, and artillery fire on friendly troops fell through ^{out} the morning of 14 January. At 1150 hours, Companies I and K attacked for the hill, but were beaten back. Under ordinary conditions, driving an enemy from such a superior defensive position as afforded by the crest of a hill would have been difficult. But attempting to advance up the side of a barren slope against snow, ice, and wind against a firmly entrenched enemy

was an almost impossible task. The attackers were forced to a halt 500 yards from Hauts Sarts. This objective was very valuable to the enemy, for not only did he use the crest for an OP to direct fire on troops moving toward Thirimont, but he could also direct artillery fire on anything in the area moving on the Malmedy-Ligneuville road south of Gerxmont.

On the west side of the Malmedy-Ligneuville road, the hill and vicinity designated as Houyire had been taken on the previous day by the 3rd Battalion, 120th Regiment. Early the morning of 14 January, the 2nd Battalion, 117th Regiment skirted the east slope of Houyire, and attacked south with Ligneuville as the objective. The original plan had contemplated the 119th and 120th Regiments of the division as handling the 1st phase of the St. Vith offensive and committing the 117th Infantry, through the 119th after the latter had advanced as far south as the 96th east-west grid line. The unexpected resistance around Hauts Sarts and Thirimont, held up the advance of the 120th and in an attempt to cut past the enemy at Thirimont, the 117th was committed to the attack.

Moving south toward Ligneuville from Houyire, the 2nd Battalion, 117th Infantry, avoided being observed to any great degree by advancing along the west side of the Malmedy-Ligneuville road. The

trees were thick, the knee deep snow drifts were higher by 3 or 4 inches more of snow that had fallen during the night and communication was difficult. At 1200 hours, 14 January, the battalion was in the outskirts of Ligneuville. They were met by scattered units that were displaced in the stone buildings of the city. Fire fights continued throughout the afternoon in the city of Ligneuville, but by 1600 the enemy had been driven out. Moving through the city quickly, on the St. With road, Company E approached the bridge spanning the L'Ambleveⁿ river. The bridge, at 806987, had been prepared for demolition by the Germans, but the Company E commander, Capt. George H. Sibbald, cut the wires and led his troops across. With all three companies in the city, the 2nd Battalion, 117th Infantry, consolidated their positions and were not taken unaware by the German counter attack launched at 2000 hours. Estimated at a battalion of infantry and supported by six tanks, the enemy attempted to regain Ligneuville. They were unsuccessful, however, and were forced to withdraw.

Moving further to the right, or west, into the 119th Infantry sector, it will be recalled that during the early morning hours, 14 January, after a terrific 30th Division artillery barrage on Hedmont, the city was captured by the 3rd Battalion. At first light,

14 January, after a terrific struggle, Lt. Colonel Robert H. Herlong's 1st Battalion passed through the 3rd and attacked south for Lamoriville (790005). The Battalion met practically no resistance at Lamoriville and went through it rapidly. Still moving south from Lamoriville, with Companies A and B leading and Company C in the rear, the battalion headed for Reulemont (785995). Shortly before noon they were halted north of the city by very accurate and damaging mortar fire and artillery. With the support of tanks from the 743rd Tank Battalion, the enemy line was broken north of Reulemont and 50 PW's were captured.³⁵ With tanks leading the way, Companies A and B took up positions in Reulemont at dusk. With a firm base in the city, Captain Donald R. Fell led Company C through the town and by darkness had gone another 1000 yards south to reach the north bank of the L'Ambleve River. Thus in one day, the 1st Battalion, 119th Regiment had pushed, slugged, and battered their way through snow, woods, ice, and a determined enemy for a gain of approximately 4000 yards. Their casualties were relatively high, but so were the entire 30th Division's on 14 January.

The 2nd Battalion, 119th Infantry, moved off at 1000 hours, 14 January with Company G on the right and Company F pushing further into Beàlevaux. Under 1st Lt. G. L. Farris, Company G skirted

Belleveaux on the west and attacked Thioux (761004). They were met by heavy small arms fire but prior to noon they had possession of the city. Company F in Belleveaux was troubled during the morning, not only by the enemy, but also by the American Air Corps. A small group of medium bombers mistakenly dropped several bombs on the city, but caused no serious casualties of 2nd Battalion troops. ³⁶

Shortly after 1300 hours, a platoon was sent out by Capt. Edward C. Arn of Company F for the purpose of securing a river crossing site. They crossed the L'Ambleve at 1330 and shortly thereafter Companies G and E followed, and secured a bridgehead in the vicinity of Plache (775999). Working in smooth coordination, Company E, 2nd Battalion, 119th Infantry, which had been the reserve company throughout the day, then moved past Company G and seized Villers (759996), which lay 1800 yards west of the river crossing site. In the vicinity of Villers, Company E established contact with the 517th Parachute Infantry, 106th Division at 756997. With Company E in Villers, Company G attacked Beaumont (781994) ^{which lay} lying 200 yards south of Villers. The enemy troops in Beaumont, had doubtless been reinforced by those who had withdrawn from Villers and by midnight, 14 January, Company G had not ^{yet} been successful in taking the city.

By ^{2400 hours,} midnight, 14 January, the 30th Division had made most of its progress on the right flank of the Division sector. Two bridge heads

had been established; one at Ligneuville (K805986) and one at Planche (775999) and plans for 15 January were stated in a letter of instruction.

The most important factor mentioned was that the 1st Infantry Division, on the left flank of the 30th Division, would attack south prior to daylight, 15 January. 37

In the 117th Infantry sector, 15 January was relatively quiet. The 2nd Battalion remained in Ligneuville and eliminated scattered enemy groups in their zone that were found on the south bank of the L'Ambleve River. The 3rd Battalion passed through the 2nd and proceeded south against light resistance for approximately 2000 yards and reached an area in the vicinity of 810967 by 1800 hours.

The 3rd Battalion, 119th Infantry had been attached to the 117th and during 15 January moved in a line along the southeast section of Ligneuville and set up positions of defense along the Malmady-St. Vith road. Further, they established outpost groups in the woods in an attempt to capture or destroy a few enemy harassing patrols and several German self propelled assault guns that had been bypassed or had infiltrated back into the lines and were causing some ^{dis} disturbance.

The other two battalions of the 119th Infantry continued to attack in the Regiment's sector throughout the 15 January and by nightfall, had reached the line marking the termination of the first phase in the St.

Vith offensive. The 1st Battalion, 119th Infantry used Companies A and C primarily during 15 January. Company A's platoons worked between Borgueuscheid (790991) and the L'Ambleve River, hunting out harassing patrols and scattered enemy units. Company C supported by a platoon of tanks of the 743rd Tank Battalion, swung east from Lamouville and crossed the bridge in Ligneuville (805988) spanning the L'Ambleve. Once across the bridge, Capt. Fell moved west in the direction of the objective, Pont (794977). The outskirts of Pont were reached before noon and an attack for the city was launched immediately. Driving the enemy out of the houses, Pont fell by 1430. 28 PW's were taken during the assault on the city. ⁹⁸ Moving south out of Pont, the same unit of the 119th Infantry advanced ~~on Brucken~~ ^{toward} (794972). An ineffective natural road block of 22 heavy trees ^{had been} ~~cut and fell~~ across the road, between Pont and Brucken by the retreating enemy. They were quickly ^{removed} ~~eliminated~~ and Brucken was occupied by dusk. ^{the company continued until}

In the 2nd Battalion, Company F had continued to attack against Beaumont until 0200, 15 January. At 0745, Company G passed through Company F, at Beaumont and advanced along the Beaumont-Houvegnex road. The company met very strong small arms fire and very heavy mortar concentrations. Also encountered, in lesser amounts, were artillery and rocket fire. By 1100, Francheville was taken and the attack

pressed to the south to capture another small village, Houvegnex. The woods became thicker and the enemy resistance stronger. Division artillery fire was called for in greater volume by the 2nd Battalion, 119th Infantry and following it, Company G pushed into Houvegnex where it captured over a score of stunned prisoners. The total number of PW's taken by the 119th Infantry during 15 January numbered 108. 39

In the 120th Regiment on 15 January, the attack against Thirimont continues. The 1st Battalion managed to get into the city with armor support by noon. The enemy defended from houses in the city that had been made into strongpoints of defense. It was against such defenses that Company B of the 823rd Tank Destroyer Battalion assaulted. Those brick houses in the city had been turned into veritable pill boxes and heavy machine guns and other automatic weapons emplaced in them. If it had not been for the supporting tanks from the 743rd Tank Battalion and the TD's from the 823rd, it would only have been at an exorbitantly high price of infantry that the city would have been taken on 15 January. 40

The 3rd Battalion of the 120th Infantry attacked Thirimont at the same time as the 1st Battalion. Hitting at the city from the northeast. The battalion met very heavy sniper, small arms and automatic weapon fire, not only from the city, but also from the east. The 1st Division, on the left flank of the 30th

Division attacked south the same morning, but did not advance fast enough to relieve the pressure on the 120th Infantry. Toward noon, 15 January, fire on the 3rd Battalion increased to such an extent that it was necessary to call for help from the 2nd Battalion.

The 2nd Battalion, 120th Infantry had moved off early the same morning on the right flank of the 3rd Battalion and headed for the Wolfsbusch forest area. That objective contained a hill whose elevation was almost 600 meters high and easily dominated the area. Lt. Colonel Cantey had moved his 2nd Battalion down the Malmedy St. Vith road when he was intercepted about 500 yards out of Ligneuville at 816984, and ordered to return to the Thirimont area and support the right flank of the 3rd Battalion. ⁴¹

Throughout the day (15 January) fighting continued unabated. By nightfall the 120th Infantry was finally in possession of Thirimont and Harts Sarts. Division artillery expended over 11,000 rounds of 105 mm and 155 mm ammunition that day, and most of it was called for and directed at the enemy in the Thirimont area. The job the support tanks and tank destroyers accomplished cannot be minimized and the final capture of those two strong points, in a large measure belongs to them. The rate of casualties for the 120th for that day was high and the total number for 13, 14, and 15 January amounted to over 450 killed, wounded and missing. ⁴²

Because of the nature of the terrain, that is the sharp rises and falls, plus the knee deep snow, ice, and heavy forest, litter bearers found it necessary to frequently carry wounded several thousand yards. Ambulances in many cases couldn't get any where near the wounded. However, the 105th Medical Battalion improvised and borrowed sleds from farmers in the neighborhood. Frequently, the ^{sleds} ~~letter~~ were pulled by horses and served admirably to get the wounded to ambulances for further evacuation. 43

With the fall of Thirimont, at the close of 15 January, all objectives in the first phase of the St. Vith offensive in the Division zone had been captured. The operation had gone according to schedule, except on the left flank where the cost had been high; unexpectedly high in fact. The 30th Division can only be commended highly for the job they did while operating with an exposed left flank. It can safely be assumed, that had the 1st Division on the 30th Division left flank, been ordered to attack at "H" hour, "D" day, 0800, 13 January, in coordination with the 30th Division, the losses sustained by the latter would have been much lighter, and the advance more rapid. When the 1st Division did attack, two days later, 15 January, they quickly eliminated the strong automatic weapon and artillery positions in the vicinity of Ondenval and Faymonville that had been striking at the side of the 30th Division for two days.

As for the enemy tactics during the first phase; they have been

touched on above. One of the most troublesome items needs additional emphasis. That was the mines the Germans laid in roads and possible routes of approach. In most cases, because of the haste of their withdrawal, the enemy made no attempt to lay mines in any careful or strategic pattern. They were again favored by the weather on this score for shortly after the mines were laid, they were covered by snow. Ice followed, more snow and again ice. That meant that scores of our vehicles would roll over the mines without setting them off. After a road became accepted as "safe", by the number of vehicles that had gone over it, a light jeep, or a heavy tank would unexpectedly detonate the mine. As for infantry field positions occupied by the enemy, they were also aided by natural terrain features. Concealed wooded areas, roadside dugouts, approaches to roads, firebreaks and trench lines on hill crests were only a few utilized. In the cities, infantry positions were invariably taken in stone houses. All in all, the entire sector was admirably suited to, and offered every tactical and strategic advantage to defending troops. In the two day period from 13 January to midnight 15 January, the Division captured 497 PW's. ⁴⁴

The caliber of the enemy soldier on the division front had risen materially from the attack hour on 13 January. At that time almost all of the opposition was estimated to be from the 18th Volksgrenadier Division. But shortly after the initial attack by the 30th Division, elements of the 3rd Parachute Division hit the left flank of the 90th.

In the area around Thirimont, four battalions of the Parachute Division were identified. ⁴⁵ The fact that the enemy opposition on the left flank of the 30th Division were paratroopers, as compared with 18th Volksgrenadier Division soldiers on the right portion of the Division sector, may help to explain the severity of the fighting and the tenacity of the resistance encountered by the 30th Division ^{the former sector} in ~~that~~ sector.