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THE BATTLE OF ST. VITH

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MAJ William N. Standage, CPT(P) Teddy A. Stout, MAJ David M. Tanksley

THE BATTLE OF ST. VITH

Defense and Withdrawal by Encircled Forces

German 5th and 6th Panzer Armies
versus
U.S. 7th Armored Division and Attachments

17-23 December 1944

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ABSTRACT

COMMON REFERENCE: Defense of St. Vith (16-23 December 1944)

TYPE OPERATION: Defensive, Encircled Forces

OPPOSING FORCES: U.S.: 7th Armored Division and Attachments (elements from three other divisions, see Appendix A)

German: 5th and 6th Panzer Armies (see Appendix B)

SYNOPSIS:

When the German Ardennes Offensive of December 1944 ruptured the front of the U.S. First Army, Major General Troy Middleton committed his VIII Corps to the defense of selected transportation bottlenecks in the path of the German advance. St. Vith, located in the central sector of the Ardennes battleground, was one of these. Although bypassed by German spearheads bound for the Meuse River, the 7th Armored Division (plus major elements of three other divisions) held the position against major elements of two German Panzer armies. After six days of tenacious defense while practically encircled, the St. Vith force was ordered to withdraw. The defenders of St. Vith prevented the Germans from effectively supplying their armored spearheads, drew off their follow-on forces, and bought time for the U.S. First Army to consolidate its position on the north flank of the German penetration.

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The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge, by Hugh Cole.

The Bitter Woods, by John S.D. Eisenhower.

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St. Vith: Lion in the Way, by R.E. DuPuy.

The Battle at St. Vith, U.S. Army Armor School.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE BATTLE OF ST. VITH

1.1 Synopsis of the Battle

The defense of St. Vith occurred 16-23 December 1944, during the German counteroffensive in the Ardennes. Popularly known as the Battle of the Bulge, this last German offensive pitted Generalfeldmarschall Model's Army Group B, consisting of the 5th Panzer Army, the 6th Panzer Army, and the 7th Army, against the U.S. First Army. Eventually, the U.S. First Army got help from the U.S. Third Army and the British XXX Corps in defeating the German onslaught. Because St. Vith lay nearly on the boundary between the German 5th and 6th Panzer Armies, the defenders fought division-sized elements of both armies. The defense of St. Vith was fought principally by BG Robert W. Hasbrouck's 7th Armored Division aided by elements of at least regimental size from the 106th Infantry Division, the 9th Armored Division, and the 28th Infantry Division.

On 16 December the three German armies launched their attack with seven Panzer (armored) divisions, ten Volk's Grenadier

(infantry) divisions and one parachute (infantry) division. These assault divisions were eventually augmented by another Panzer division, two Panzer Grenadier (motorized infantry) divisions, two more Volks Grenadier divisions, the Fuhrer Escort (armored) Brigade and the Fuhrer Grenadier (motorized infantry) Brigade. The Germans attacked on a frontage of nearly ninety miles, ranging from Monshau, Germany, in the north, to Diekirch, Luxembourg, in the south.¹ The attack occurred in the Ardennes Forest, which was thinly defended by the 99th Infantry Division (V Corps) in the north, and the VIII Corps, consisting of the 106th Infantry Division in the Losheim Gap and St. Vith sector, the 28th Infantry Division east of Wiltz, and the 4th Infantry Division in the Luxembourg sector (see Map 1 in Chapter 4).² At the outset of the battle, the 7th Armored Division was well north of St. Vith and had to move more than 60 miles to reinforce the defense on 17 December.

General von Manteuffel's 5th Panzer Army intended to take St. Vith on 16 December. Ten miles west of the German frontier, St. Vith was critically important because it was a hub for a network of westward-leading roads and a railroad. These viaducts were

1. Hugh Cole, The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1965), pp. 33-36 and pp. 64-74. See also Cole's Maps I - III.

2. *ibid.*, pp. 53-56.

essential for the logistic support of von Manteuffel's army as well as for the 6th Panzer Army on Manteuffel's right. Initially the 106th Division, commanded by MG Alan W. Jones, defended the St. Vith sector. Jones also controlled the 14th Cavalry Group, which occupied a line of strong points in the Losheim Gap, just north of St. Vith, in the "gap" between V and VIII Corps.³

Like most towns in the Ardennes Forest, St. Vith lies in a bowl, surrounded by rugged hills. To the east are the densely forested ridges of the Schnee Eifel running generally northeast to southwest. The Our River flows toward the northeast between St. Vith and the Schnee Eifel. To the west lie the ridges forming the eastern parapet of the Ardennes central plateau. Like the Schnee Eifel, these ridges are less than 2500 feet high, but are nonetheless rugged and thickly forested. The German LXVI Corps commander General Walther Lucht described the area as "pathless forest country."⁴ Movement of mechanized and armored units throughout the St. Vith sector was restricted to the roads, especially in view of the weather, as discussed in Chapter 3. Consequently, control of St. Vith was crucial to both adversaries.

3. ibid., Maps I - III. See also Hasso von Manteuffel, Fifth Panzer Army, MS#B-151, p. 109.

4. Walther Lucht, LXVI Corps, 23 Dec 1944 - 2 Jan 1945, MS#B-477, p. 2. See also Charles B. MacDonald, "The Neglected Ardennes," Military Review, LXIII (April 1963).

The defense of St. Vith is a significant example of a successful defense against a numerically superior force. At one time or another, the defenders faced elements of five German corps from the two northern-most armies of Army Group B. Although the Germans eventually captured St. Vith, the effort required six days instead of the one planned. The units and materials the Germans had planned to use to cross the Meuse River were spent at St. Vith instead. During the stubborn six-day delay, Allied armies concentrated sufficient forces north of St. Vith to hold the northern shoulder of the German penetration. Therefore, the defense at St. Vith helped to insure the eventual repulse of the German counteroffensive.

The soldiers of the 7th Armored Division, the 106th Division, Combat Command B (CCB) 9th Armored Division, the 112th Regiment, Combat Team of the 28th Division, and the attached combat support and combat service support units accomplished a great deal against heavy odds. Additionally, they fought the battle in miserable weather. The temperature hovered just above freezing the entire week. The cloud cover, rain, sleet and snow caused poor visibility which sheltered the Germans from American airpower. Finally, the defenders waged the battle with grave logistics problems. Due to successful attacks north and south of St. Vith, the Germans nearly surrounded the defenders. Thus, the defender's rear area was never secure from attacks by German armor and infantry units, not to mention infiltrators.

1.2 Comments About the Source Documents

Few campaigns of World War II are as richly documented as the Battle of the Bulge. Army historical teams conducted combat interviews of the American participants soon after the campaign ended. Most of the German division, corps and army commanders participated in interviews at the end of the war. Although no similar interviews of American commanders occurred, the journals and after-action reports are available for participating units (battalion-size and larger). Of course, these journals and reports vary from well written, detailed accounts to very sketchy notes. The reports of CCB/9th Armored Division are an example of the latter case, even though they include some detailed overlays. The reports of several 7th Armored Division units are an example of the former case, although (then division commander) Hasbrouck is now critical of those reports.⁵

A host of books and articles have been written about the Battle of the Bulge and the defense of St. Vith. These, too, vary from thoroughly researched narratives to impassioned

5. Private communication by BG (Ret) Robert W. Hasbrouck to Maj. Gregory Fontenot, 18 April 1984.

arguments in defense of various units and commanders. Hugh Cole's The Ardennes, written as part of the official Army history of the war, is perhaps the best narrative of the entire campaign. Charles Whiting's Death of a Division is a good account of the destruction of the 106th Division. However, veterans of the 106th Division probably find Death of a Division an unpleasant indictment of themselves and their leaders. The 106th Division would prefer the account offered in Lion in the Way by R.E. Dupuy, which is, one might say, the "authorized" history of the division. Clarke at St. Vith, by William D. Ellis and Col. Thomas J. Cunningham, glorifies Bruce C. Clarke, who commanded CCB/7th Armored Division. Clarke's role in the defense deserves the highest accolades, but the authors of Clarke tend to forget that anyone else participated.

John S.D. Eisenhower's The Bitter Woods is an excellent account of the campaign, but seems directed at vindicating his father's (GEN Dwight D. Eisenhower's) judgments. Robert E. Merriam's Dark December is the best of the contemporary accounts of the battle. First published in 1947, Dark December remains useful today. Finally, Charles B. MacDonald, author of Company Commander, will publish a history of the Battle of the Bulge on the 40th anniversary of the battle (in December 1984). If it meets the promise of his previous work, it will become one of the standard works on this campaign.

John Toland's Battle: The Story of the Bulge is the best of the popular histories of the campaign and is rich in personal accounts. However, the book suffers from having too few footnotes in many areas, limiting its use in research. Russell Weigley touches on the campaign in the context of American leadership in his excellent Eisenhower's Lieutenants. Stephen Ambrose, who co-edited the Eisenhower Papers, has devoted a chapter to the Battle of the Bulge in his recent biography of Eisenhower, entitled Eisenhower, 1890-1952.

Jacques Nobe'court's Hitler's Last Gamble and Peter Elstob's Hitler's Last Offensive are excellent accounts of the campaign from a European perspective. Both books are even-handed, well-reasoned accounts of the battle with an emphasis on the consequences of the battle at Yalta and on other battlefields during the waning months of the war.

Cole's book is absolutely indispensable, but each of the works cited deserves reading. All of these works must be read critically. None of the fighting in the Ardennes was "tidy." Therefore, each of the authors have had to make judgments and draw conclusions based on incomplete information. Often several of these works will vary as to when events occurred, why they occurred, and/or who was responsible. Anyone attempting to analyze the battle would do well to read several accounts and, if possible, review some of the primary sources before making

judgments. Indeed, readers should form their own conclusions and be wary especially of memoirs or works which tend to make blanket denunciations of particular units or commanders.

Finally, a review of the primary sources and analysis of the secondary sources will convince any reader of the difficulty of determining what happened with precision. The neatness of historical maps belies the confusion usually involved in battles. In itself, the obvious confusion at St. Vith is a valuable lesson for soldiers who may find themselves in an analogous situation.

Chapter 2

THE STRATEGIC SETTING

2.1 Situation Before the Conflict

During the heady weeks of success following Operation Overlord (the Allied landings on the continent of Europe via the Cherbourg Peninsula, beginning 6 June 1944) and Operation Cobra (the breakout from the Cherbourg Peninsula at St. Lo, beginning 25 July 1944), the Allied armies moved rapidly. For a time, it seemed possible that the Allies might shatter the German armies west of the Rhine River and make an early end to the war. But opportunities were missed at Falaise (Patton's XV Corps ordered to halt 13 August 1944 when it might have been able to complete an encirclement of most of three German armies) and again in the dramatic, but unsuccessful attempt to secure crossings over the Rhine via an airborne assault (Operation Market Garden, 17 September - 6 November 1944). In the late fall, American efforts to smash through the Huertgen Forest (30 miles north of St. Vith) had gained little ground against bitter opposition. Further

south, Patton had successfully invested Metz, but was unable to continue for lack of supplies.

As the Allies drew closer to Germany, the German army demonstrated that it had plenty of fight remaining. The success of the German defense in the fall of 1944 stemmed not only from the Wehrmacht's own efforts, but also from the terrain advantages and increasing Allied logistics problems. The terrain along the German frontier favored the defense and Hitler had improved the "West Wall" (or "Siegfried Line") in the summer of 1944, which enhanced the German terrain advantage. The Rhine River also constituted a major obstacle for the Allies since it was difficult to cross and was well defended. At the southern extremity of the American front, the Germans remained west of the Rhine River in the Colmar Pocket, which tied up significant American forces.

2.2 Allied Situation and Strategy

In the late summer and early fall of 1944, Allied supply problems became severe. The difficulties of maintaining Eisenhower's "broad front" strategy were made worse by the Allied failure to open quickly the French coastal ports, some of which remained in German hands in December 1944. By the end of November, the Allies had no recourse but to consolidate their

impressive gains. Eisenhower hoped to build up his logistical base and to bring ashore additional troops. He hoped to renew the offensive by the middle of December 1944, with First and Ninth Armies aimed at the Roer River. Concurrently, Patton's Third Army would attack in the Saar and Dever's 6th Army Group, composed of the U.S. Seventh Army and the French First Army, would reduce the Colmar Pocket. Montgomery's 21st Army Group would secure the Rhine River north of Cologne.

6

Together with continued pressure from the Allied strategic air forces and from the Russians on the Eastern Front, Eisenhower intended to complete the destruction of the German army and move into Germany itself in early 1945. Although all had not gone as well as it might in 1944, things had gone much better than Eisenhower expected. Generally, the Allied strategic picture in December 1944 remained good. The Allied armies had been slowed, but not stopped. The German armies on the Western Front retained significant power, but they had suffered heavy losses.

7

6. General of the Army Omar Bradley's memoirs include a good account of the strategic and logistics picture. See Omar N. Bradley and Clay Blair, A General's Life (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983).

7. John S.D. Eisenhower, The Bitter Woods (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1969), chapter 5. See also Dwight D. Eisenhower, Crusade in Europe (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1948), chapters 15 through 18.

By December 1944 many people in the Allied high command thought the great German war machine was on the verge of collapse. Certainly, few people expected anything so bold as the German Ardennes Offensive.⁸ Eisenhower and Bradley did not consider it likely that the Germans would conduct a large-scale counteroffensive over the Ardennes terrain, especially during the early winter. On the contrary, they expected the Germans to defend and delay in successive prepared positions to block the Allied advance toward the West Wall. Intelligence estimates indicated the Germans most likely would remain in defensive positions. Interpretations that the enemy was planning to launch a major counteroffensive were simply not considered, although some historians argue that clear indications of German intentions existed. Much has been made of the Allied "intelligence failure" prior to the German counteroffensive. However, it is not correct to say that the Allied commanders ruled out any German counteroffensive. Rather, they expected it east of the Rhine

⁹
River.

8. The U.S. Army Armor School, The Battle at St. Vith, Belgium, 17-23 December 1944 (Ft. Knox, Ky., believed first published in 1966), p. 2. Hereafter cited as Battle at St. Vith.

9. Bradley and Blair, pp. 349-355.

2.3 German Situation and Strategy

By 15 December 1944, the Russians had driven the Germans out of Russia and were pressing nearer the German eastern frontier from Warsaw to Budapest. In the west, the Allies had been slowed, but probably not for long.

"Politically the Reich was friendless, deserted. Italy was finished, Japan had politely suggested that Germany start armistice negotiations with the Soviet Union. The Rumanians and Bulgarians had switched sides, joining the triumphant Russians.

Finland had just broken with Germany."¹⁰

More than four million German soldiers had been killed since the start of the war. In the fall of 1944 alone, Germany had suffered more than one million of those casualties, half of them on the Western Front. But ten million men were still listed as being under arms, and Hitler never abandoned hope for restoring the situation in the west by means of a grand counter-stroke. He realized he must regain the initiative.¹¹

Col. Gen. Alfred Jodl summed up the war situation by

10. John Toland, Battle: The Story of the Bulge (New York: Random House, 1959), p. 14.

11. Cole, p. 2 and pp. 6-7.

explaining to Hitler that the Russian summer offensive in the east had run its course and, in the west, German troops were getting a rest in the Ardennes.

"At the word 'Ardennes' Hitler suddenly came to life, raised his hand dramatically and cried 'Stop ! I have made a momentous decision. I am taking the offensive: Across the Meuse and on
12
to Antwerp.'"

Hitler envisioned a coordinated attack against the American lines in a lightly-defended sector. "The entire operation demanded that German spearheads be driven deep into the American rear installations, thus paralyzing the American ability and will

13
to strike back." Hitler intended to seize Antwerp at the point of a penetration which would split the Allied armies and would frustrate Allied efforts to improve serious supply difficulties. He believed that such a catastrophic defeat would produce a separate peace in the west. In any case, after a successful attack in the west, Hitler would be able to move sufficient forces to the east to stalemate Stalin before too much of Germany was lost.

By December 1944 the Germans had amassed 22 divisions, including seven Panzer divisions, to conduct the counter-

12. Toland, p. 14.

13. Battle at St. Vith, p. 1.

offensive. Designated as Army Group B under Model, this force was to attack all along a line from Monschau, Germany (near the junction of the Belgian-Dutch-German borders), in the north, to Diekirch, (near central) Luxembourg, in the south, a frontage of nearly ninety miles. It was a bold, even desperate strategy, one which meant hope, if successful, otherwise doom. It is probably in that spirit that German soldiers scrawled "Sieg oder Siberia" (Victory or Siberia) on the walls of Belgian villages during the campaign. Even German generals considered the plan for the Ardennes to be too ambitious, but the plan was Hitler's own. It was "a last effort to force a decision. To fail was to lose the war."

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14. Dietrich Moll, 18th Volks Grenadier Division, 1 Sep 1944 - 25 Jan 1945, MS#B-688, p. 23. On German planning for the Ardennes offensive, see Peter Elstob, Hitler's Last Offensive (New York: Macmillan Co., 1971). For the German viewpoint, see Percy E. Schramm, The Preparations for the German Offensive in the Ardennes, MS#A-862.

Chapter 3

THE TACTICAL SITUATION

3.1 The Area of Operations

(A "fold out" map included at Appendix C serves as a helpful reference for this section, as well as for the narrative of the battle in the next chapter.)

The St. Vith area of operations is bounded by the Schnee Eifel (heavily forested mountain region) on the east and the Salm River on the west. The area can be delineated by a "box" with corners near the towns of Trois Ponts (northwest of St. Vith), Ambleve (northeast), Burg Reuland (off the map in Appendix C to the south of St. Vith), and Gouvy (southwest). Most of the action in this battle occurred within this box. One important exception is the struggle by the 422nd and 423rd Infantry Regiments of the 106th Infantry Division who were encircled in the Schnee Eifel area, 16-19 December. Another important exception is the heroic stand by Major Parker's small force against the 2nd SS Panzer Division at the Baroque de Fraiture crossroads, 21-23 December. (Baroque de Fraiture does not appear

on the map at Appendix C. The town is located near the road intersections in the southwest corner of that map, northeast of Samree, southeast of Manhay, west of Sart.)

The area is characterized by densely wooded, rugged hills at the geographical junction of the central Ardennes plateau and the Schnee Eifel. The highest elevation in the area is just more than 560 meters, but the slopes of the ridges and hills are steep. General von Manteuffel, commander of the German 5th Panzer Army, described the area as "undulating ... (and characterized by) ... deep ravines worn by numerous small rivers

and streams."¹⁵ St. Vith itself lies at the major road intersection in the area. While there were many trails through the forested hills, only three paved roads headed generally west. All three emanated from St. Vith. According to von Manteuffel, the roads were not very trafficable because "even the main roads had many steep slopes and sharp, hairpin curves."¹⁶

Almost entirely restricted to the roads (due to the weather), von Manteuffel's panzers had to pass through St. Vith in order to go west in this area.

The town of St. Vith lies at an elevation of only 440 meters in a "bowl" surrounded by hills. To defend the town, American

15. von Manteuffel, MS#B-151, p. 115.

16. *ibid.*

troops needed to hold the high ground around the town. BG Bruce C. Clarke, commander of CCB/7th Armored Division, initially organized his defense on the ridges north, east, and south of St Vith. On 21 December 1944, the Germans successfully breached the American defenses just north and east of St. Vith, making Clarke's positions untenable. Clarke then withdrew to the ridgeline just west of the town.

The only major river obstacle in the area is the Salm River, which flows north through Salm Chateau, Vielsalm, and Trois Ponts. The river could be forded, but fording sites were scarce and not useful for much heavy traffic. (The 112th Regimental Combat Team forded the river during the withdrawal. Also, LTC Jones' task force was trapped south of Salm Chateau during the withdrawal. In desperation, Jones reconnoitered for a fording site and managed to escape across the river on 23 December.) Otherwise, both German and American units exhibited great concern for the existing fixed bridges. Neither side had much readily available tactical bridging, so the fixed bridges became key terrain. This point was best made when small groups of defenders managed to hold bridges at various points along the Salm River against Peiper's 1st SS Panzer Division. On several occasions, the German columns turned around and sought easier bridges to

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cross.

17. Cole, pp. 260-269. See also John S.D. Eisenhower, p. 28

In order for the German counteroffensive to be successful, it had to be executed with speed and surprise. With such ambitious objectives, the Germans could not afford to get bogged down east of the Meuse River where both terrain and weather served to limit maneuver room. Once across the Meuse, the terrain would permit rapid exploitation. A delay near St. Vith would endanger the

18
entire operation. Whoever controlled this little town controlled the meeting place of the paved roads and a western-leading railroad. Also, the town was near the operational boundary between the German 5th and 6th Panzer Armies. Consequently, St. Vith was critical not only because it was a transportation center, but also because it threatened the 5th Panzer Army's northern flank and, more importantly, because it hampered the movement of the 6th Panzer Army just to the north. The result of delay here was that the U.S. First Army had time to reinforce defensive positions to contain and blunt the German penetration.

3.2 Weather and Its Effects on Operations

The weather during the week of 16-23 December was miserable. Temperatures hovered near freezing and rain or snow fell most of

18. Battle at St. Vith, p. 2.

the week. According to BG Clarke, visibility remained so poor that most tank engagements occurred at ranges of no more than

19
"300 or 400 yards." Weather-related casualties such as

frostbite and exhaustion were a problem for both sides.

Trafficability was a serious problem. Vehicles had to stay on the roads virtually all of the time. Off road, some vehicles became mired in mud so deeply that they had to be abandoned.

Even on paved roads, slippery, muddy conditions prevailed. The road restriction was a critical factor in limiting how much strength the Germans were able to bring to bear against small pockets of resistance. Attacks generally were made along roads with little maneuver room, so outnumbered defenders in protected positions were often very effective against large formations.

20

19. Bruce C. Clarke letter to Maj. Gregory Fontenot, dated 1 April 1984.

20. According to von Manteuffel, for example, the Fuhrer Escort Brigade never succeeded in bringing more than one-third of its combat power to bear because of the need to stay on the roads. See von Manteuffel, MS#b-151a, p. 43.

There were occasional breaks in the weather which enabled limited use of aerial observers, but the weather generally precluded the effective use of close air support. The commander of the German 62nd Volks Grenadier Division summed up the effect of air power as "not worth mentioning."²¹ Both adversaries suffered from these conditions, but the absence of American tactical air power must be deemed an advantage for the attackers. Given good weather, aerial reconnaissance and air interdiction probably would have made the defense shorter and more successful. The defenders gained a weather-related advantage on the night of 22-23 December. That night the temperature dropped sufficiently to freeze the ground, making possible the American withdrawal of heavy equipment on 23

²²
December.

3.3 German Combat Effectiveness

After August 1944, the fighting quality of German divisions along the western front was reported to be relatively good.

21. Friedrich Kittel, 62nd Volks Grenadier Division, 16 Dec 1944 - 27 Jan 1945, MS#B-028, p. 31.

22. After-Action Report, 7th Armored Division Artillery, December 1944, p. 20.

Panzer divisions were considered strong. Some infantry divisions were known to have little combat experience. Troops and officers from air and naval forces had been reassigned to fill some of the Volks Grenadier (infantry) divisions, so their quality was suspect.

The morale of German soldiers was growing poor. They were "very deeply disappointed by the failure of the German Air Force in addition to the poor supply of men and materiel," according to

23

the German LVIII Panzer Corps commander, General Krueger. Additionally, rumors about differences of opinion among senior officers were filtering down to the troops. On the other hand, at the outset of the battle German morale was boosted by the advantages of surprise, superior numbers, and weather poor enough to ground Allied air power.

It is difficult to draw general conclusions about the German units at St. Vith since each was unique. By 1944 almost no German unit had any "standard" organization. Usually, a Volks Grenadier division consisted of three regiments. One regiment had a battalion mounted on bicycles. Each division was authorized a company of assault guns. Generally, these divisions had some artillery. The 62nd Volks Grenadier Division, for example, had a battery of light howitzers. The Panzer divisions

23. Walter Krueger, History of the LVIII Panzer Corps, 24 Jul - 15 Nov 1944, MS#B-321, pp. 34-35.

consisted of one panzer regiment, one motorized infantry regiment, and one infantry regiment. The divisions were authorized only 103 tanks. Von Manteuffel's Panzer divisions were at 60-to-70 percent strength.

The units at St. Vith reflected this state of affairs. Some units were well equipped, such as the Fuhrer Escort Brigade, which had more operational tanks on hand than did some of the Panzer divisions. Some of the divisions were experienced, such as the 116th Panzer Division, some were not so experienced but adequate, like the 18th Volks Grenadier Division, and some were brand new, like the 62nd Volks Grenadier Division. Von Manteuffel was very concerned about the 62nd Division because it

had "practically no training in firing live ammunition." Von Manteuffel's units had significant equipment problems. The most serious problem was that much of artillery was horse-drawn. As a result, the artillery lagged behind the assault elements. Von

Manteuffel did have nearly 300 tanks and 60 assault guns. These 360 armored vehicles were a little more than half of what von Manteuffel was "authorized" by typical Panzer division tables

24. See Kittel, MS#B-028 and von Manteuffel, MS#B-151. Also see K.J. Macksey, Panzer Division: The Mailed Fist (New York: Ballantine Books, 1968), p. 126.

25. von Manteuffel, MS#B151, p. 122.

26. *ibid.*, p. 146.

of organization. Fortunately for von Manteuffel, the Panzer divisions were well organized, experienced units.

The Germans fought with determination during the Ardennes campaign. They were effective in their use of deception (see later section in this chapter), discipline, and leadership. They also fought well at night, ultimately taking St. Vith by a night attack. But they were not as effective as they had been earlier in the war. Von Manteuffel felt some of his Volks Grenadier divisions were not very good. He also noted problems with tactical driving and maintenance which stemmed from inadequate

27
training.

By 13 December, the status of German reserves of armor and infantry continued to baffle U.S. intelligence. Although it was known that there were eight panzer, three parachute, and three infantry divisions not in contact, it was not known how these units would be employed. There were indications that the Germans were planning an operation to employ four divisions of the Sixth Panzer Army to spearhead a counteroffensive, apparently in the Aachen-Duren area north of the Ardennes. These four divisions had been reconstructed and remained west of the Rhine River in the vicinity of Cologne despite the growing threat that the U.S. Third Army might breakthrough the Siegfried Line further to the

27. von Manteuffel, MS#B-151, p. 139. See also his MS#B-151a regarding the decline in the flexibility of German commanders.

south. U.S. Third Army intelligence placed these (and other) divisions near the boundary between the U.S. First and Third Armies where they might be committed against either army.

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3.4 U.S. Combat Effectiveness

3.4.1 The 7th Armored Division

By today's standards, the 7th Armored Division was a comparatively small division. It had an authorized strength of 10,937 officers and men. Combat units assigned to the division were organized under the 1943 Armored Division Tables of Organization. Accordingly, the division fielded only seven maneuver battalions: three tank battalions, three armored infantry battalions, and a cavalry reconnaissance squadron. The division artillery consisted of three battalions armed with self-propelled 105-mm howitzers. Combat support assets organic to the division included a combat engineer battalion which had three lettered companies, but no organic bridge company. The division also owned a signal company and a tactical military police platoon. Service support included a division trains headquarters, a maintenance battalion, and a medical battalion.

28. After-Action Report, U.S. Third Army, December Bastogne - St. Vith Campaign, chapter 7, p. 164.

Generally, when a U.S. division was committed, it was augmented with combat, combat support, and combat service support units from its parent corps. At St. Vith, the 7th Armored division augmentation included attachments of an anti-aircraft battalion, a tank destroyer battalion, two quartermaster truck companies, and an additional artillery battalion. As the battle progressed, several other units were (actually or effectively) under division control. These additional units consisted of CCB/9th Armored Division (a tank battalion, an armored infantry battalion, and company-sized elements of cavalry, engineers, tank destroyers, anti-aircraft artillery, and medics), units from the 106th Division (the 424th Infantry Regiment consisting of three battalions, two artillery battalions, and parts of two engineer battalions); and the 112th Regimental Combat Team of the 28th Division.

The 7th Armored Division packed quite a punch. It had 186 M-4 medium tanks, most with 75-mm or 76-mm guns. A few tanks had 105-mm howitzers and were used as assault guns. The division also had 77 light tanks, most with 37-mm guns, some with 75-mm howitzers. The three armored infantry battalions each were authorized about 1000 officers and men. These battalions used the M-3 half-track as a weapons platform and troop carrier. Each battalion had a platoon of 57-mm anti-tank guns.

To control its formations, the division had a headquarters establishment of 164 officers and men. There were three combat

command headquarters subordinate to the division. Two of these commands, CCA and CCB, were fully staffed, but the third, CCR, was authorized only eight officers and men. CCR was intended to serve only as a reserve headquarters for units rotating in and out of line. It was common practice, however, for armored divisions to use CCR as a third tactical headquarters. No doubt, unofficial staffs and equipment were accumulated to operate as such.

The 7th Armored Division arrived at St. Vith as a well-trained, well-seasoned combat unit. It arrived relatively well-rested and confident.²⁹ Frequent re-structuring (or "task organizing") of the combat commands was normal, so the hasty "make do" organization for defense amid the confusion at St. Vith posed no insurmountable problems. The units were willing and able to operate in very fluid situations under trying circumstances, often with little formal guidance from the division headquarters. Such flexibility and freedom of action proved to be very important in the St. Vith battle.

3.4.2 The 106th Infantry Division

The concept of organization for the 106th Infantry Division varied greatly from that of the 7th Armored Division. The 106th

29. Cole, pp. 273-274.

Division was a "triangle" division, consisting of three regiments of three battalions each. Unlike the combat commands of an armored division, the infantry regiments "owned" their battalions. Situational task organizing was rare. Each of the infantry battalions had three rifle companies and a heavy weapons company. The division artillery consisted of four towed artillery battalions, three armed with 105-mm howitzers, one with 155-mm howitzers. The division also fielded a reconnaissance troop, an engineer battalion, and a military police platoon. The service support assets included a signal company, a medical battalion, an ordnance company, and a quartermaster company.

By the late summer of 1944, the War Department had gutted the 106th Division for replacements. By August the division had lost more than 60 percent of its enlisted strength to the replacement

31
pools. Worse yet, the losses had been among the division's best people. The division lost these trained men after its major unit training. Consequently, when the division deployed to

32
Europe, its new troops had little or no unit-level training. The division met the enemy as a "green" unit composed of soldiers

30. George Forty, US Army Handbook (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1980), pp. 50-57.

31. R.E. Dupuy, St. Vith, Lion in the Way (Washington, D.C.: Infantry Journal Press, 1965), pp. 7-8.

32. *ibid.*

who had not had the time to develop a sense of belonging.

Like all divisions, the 106th Division was augmented with units from corps. At the outset of the fighting at St. Vith, the 106th Division controlled the 14th Cavalry Group (two squadrons), an additional artillery battalion, a tank destroyer battalion, and an anti-aircraft artillery battalion.

The 106th Division went on line just six days before the battle at St. Vith began. The German attack on 16 December was the division's first combat action. The division had not had the time to accumulate "extra" automatic or heavy weapons, which was a common practice among veteran units. In fact, the 106th Division was short ammunition for some of its authorized heavy

³³
weapons. From the German point of view, this division was an ideal one to attack.

3.4.3 The 112th Regimental Combat Team and CCB, 9th Armored Division

The 112th Regimental Combat Team from the 28th Infantry Division was an experienced unit. However, it had been handled roughly by the Germans in the Huertgen Forest battle for the town of Schmidt. The 28th Division had been moved to the Ardennes for rest in what the troops called the Ghost Front. The 112th's

33. Cole, p. 141.

units had less than two weeks' rest when the St. Vith battle began. Accordingly, they were not at full strength and were still tired.

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CCB/9th Armored Division was another unit that had not been tried in major combat. According to its own (very sketchy) after-action report, however, it went into its first battle in

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good shape.

3.5 The German Deception Effort

Hitler and his planners realized the weakest point in the Allied lines was in the Ardennes. At the same time, they knew the assembly of German forces to take advantage of that fact would cause the Allies to concentrate their forces in that area to block any German offensive. Consequently, the German plans and preparations for the attack were made in absolute secrecy, shrouded by a deliberate deception effort. On 11 October 1944

34. *ibid.*, pp. 55-56. The 28th Division left the Huertgen Forest on 19 November after sustaining 6000 casualties. See Charles B. MacDonald and Sidney T. Matthews, Three Battles: Arnaville, Altazzo and Schmidt (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, 1952), pp. 251-417.

35. After-Action Report, CCB/9th Armored Division, December 1944. Although sketchy, this report does include several meticulously drawn overlays which are useful in tracing the unit's movements.

the German high command issued a directive informing German commanders on the Western Front that it was no longer possible to mount an offensive operation. "All strategic reserves must be deployed in the imminent defense of the Fatherland."³⁶ Hitler carefully controlled the list of commanders who were told of the actual plan. Moreover, those officers were placed under a special oath of secrecy which called for the death penalty for anyone who divulged the plan even to his subordinates, let alone to outsiders.³⁷

A second directive was issued in November which set forth the basic deception story. It stated that an Allied offensive was expected between Cologne and Bonn. To counter this threat, two reserve forces would be assembled. The first reserve would be the 6th Panzer Army, located northwest of Cologne, which would prepare to attack an assumed Allied penetration from the north. The other force would consist of the "burned out" divisions of the 5th Panzer Army, which needed time to reorganize. They would be placed secretly in the Schnee Eifel region, where they could contain the south flank of the assumed Allied penetration.³⁸

36. Toland, p. 15.

37. Percy Ernst Schramm, MS#A-862, p. 92.

38. Jacques Nobe'court, Hitler's Last Gamble (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), p. 106.

Both directives were designed for consumption by the German public and Allied intelligence. They meant to portray the notion that Hitler feared a massive breakthrough by the U.S. First and Ninth Armies. These directives and subsequent rumors passed by double agents were quite believable for several reasons. The Allies greatest effort was in an area near Aachen, and this was the area the German plan would protect. An Allied attack through this area would lead to the Ruhr, the industrial heart of Germany. Allied intelligence reported that the 5th Panzer Army had been badly mauled, and a refit period for it in the Schnee Eifel region was only logical.

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The deception was effective. The 6th Panzer Army was not a counterattack force, but an offensive force aimed at Antwerp. The build-up of the 6th Panzer Army was not concealed because the Germans knew that the Allies took great pride in accounting for

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Panzer divisions. (There were four SS Panzer divisions among the 6th Panzer Army's nine divisions). Although the Allies did have some information about 6th Panzer Army, they were not able to determine that the bulk of the attack force was assembled as

39. Basil J. Hobar, "The Ardennes 1944, Intelligence Failure or Cover and Deception Success?", an unpublished thesis in the military history holdings of the USACGSC Library, Ft. Leavenworth, KS., p. 12.

40. John S.D. Eisenhower, p. 144.

far south as it was. To conceal this assembly, the Germans "invented" a fictitious army in the north, complete with representative, but bogus radio traffic.⁴¹

In contrast, the 5th Panzer Army was assembled in the Schnee Eifel with the greatest secrecy. The secret remained well kept because the Allies gave lower priority to accounting for Volks Grenadier divisions (which comprised four of the 5th Panzer Army's seven divisions). Contrary to the Allied intelligence estimates, the 5th Panzer Army was actually fairly healthy and was getting ready to push through the heart of the Ardennes.⁴²

The German efforts at secrecy were very thorough. Even plan and operation code names had defensive implications, for example "Watch on the Rhine" and "Defensive Battle in the West."⁴³ Field commanders were not advised of the plan until the last possible moment. German troops were not told of the offensive until the night before they moved into their final assault positions. Even

41. Schramm, MS#A-862, p. 135.

42. *ibid.*, p. 94.

43. *ibid.*, p. 2.

then, the troops were told they were part of reserve units

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preparing to counterattack. In the Schnee Eifel, secrecy and deception involved frequent roll calls, travel only at night, masterful camouflage, use of horses to move artillery and other equipment, strict noise discipline, total radio silence, charcoal cooking fires rather than wood, and airplane overflights to cover

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noisy movements.

44. Carl Wagener, Fifth Panzer Army - Ardennes (Special Questions), MS#A-961, Volume D, p. 10.

45. Schramm, MS#A-862, pp. 229-247.

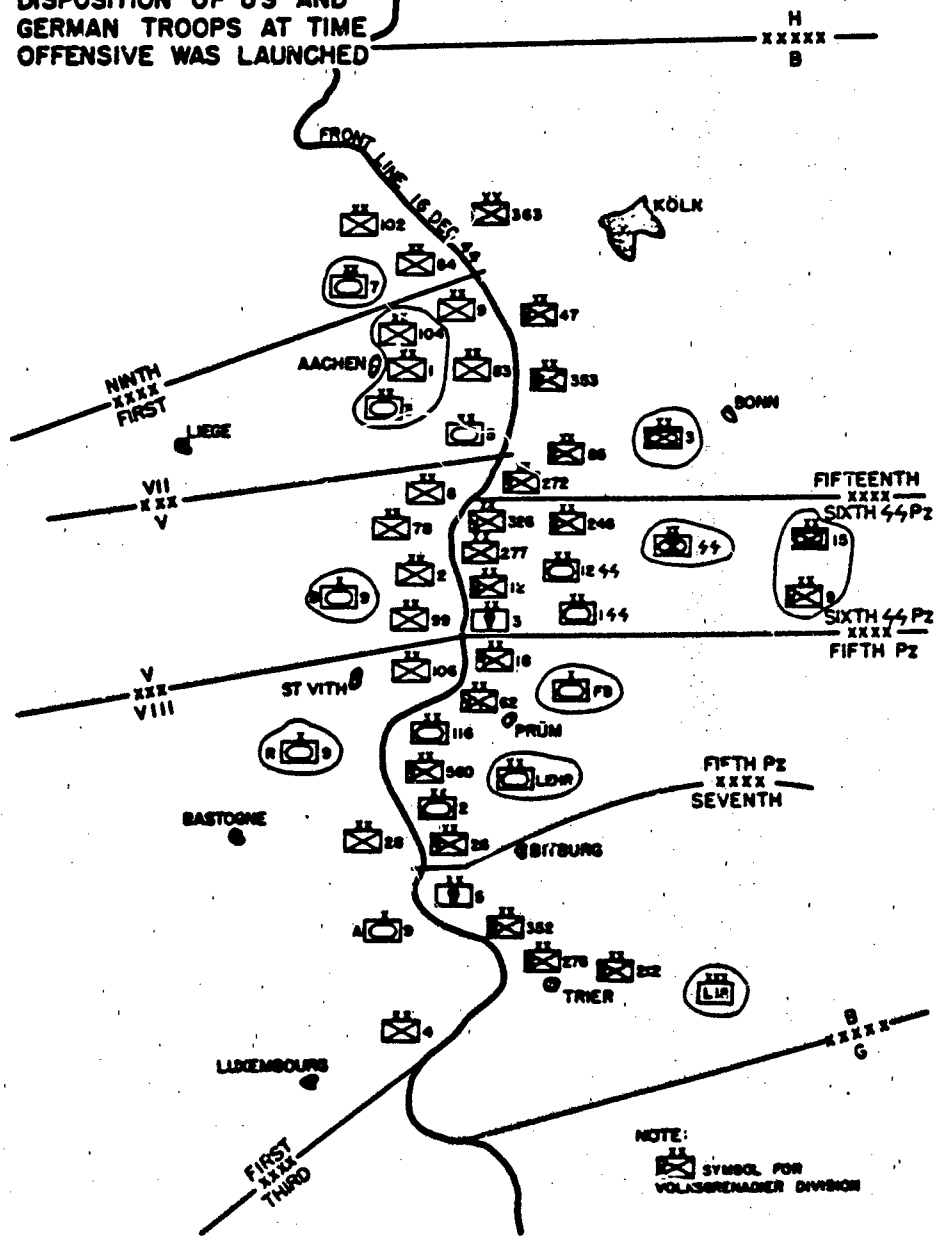
Chapter 4

THE FIGHT

4.1 Disposition of Forces at the Beginning of the Action

On the eve of the German attack, the U.S. First Army held a 165-mile wide front, roughly from Aachen to Luxembourg (See Map 1). The U.S. Third Army was on the south flank and the new U.S. Ninth Army was on the north flank. First Army had three corps on line: VII Corps in the north, pushing toward the Roer River; V Corps in the center, probing toward the dams that control the waters of the Roer; and VIII Corps, commanded by MG Troy Middleton, holding approximately a 90-mile front in the relatively quiet southern sector opposite the Ardennes Forest. The southern-most unit of V Corps was the 99th Infantry Division, on line a few miles north of St. Vith. The northern-most VIII Corps division was the 106th Infantry Division, headquartered in St. Vith, with two regiments deployed to the east on the Schnee Eifel. The 106th Division had just arrived in Europe and had not yet received its baptism of fire. Between the 99th and 106th divisions was a distance of three or four miles, including

DISPOSITION OF US AND
GERMAN TROOPS AT TIME
OFFENSIVE WAS LAUNCHED



Map 1

This map was originally published in The Battle at St. Vith
by the U.S. Army Armor School, p. 3.

an avenue of approach into the area through the town of Losheim. This "Losheim Gap" was defended by the 14th (Mechanized) Cavalry Group, attached to the 106th Division. The positional defense mission given the cavalry was somewhat unusual, unsuited at least to the unit's desires if not also its training. On line south of the 106th division was the 28th Infantry Division along a 27-mile wide front east of Bastogne. Further south were Combat Command A
46
of the 9th Armored Division and the 4th Infantry Division.

The Germans were organized into three attacking armies: the 6th Panzer Army (commanded by Dietrich) in the north, opposite the 2d and 99th divisions of V Corps; the 5th Panzer Army (von Manteuffel) in the center, opposite the 106th and 28th divisions of VIII Corps; and the 7th Army (Brandenberger) in the south, opposite CCA 9th and 4th divisions of VIII Corps. (The fold-out map at Appendix D is helpful in understanding the German plans.) Dietrich's 6th Panzer Army was the main effort. With four panzer and five infantry divisions, 6th Panzer Army was ordered to attack in a sector from Monschau to the Losheim Gap, roll across the Elsenborn Ridge, cross the Meuse River, and seize Antwerp. Dietrich planned to open a hole and to turn loose two panzer divisions for a dash to the Meuse. Von Manteuffel's 5th Panzer Army had two missions. First, two infantry divisions were to encircle the Schnee Eifel salient, trapping the 106th division

46. Battle at St. Vith, p. 2.

and capturing St. Vith. Second, the remaining three panzer and two infantry divisions of 5th Panzer Army were to race west. Von Manteuffel planned to strike using tank-infantry teams following a short artillery preparation. The LXVI Corps (commanded by Lucht) intended to strike the 106th Division, isolate the Schnee Eifel, and drive rapidly to St. Vith. Further south, LVIII Panzer Corps (Krueger) and XLVII Panzer Corps (von Luettwitz) proposed to burst through the 28th Division, isolate Bastogne, and then drive to the Meuse. Brandenberger's 7th Army had orders to seize the Vianden-Echternach area, push west, and protect the southern flank of the German penetration.⁴⁷

4.2 The German Attack Begins (16 December)

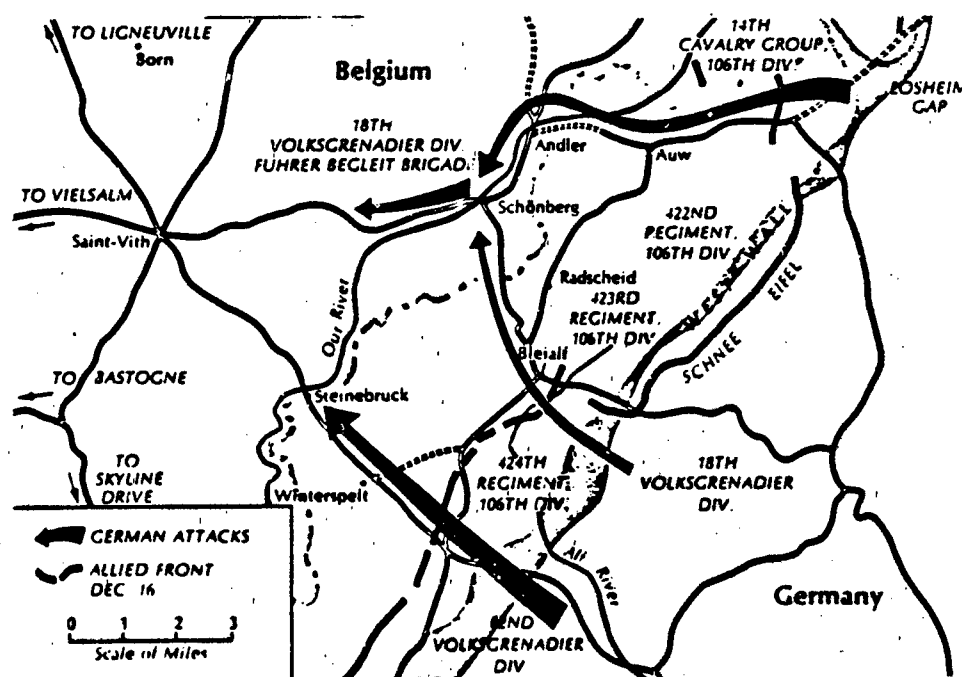
Making the most of von Manteuffel's surprise tactics, two Volks Grenadier regiments surged through the Losheim Gap, brushing past (and, some say, putting to flight) the 14th Cavalry Group early in the morning on 16 December. By mid-morning, the Germans were pushing toward the village of Auw, three miles behind the northern flank of the 422nd Infantry Regiment of the 106th Division. Meanwhile, at the southern end of the Schnee

47. Toland, pp. 17-18.

Eifel, another regiment of Volks Grenadiers surged up the valley of the Alf River, overran the positions of the 423rd Infantry Regiment's antitank company (also of the 106th Division), and captured most of the village of Bleialf (See Map 2). A group of "miscellaneous GIs" later counterattacked and recaptured the village in house-to-house fighting. During the day, the 423rd

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Regiment used up most of its reserves and ammunition.



Map 2

This map was originally published in The Battle of the Bulge, by William Goolrick and Ogden Tanner, Time-Life Books, p. 92.

48. Dupuy, pp. 21-62.

By nightfall, 16 December, the 106th Division was in grave peril. The Germans had nearly encircled the 422nd and 423rd Regiments on the Schnee Eifel. A gap of only five miles remained between the rapidly closing German pincers. The 424th Regiment was being driven back to the Our River. MG Alan Jones, the Division Commander, conferred with VIII Corps Commander Middleton about withdrawing the two exposed regiments, but eventually decided against it. Middleton promised Jones reinforcement by at least a combat command of the 7th Armored Division early the next morning.⁴⁹

During the night, the Germans worked feverishly to bring up reinforcements and to continue their two-pronged attack around the Schnee Eifel. At 0600 hours on 17 December the southern prong of Volks Grenadiers struck Bleialf again and broke through the hastily prepared American defenses. In the north, the 14th Cavalry Group had withdrawn to "a final delaying position" and then unexpectedly withdrew again,⁵⁰ allowing the Germans to sweep into the village of Andler, then head south for Schonberg. The German pincers closed rapidly. By 0830 hours, German forces

49. *ibid.*

50. Cole, pp. 163-164.

linked up at Schonberg. The trap snapped shut. Although Jones had received attachment of CCB/9th Armored Division, the promised help from 7th Armored Division had not arrived.

Jones ordered the encircled 422nd and 423rd Regiments on the Schnee Eifel to attack in the direction of Schonberg, thereby extricating themselves from the trap. They attempted to do so on 17 December, but their attack fell short of the town. Although surrounded and never resupplied, the regiments continued to resist until late afternoon of 19 December. Again they attempted to assault Schonberg and again failed. The regiments suffered heavy casualties, particularly due to enemy tanks and minefields. Finally, both regiments surrendered in a piecemeal fashion, 19 - 20 December, and at least 7000 American soldiers

were marched off to Germany as prisoners.

4.3 The 7th Armored Division Moves to St. Vith (16-17 December)

When the battle began, 7th Armored Division occupied an assembly area near Heerlen, Holland, 60 or 70 miles from St. Vith. The division was the reserve for XII Corps in Ninth Army.

51. William Goolrick and Ogden Tanner, The Battle of the Bulge (New York: Time-Life Books, 1979), pp. 91-92.

52. Cole, pp. 170-171. See also Dupuy, pp. 145-150.

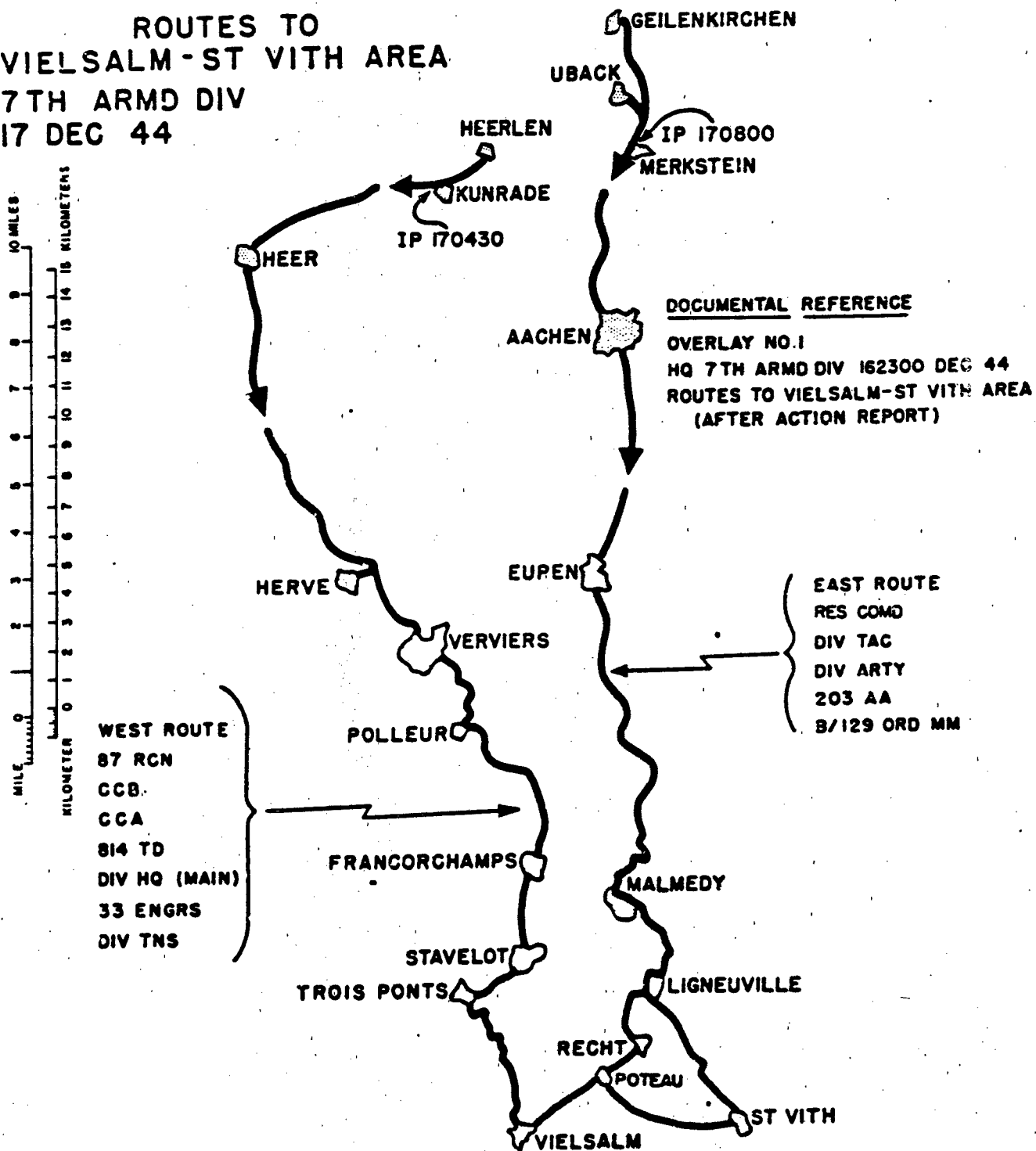
At 1730 hours 16 December, XII Corps alerted the division for an administrative march to assembly areas around Vielsalm, Belgium, where it would come under the command of Middleton as part of VIII Corps. The division had little knowledge of its eventual mission, only that "some difficulty" was occurring near St. Vith, ten miles east of Vielsalm. Division Commander BG Robert W. Hasbrouck sent his Combat Command B commander, BG Bruce C. Clarke, to Bastogne to meet with Middleton and determine how VIII Corps intended to employ the division. Hasbrouck planned to begin moving the division early in the morning of 17 December.

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The 7th Armored Division moved in columns over two routes. The weather was rainy and the roads were covered with mud. Movement cross-country or in fields alongside the roads was impossible. The plan called for Combat Command R, the Tactical CP, Division Artillery, and an attached anti-aircraft battalion, in that order, to follow an eastern route through Geilenkirchen, Aachen, Eupen, Malmedy, Ligneuville, to St. Vith, and then west to Vielsalm (See Map 3). The divisional cavalry squadron, division trains, 33rd Engineer Battalion, 814th Tank Destroyer Battalion, Combat Command B, Combat Command A, and the division headquarters intended to move on a western route through Heerlen, Herve, Francorchamps, Stavelot, Trois Ponts, to Vielsalm.

53. Battle at St. Vith, p. 4.

**ROUTES TO
VIELSALM-ST VITH AREA
7TH ARMD DIV
17 DEC 44**



Map 3

This map was originally published in The Battle at St. Vith

by the U.S. Army Armor School, p. 6.

Joachim Peiper's Kampfgruppe (battle group) cut both routes of march during 17 December. Peiper cut the eastern route early in the afternoon near Malmedy, just after the combat elements of 7th Armored Division had passed. In the process, the Germans captured Battery B, 285th Field Artillery Observation Battalion, which ironically had inserted itself into the column without authorization. The German shooting of these prisoners became

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known as the Malmedy Massacre.

The Division Artillery arrived on the scene while B/285th Artillery was being engaged, and swerved west to avoid the Germans. Eventually, the Division Artillery turned south towards Stavelot. Here they ran into Peiper again, by this time on the morning of 18 December. Fortunately, the 203rd Anti-Aircraft Artillery Battalion was able to hold off Peiper while the main body escaped. The Division Artillery again turned west, finally finding its way to Vielsalm late in the afternoon of 18

55

December. The considerable delay meant that the 7th Armored Division went into a confused fight without its own organic artillery.

Although the combat units of 7th Armored Division avoided

54. *ibid.*, p. 5, note.

55. Cole, pp. 278-279.

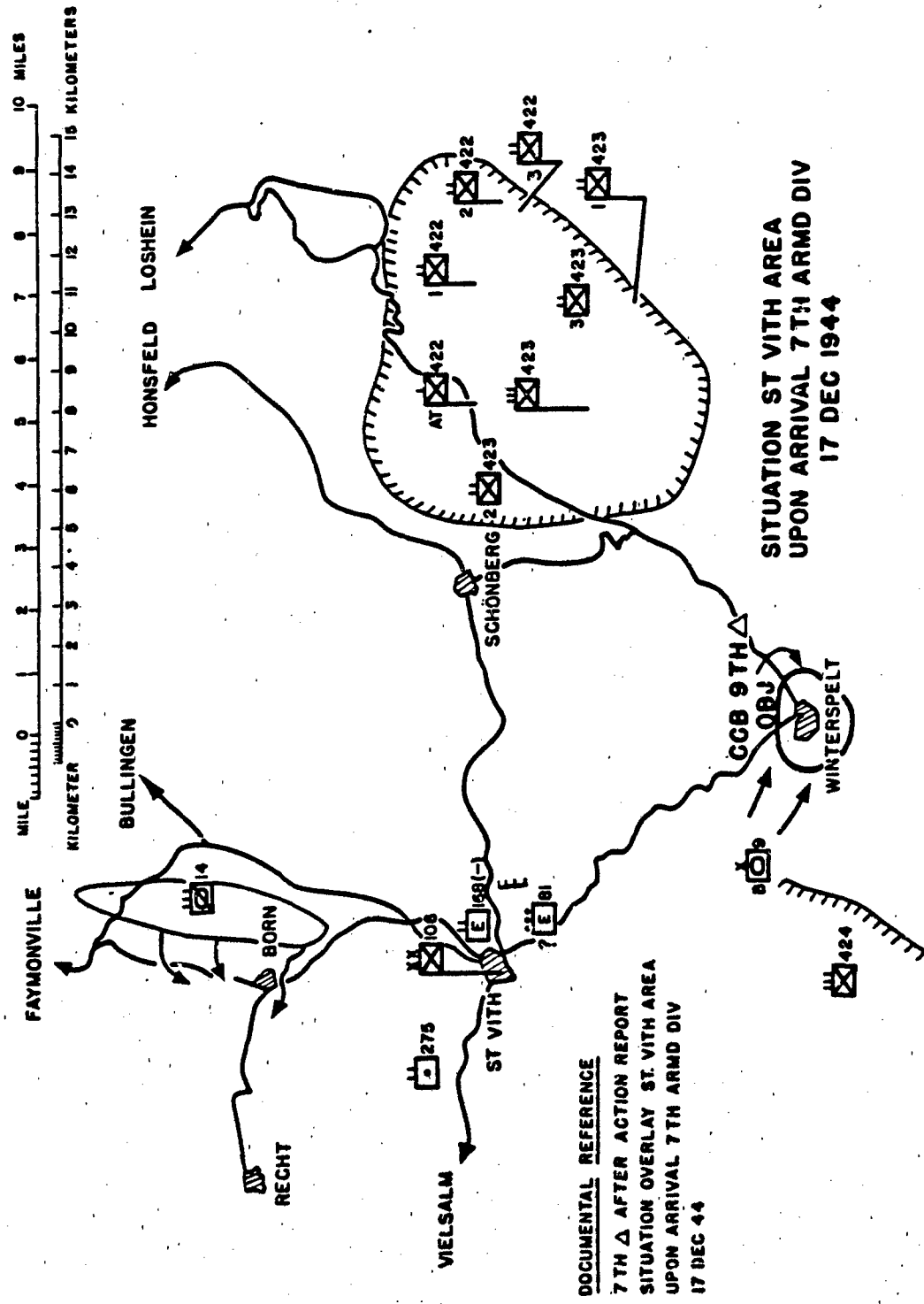
Peiper, they could not avoid the rabble of fleeing American soldiers. South of Malmedy, the division had to force its way against a tide of routed American troops.⁵⁶ At times, the entire 7th Armored Division came to a standstill, stretched for several miles north of Vielsalm, intermingled with all manner of soldiers and vehicles heading opposite directions. The reinforcement that the 106th Division hoped would arrive early 17 December was bogged down until much later that day.

4.4 The Defense of St. Vith (17-22 December)

4.4.1 Organization of Defense on 17 December

By 1200 hours 17 December the situation near St. Vith was critical (See Map 4). The 14th Cavalry Group had been pushed (and/or withdrew) to the vicinity of Born, four miles north of St. Vith. The 422nd and 423rd regiments of the 106th Division were cut off ten miles east of St. Vith. The Germans had interposed units between the two encircled regiments. CCB/9th Armored Division was eight miles southeast of St. Vith, trying to recapture Winterspelt. Just south of CCB/9th Armored Division near Burg Reuland, the 424th Infantry Regiment remained more or less intact, but under strong pressure from the Germans.

56. Battle at St. Vith, p. 7.



Map 4

This map was originally published in The Battle at St. Vith by the U.S. Army Armor School, p. 8.

The 424th Infantry Regiment had lost contact with the 28th Infantry Division on its right. That division had been penetrated in several places, and von Manteuffel's units were streaking through the gaps towards Wiltz, Bastogne, and Houffalize. The 112th Regimental Combat Team (28th Division) was hit hard, but it stayed on its feet and conducted a fighting withdrawal to the northwest, towards St. Vith.

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In St. Vith itself the 106th Division had only its headquarters, a few engineers, some service troops, one infantry platoon (CP guard), and BG Clarke, anxiously awaiting the belated arrival of his armored combat command. Plans for 7th Armored Division to counterattack to open a corridor to the encircled regiments had to be scrapped. There was no contiguous defense line. Amid the confusion, MG Jones apparently felt he no longer had control of the battle nor sufficient troops with which to fight. In essence, he turned over command of the defense of St. Vith to BG Clarke at 1430 hours 17 December. Clarke had no troops on the scene yet, but it was no time to count noses. German units closed to within two miles of the town. Clarke sent the infantry platoon and the engineers east of town to make contact with the Germans and set up defensive positions. This

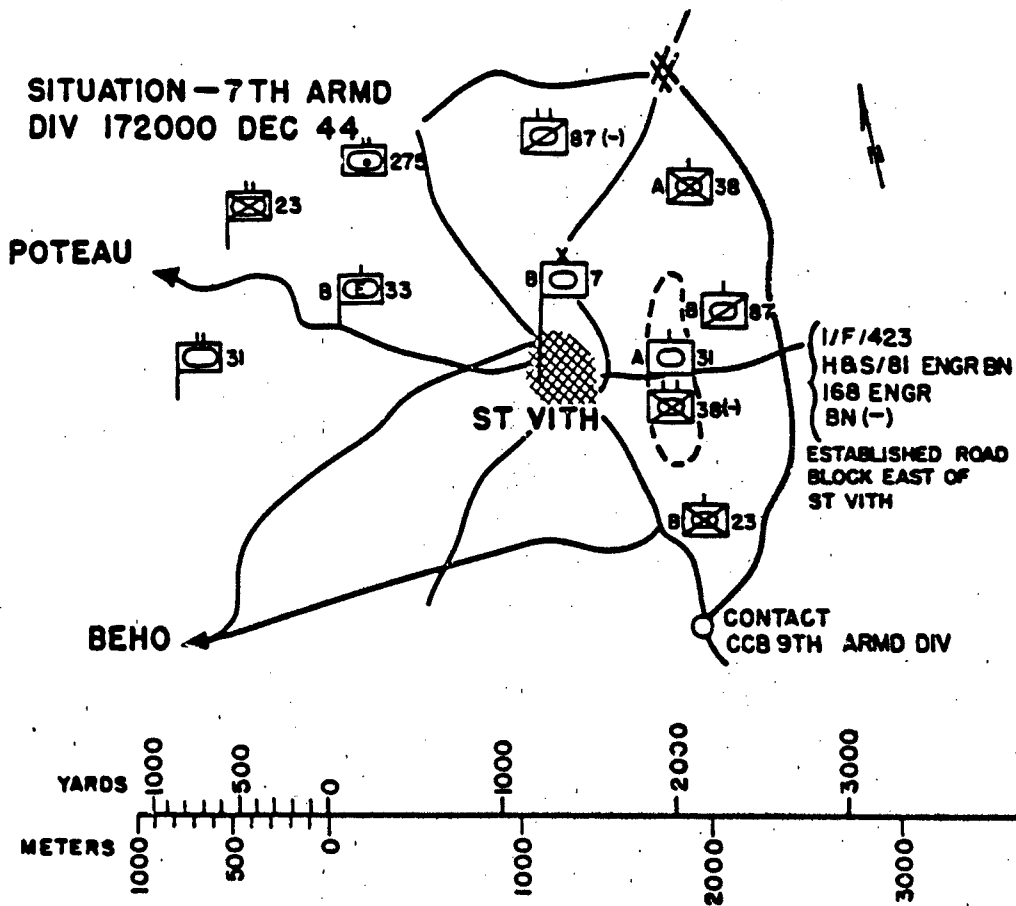
57. *ibid.* See also Cole, pp. 289-290.

makeshift defense provided the only resistance east of town until
58
7th Armored Division units arrived.

Clarke added units to the defense literally as they arrived late the afternoon of 17 December, beginning with Troop B, 87th Cavalry, which joined the left flank of the infantry/engineer defense east of town. Other units were added to the left and right until a defense line was established east and north of St. Vith. LTC William Fuller, commander of the 38th Armored Infantry Battalion, was put in command of the troops east of St. Vith. His battalion was reinforced by the units already present and by another infantry company and a tank company later in the evening. The 87th Cavalry Squadron was sent northeast to the Wallerode area to contact the 14th Cavalry Group. The remainder of the 23rd Armored Infantry Battalion, the 31st Tank Battalion, and the 33rd Engineer Battalion arrived by midnight, completing the arrival of Clarke's CCB/7th Armored Division (See Map 5).

Clarke's arrangements, however, included no artillery. As already mentioned, 7th Armored Division Artillery did not arrive until late afternoon, 18 December. But the 275th Armored Field Artillery Battalion (VIII Corps) was in position near Ober Emmels, about two miles west and north of St. Vith. The unit had remained in place despite the fact there were no longer friendly

58. *ibid.*, p. 9.



Map 5

This map was originally published in The Battle at St. Vith
by the U.S. Army Armor School, p. 11.

troops between it and the Germans. The commander, LTC Roy Clay, used his batteries to form roadblocks and prepared his guns for direct fire. As 7th Armored Division units began to arrive in St. Vith, Clay found Clarke and offered his unit's services.

Clay's artillery battalion provided Clarke's only artillery

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support during the initial defense.

4.4.2 Holding the Line on 18 December

The 7th Armored Division extemporized a defense by 0300 hours 18 December. Combat Command R (commanded by Col. John Ryan) held the northern flank. Clarke's CCB occupied an arc east of St. Vith. The arc extended far enough south to contact CCB/9th Armored Division (BG William Hoge). Combat Command A (Col. Dwight Rosebaum) was the division reserve in an assembly area near Beho, southwest of St. Vith. By 0700 hours a U-shaped arc of defensive positions had been developed from Hunningen, one mile north of St. Vith, around the east side of the town, to Weisenbach, two miles to the southeast. Clarke retained some of his command on the high ground west of St. Vith, poised to

60

conduct counterattacks.

59. John S.D. Eisenhower, p. 288. The 275th Artillery Battalion had been the direct support battalion for the 14th Cavalry Group.

60. After-Action Report, 7th Armored Division, p. 7. See also AAR, CCB/7th AD. The disposition of units was not as neatly done as suggested here. In the Poteau-Born area, for example, there were elements and/or remnants of 14th Cavalry Group, CCB/9th Armored Division, and the 106th Division. The 589th Artillery Battalion (106th Division) had only three tubes remaining. In general, the situation was chaotic.

Throughout 18 December the Germans launched determined attacks aimed at capturing St. Vith. The day-long ordeal began at 0200 hours with an attack on CCR toward the town of Recht. The Germans made effective use of flares fired from tanks to silhouette American positions and blind American gunners. The pressure of the attack forced the headquarters of CCR to withdraw under pressure to Poteau. The German attack threatened the north flank of CCB. The 17th Tank Battalion took up positions south of
61
Recht to try to offer some flank protection.

At 0800 hours the Germans attacked CCB with a well-coordinated assault by infantry and tanks. The attack moved from the north toward Hunningen and from the east toward CCB's defensive positions across the road to Schonberg. Hunningen was temporarily lost, but was regained after an aggressive counterattack by three tank companies of the 14th Tank Battalion and a company from the 811th Tank Destroyer Battalion. In the fight, the Germans lost seven tanks and an armored car, and more than a hundred German infantrymen were killed. German penetrations on the east side were restored by similar tank counterattacks. Aggressive, determined, tank-heavy counterattacks characterized the defense of St. Vith and probably caused the Germans to think the American strength was greater

61. Battle at St. Vith, p. 12.

than was actually the case. The LXVI Corps Commander (General Lucht) had reports of American tanks and remarked that "the resistance in front of St. Vith had stiffened" on 18 December. ⁶²

The trains of the 31st Tank Battalion and 23rd Armored Infantry Battalion, separated from their parent battalions during the action just described, found themselves fighting desparately against strong German combat patrols. Using cooks, clerks, mechanics and casuals as infantry, and three tanks that were being repaired, the trains managed to disengage and move southwest to Krombach, four miles southwest of St. Vith. The Germans siezed Poteau and pushed west, threatening to isolate CCB from the rest of the division. Clarke placed a tank company across the St. Vith - Poteau road near Rodt to guard his rear while the division ordered CCA to attack to recapture Poteau. ⁶³

The initial counterattack by CCA began at 1320 hours. Although the Germans had begun digging in along the woods overlooking the crossroads in the town, CCA managed to fight its way into Poteau. However, heavy German fire forced CCA to return to covered positions south of the town. CCA launched another

62. *ibid.* See also Lucht, MS#B-333, pp. 10-12.

63. *ibid.*, p. 13. See also AAR, 7th AD, p. 8 and AAR, CCA/7th AD, p. 2.

attack as darkness fell. House-to-house fighting finally overcame a German stand "to the last man."⁶⁴ The action was indicative of the determination of the German soldiers, and of the bitterness of the fighting involved at St. Vith.

The pattern that emerged on 18 December became the rule. As the Germans tried to flank the 7th Armored Division, Hasbrouck lengthened his flanks, which never were tied in north or south throughout 18 December. Although MG Jones (106th Division) was senior to BG Hasbrouck, Jones had become a "mental wreck" (in Hasbrouck's opinion),⁶⁵ crushed by the encirclement of two of his regiments (in one of which Jones' son was serving). Therefore, Hasbrouck acted on his own accord to improve the defense.

Hasbrouck sent a tank company to Gouvy to strengthen his right flank. With some surprise, the company commander (Cpt. Walter Hughes) found a force already there under the command of LTC Robert Stone. Stone was the commander of the 440th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Battalion. At Gouvy, he had gathered about 250 stragglers and prepared to defend the town. According to the After-Action Report of 7th Armored Division, Stone was a

64. *ibid.*

65. Hasbrouck to Fontenot, see note 5.

man of few words who announced "By God, the others may run, but

I'm staying here and will hold at all costs." ⁶⁶ Stone and Hughes had plenty to do. The Germans were moving on Gouvy, threatening a rations dump and a POW enclosure containing some 750 of their colleagues. Stone and Hughes held off the Germans. Hughes evacuated the POWs and 7th Armored Division started issuing the ⁶⁷ rations.

Despite Hasbrouck's efforts (and those of several men like Stone and Hughes), German armored spearheads passed to the north and south of St. Vith throughout the day. The 7th Armored Division knew that the towns of Trois Ponts and Houffalize had been occupied. A mild German attack at 2230 hours was repulsed, and afterwards the defenders spent the night listening to German movements all around the area. It was no longer a matter of trying to relieve the encircled 422nd and 423rd regiments, but of denying St. Vith to the Germans without all of 7th Armored

⁶⁸ Division becoming encircled.

66. AAR, 40th Tank Battalion, pp. 15-16 and AAR 7th AD, p. 8. See also Cole, p. 286.

67. AAR, 40th TB, pp. 15-16.

68. Cole, p. 289.

4.4.3 German Probing Attacks on 19 December

The north and south flanks continued to hold. The road center of St. Vith remained under American control, but it was almost surrounded. The impetus of the German offensive had not been depleted. As they became increasingly more isolated, the defenders continued their attempts to delay the German advance. Von Manteuffel, and the rest of the German command, were frustrated by the stubborn resistance that had been encountered. The slow progress aggravated an already troublesome traffic congestion problem in the rear of the German units, not unlike what 7th Armored Division had seen two days earlier. To give the attack a burst of momentum, the Germans committed additional units, in particular the Fuhrer Escort Brigade.

69

During the night of 18-19 December, both German and American forces conducted patrols. The Germans employed harassing fires on all roads and road junctions using mortars, 88-mm guns, and concentrated fires of artillery battalions. Before dawn, CCB/7th Armored Division's north flank twice came under attack by infantry and tanks. The 31st Tank Battalion, assisted by the

69. von Manteuffel, MS #B151a, p. 33 and Lucht, MS#B-333. General Lucht found himself personally directing traffic and resolving squabbles with out-of-bounds 6th Panzer Army units which were using his routes partly due to the resistance of the 99th Division in the north.

87th Cavalry Squadron, succeeded in repelling both attacks. The day of 19 December was characterized by a series of German attacks apparently probing for a weakness in the defensive line that might be exploited.

Steady pressure applied by the Germans required CCR to conduct an "active defense" with combat patrols and "continuous reconnaissance" of its entire sector.⁷⁰ CCR attempted to send a patrol from Petit Thier to contact CCA at Poteau, just a mile or two away. The task proved difficult because the Germans had the road under direct fire throughout the day. Contact was finally made in the late afternoon.⁷¹

CCA was "consolidating along the general arc Poteau - Recht - Gut Eidt Farm."⁷² CCA's hold on Poteau was fragile, but it had contact with CCB, which continued to hold ground in an arc around St. Vith. CCB fought several sharp firefights (infantry and tanks) between 0930 and 1300 hours. A platoon of the 814th Tank Destroyer Battalion successfully engaged three German tanks at a range of 2000 meters before the Germans withdrew.⁷³

70. AAR, CCR/7th AD, pp. 8-9.

71. *ibid.*

72. Dupuy, p. 154.

73. AAR, CCB/7th AD, p. 3.

CCB/9th Armored Division manned the southern flank. A German attack here was blunted before it gathered much momentum. The German forces withdrew to probe elsewhere. During the afternoon, the two CCB commanders, Clarke and Hoge, coordinated the withdrawal of CCB/9th Armored Division from its exposed position on the forward side of a stream and railroad. CCB/9th Armored Division moved to a new position just south of St. Vith which permitted a better "tie in" with CCB/7th Armored Division.

74
Thereafter, Hoge and Clarke maintained "close liaison."

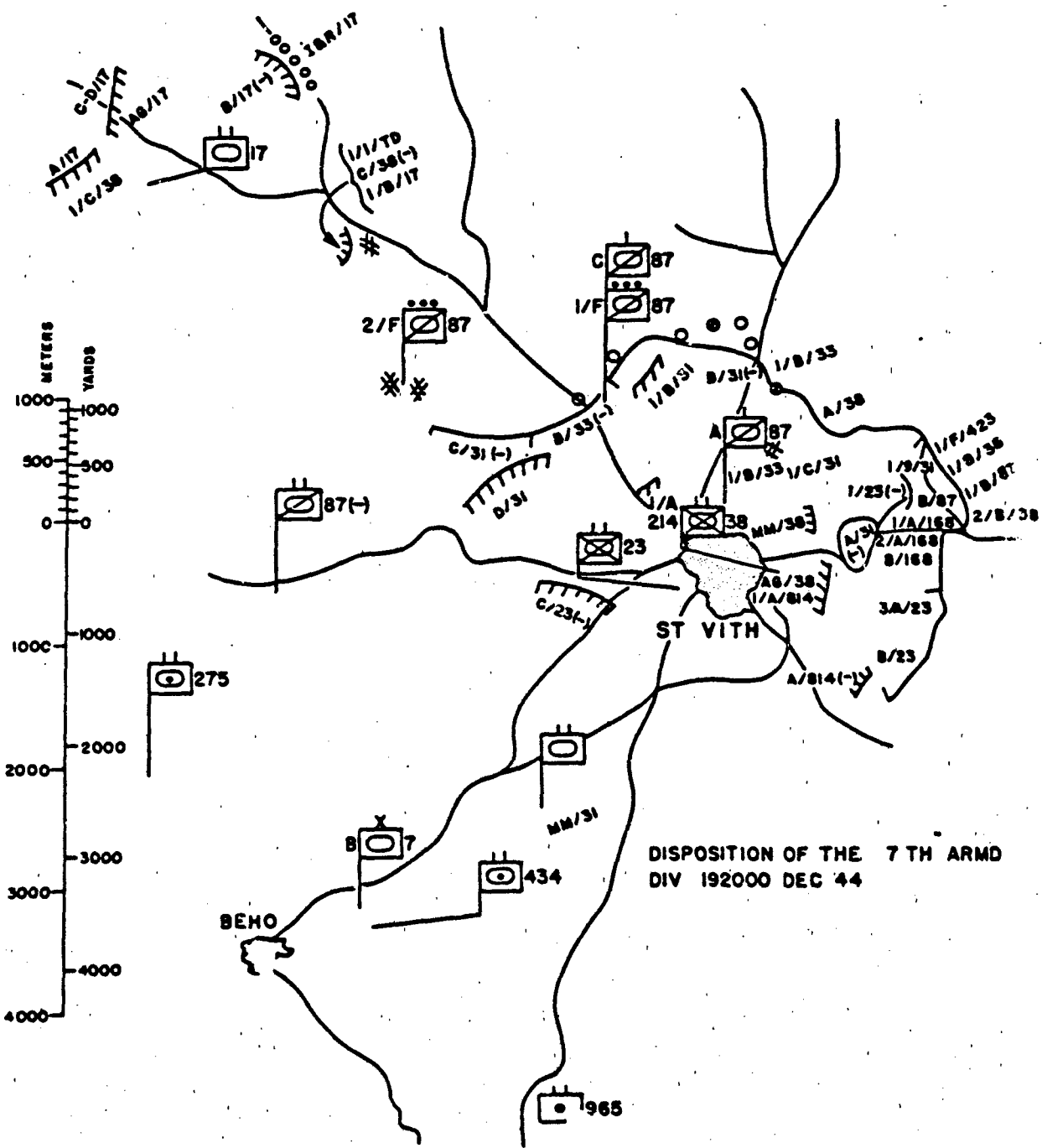
On 19 December Clarke's sole artillery battalion, LTC Clay's 275th, was joined by the 434th Armored Field Artillery Battalion and two batteries of the 965th Field Artillery Battalion.⁷⁵ The artillery proved effective against tanks as well as infantry. According to LTC Richard Chappins, commander of the 48th Armored Infantry Battalion, the plan "used successfully was to suck in their armor, stop it with massed artillery and then to proceed to

76
KO the Jerry tanks at close range with our Shermans."

74. *ibid.*, p. 4.

75. Battle at St. Vith, p. 16.

76. Commander's Battle Notes, AAR, 48th Armored Infantry Battalion, p. 1.



This map was originally published in The Battle at St. Vith by the U.S. Army Armor School, p. 15.

Another addition to the defense on 19 December was the 112th Regimental Combat Team of the 28th Division. This regiment had been out of communication with its parent division since the battle began. A patrol from 7th Armored Division contacted the regiment southwest of St. Vith.⁷⁷ The regiment was incorporated into the defense, placed in the gap between Gouvy and the 424th Regiment.⁷⁸

4.4.4 The 7th Armored Division Essentially Encircled on 20 December

Dawn 20 December revealed a cold, wet day for the troops in the horseshoe-shaped perimeter. Hasbrouck considered his own situation as bleak as the day. His G-2 identified the opposing forces (roughly in order from north to south) as the 1st SS Panzer Division, Gross Deutschland Brigade, 18th Volks Grenadier Division, 62nd Volks Grenadier Division, 2d Panzer Division,⁷⁹ 560th Volks Grenadier Division, and the 116th Panzer Division.

77. Battle at St. Vith, p. 16.

78. Dupuy, p. 136.

79. Battle at St. Vith, p. 18. See also the G-2 Notes, annex to AAR, 7th AD, and Cole, p. 395. The Gross Deutschland Brigade identification was incorrect. The captured troops wearing Gross Deutschland insignia actually belonged to the Fuhrer Escort Brigade.

Intelligence reports indicated that German units were continuing to bypass the 7th Armored Division to the north and were beginning to roll up the flank on the south. Like the more famous Bastogne, St. Vith was all but surrounded. Supply routes had been interrupted, ammunition was dwindling, casualties were mounting, and the trains were fighting tanks in the division rear area.

During the night of 19-20 December, the Germans moved tanks into Wallerode, Neider Emmels, and Ober Emmels along CCB's northern flank. Massing for a final thrust into St. Vith were two Volks Grenadier divisions and the Fuhrer Escort Brigade. Clarke's CCB sensed the impending attack and spent the day shoring up thin positions. Although no major enemy attack came on 20 December, enemy artillery fire was virtually continuous.

American artillery also had an active day. The Division Artillery journal noted that there were twenty-one separate attacks, including tanks from every direction. The artillery fired some 300 missions, consuming 6815 rounds of ammunition.

80. H.W. Baldwin, Battles Lost and Won, Great Campaigns of World War II (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 340. See also AAR, 7th AD Trains.

81. Toland, pp. 162-163.

82. AAR, 7th AD Artillery, pp. 12-13.

In an effort to strengthen the southern flank, Hasbrouck organized a combined-arms task force (commanded by LTC Robert Jones, 814th Tank Destroyer Battalion) and deployed it to Gouvy. The task force got into position by 1600 hours and almost immediately had to repel strong German attacks by the 560th Volks

83
Grenadier and 116th Panzer Divisions. Hasbrouck intended to continue to extend his line in order to refuse his flanks. However, he was running out of units to deploy. The semi-secure escape corridor to the west ended at the Salm River and was only about six miles wide from Vielsalm to Gouvy.

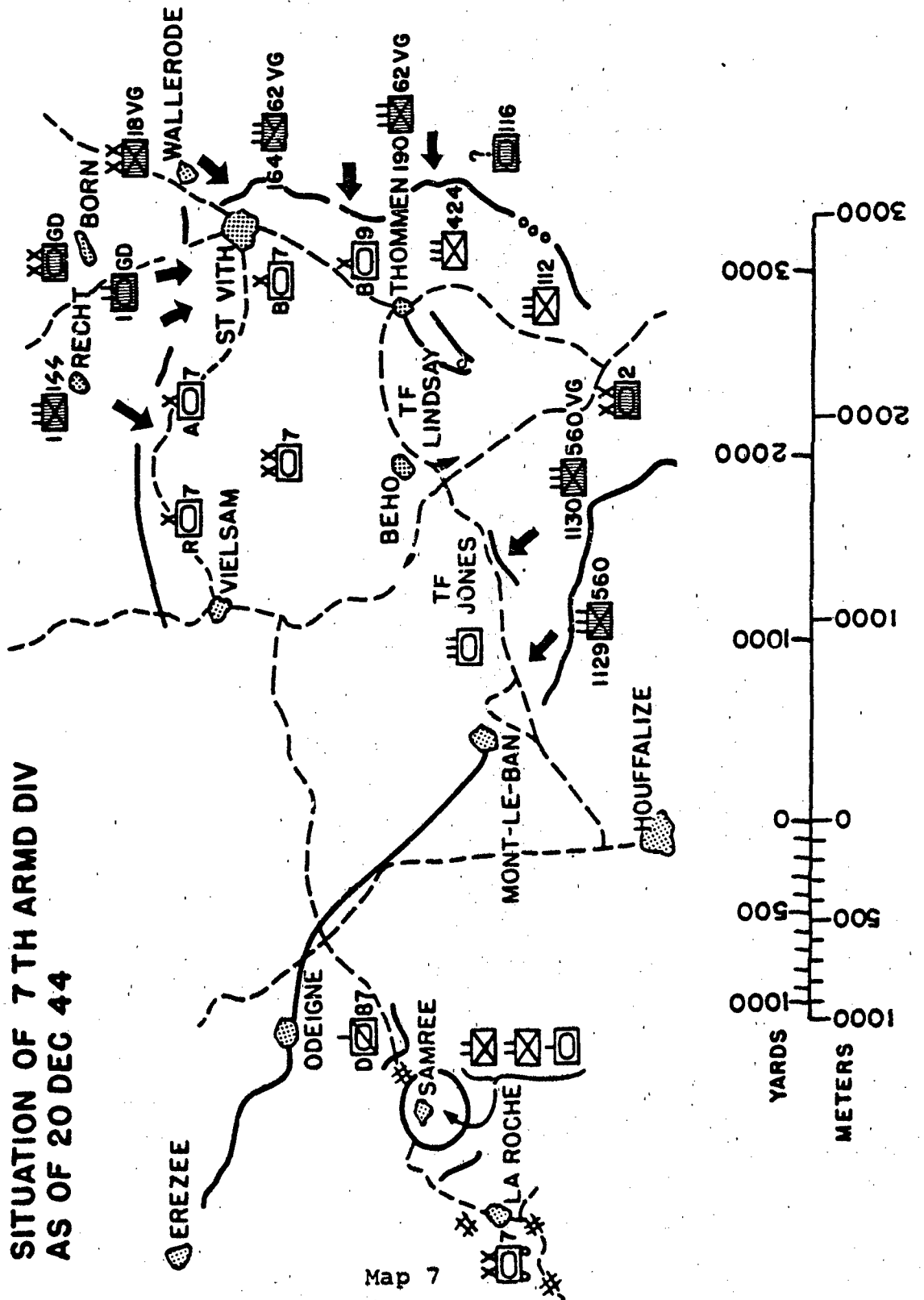
During the night of 20-21 December, about 70 members of the ill-fated 422nd and 423rd regiments managed to finish a successful infiltration from the trap on the Schnee Eifel to CCB's lines. An officer in the group confirmed the fears, both regiments had surrendered. The surrender marked the largest capitulation by American forces on the western front. Clarke had these survivors fed, rested, and assigned the mission to constitute "a reserve to be called upon when needed."

84

83. Jones' task force included his own battalion, the previously-mentioned forces of Stone and Hughes, parts of the 14th Cavalry Group, and even a part of the 112th Regimental Combat Team which Jones intercepted on its way to counterattack at Bastogne. See AAR, 7th AD, p. 8 and AAR, 814th TDB, p. 2.

84. AAR, CCB/7th AD, p. 4.

**SITUATION OF 7TH ARMD DIV
AS OF 20 DEC 44**



Map 7

This map was originally published in The Battle at St. Vith by the U.S. Army Armor School, p. 17.

At the commanders' meeting the night of 20 December the major topic of discussion was logistics. Supply constraints were imposed on rations and ammunition. Only two-thirds of a daily ration was to be issued. Artillery ammunition was to be fired

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only when the command deemed the situation critical.

4.4.5 German Attacks 21-22 December

Throughout the night of 20-21 December, the Germans could be heard moving tanks and other vehicles into positions on the north, east and south sides of St. Vith. German spearheads north and south of the town were making progress well to the west, but the stubborn resistance at St. Vith was preventing a link up on a broad front, as well as causing delays in the logistical support of those spearheads. The German command clearly intended to

86

resolve the problem once and for all on 21 December.

At 1100 hours an assault began that would continue for two days. CCA maintained its position in and around Poteau against strong enemy patrols. The Germans also established an effective ambush along the St. Vith - Poteau road. Before the road was secured again, several vehicles and people were destroyed or

85. Battle at St. Vith, p. 19.

86. Baldwin, p. 340.

captured. Among the losses were the executive officer of CCA and the executive officer and adjutant of the 48th Armored Infantry

87
Battalion.

But it was CCB that took the brunt of the battle. An artillery barrage began at 1100 hours on its northern and eastern positions. Almost simultaneously, the boundary between CCB/7th Armored Division and CCB/9th Armored Division was attacked by tanks and infantry. By 1300 hours the entire line of CCB/7th Armored Division was under attack by concentrated artillery, tanks, and infantry. Major attacks such as this continued until

88
dark. By 2000 hours the Germans had penetrated American lines in at least three places. At 2200 hours Clarke issued an order to withdraw to the high ground west of St. Vith. Control points manned by officers were established to collect stragglers and organize them into defensive positions.

Clarke's order to withdraw came too late for nearly 200 soldiers of the 23rd Armored Infantry Battalion. Nevertheless, commander LTC Robert Rhea attempted to withdraw as many troops as

89
he could. As Rhea struggled to retain some order in St. Vith,

87. Battle at St. Vith, pp. 21-22.

88. ibid.

89. AAR, 23rd AIB, pp. 2-4 and Cole pp. 402-406.

a platoon of the 814th Tank Destroyer Battalion occupied a road block in the center of the town. At about 2330 hours one of the platoon's guns picked off the leading tank of an enemy column entering the town. The crew then had a few exciting moments racing to repair a damaged track before the Germans could either move the destroyed tank or find a way around it. The Americans won the race and escaped to the west. With their departure, the defense of St. Vith itself ended.

Elsewhere, Hoge's CCB/9th Armored Division also had been hit hard. It also had lost contact with Clarke's withdrawing units. Hoge was forced to seek help in repelling the German attacks. In response, the 7th Armored Division reserve was sent to reinforce,

and the line was restored. CCR, defending the road net around Vielsalm, fought off attacks from three directions (north, east

and south), but held its ground.

90. AAR, 814th TDB, p. 3.

91. *ibid.* The division reserve was "Task Force Lindsay," composed of remnants of the 14th Cavalry Group with six assault guns and eleven tanks. See Annex #1, AAR, 7th AD.

92. Dupuy, pp. 165-166 and AAR, 7th AD, p. 12.

Hasbrouck knew that 2nd Panzer Division threatened the south and rear of the division area. Consequently, at 2200 hours 21 December he ordered Jones' task force to tighten its line and told Jones to "hold like grim death the towns of Beho and

Bovigny." ⁹³ In the same message, Hasbrouck told Jones the division must hold the Beho - Bovigny - Salm Chateau road. If Jones failed, units south of St. Vith would not be able to escape to the west. Recognizing the gravity of the situation, Clarke began reconnaissance of the poor roads leading west. It seemed ⁹⁴ only a matter of time before a withdrawal would be necessary.

Sometime during 19-20 December, 7th Armored Division (and the elements attached to it) was detached from VIII Corps and attached to XVIII Airborne Corps commanded by MG Matthew B. Ridgway, even though a considerable gap remained between these major commands. XVIII Airborne Corps was trying to get into position to block the German penetration west and south of St. Vith. At about 0200 hours 22 December Ridgway gave command of 7th Armored Division to MG Jones (recall he was senior to Hasbrouck) and ordered 7th Armored Division to withdraw west of

93. AAR, 7th AD, p. 12.

94. Battle at St. Vith, p. 22.

95

the Salm River through the 82nd Airborne Division. By this time, the 82nd Division occupied a line extending south from Trois Ponts to Vielsalm and from there west to the major crossroads southeast of Manhay (Baroque de Fraiture, see earlier discussion in chapter 3, section 3.1). Hasbrouck advised his commanders that if they did not withdraw soon, the opportunity to

96

do so would be gone.

Hasbrouck was more right than he knew. On 19 December, he had given the mission to Maj. Arthur C. Parker III to form a roadblock at the crossroads at Baroque de Fraiture. Parker had three 105-mm howitzers and a handful of troops, all that remained of the 589th Field Artillery Battalion. The rest of the battalion had been supporting the 422nd Infantry Regiment and was part of the force encircled and captured by the Germans. Parker's roadblock became critically important. It was located in the gap between the 82nd Airborne Division and the 3rd Armored Division, which were forming the line of defense to contain the northern shoulder of the German penetration. The roadblock also kept open escape routes for the 7th Armored Division. Parker held the crossroads against attacks by elements of the 560th

95. Cole, pp. 406-407. The ill-advised "change of command" was apparently ignored on the basis that Ridgway obviously was not well informed of the situation. Jones did not take control and had no interest in doing so.

96. Battle at St. Vith, p. 25.

Volks Grenadier Division and then against the 2nd SS Panzer Division from 20-23 December. If Parker had failed, the 7th Armored Division would have been trapped and the northern shoulder defense may have been ruptured.

97

At dawn 22 December the Fuhrer Escort Brigade advance guard was at the edge of Rodt. The town was situated on the reverse slope of a ridge line and at the boundary between CCA and CCB of 7th Armored Division. The position was a commanding one, overlooking the left flank and rear of CCB.

As light broke, the right battalion of Remer's brigade attacked to cut the main western road close to Poteau. The German assault here was beaten off by the drivers in a vehicle park who used the .50-caliber machine guns on their two-score half-tracks in a withering fusillade. In the east, at Rodt, Remer's left battalion tried to rush the village from the woods, but ran straight into artillery fire. Some of the Germans made it to the houses and defended themselves in the cellars, but most of the battalion finally had to pull back. A number of prisoners were later rounded up by the Americans on the Recht road. The second German assault was made in a more methodical manner. First, mortars went to work against houses and foxholes. Then the German tank group, which had been delayed by a mine field, and an infantry company or two swung to the west and rolled down the main road into the village. The Sherman tanks on the Recht road were caught in masked positions from which they could not return the panzer fire coming in from higher ground, and the troops in Rodt could not stand alone against the Panthers. The enemy took the village quickly, and with it many of the half-tracks

98.

belonging to the 48th Armored Infantry Battalion.

97. Cole, pp. 388-392.

98. *ibid.*, pp. 408-409.

4.5 The Withdrawal (23 December)

The troops between St. Vith and the Salm River urgently needed resupply. Their artillery was down to about twenty rounds per tube.⁹⁹ Fuel and ammunition had been consumed at a prodigious rate. The units also needed time to "tidy up" their defensive area and organize for the withdrawal. Consequently, the St. Vith forces spent much of 22 December clearing infantry from their rear area, tightening defensive lines, re-establishing a coherent defense, and resupplying all units. Acting on its own accord and despite having to fight off attacks on its own positions, the division trains managed to get resupply convoys through the narrowing corridor to the division units. A total of about 30 ammunition trucks, five fuel trucks, and 4000 rations made it through, and were greeted with understandable enthusiasm. The trains commander had to provide his own escort of combat vehicles returning from maintenance and was able to deliver thirteen badly needed vehicles to the division, including tank retrievers and half-tracks.¹⁰⁰

99. AAR, 7th AD Artillery, p. 2.

100. AAR, 7th AD Trains, p. 2.

The Germans maintained pressure all around the pocket. Despite the fact they had been fighting almost continuously for five days, the 7th Armored Division and attached units still managed to hold off the Germans. By the end of the day on 22 December, all non-essential vehicles were evacuated from the shrinking pocket in preparation for an organized withdrawal the next morning.

Hasbrouck's withdrawal plan required units in the center, or on the east side, of the perimeter to begin the withdrawal. Flanking units would then follow by collapsing in toward the center of the pocket. Hasbrouck established three different routes to reach the Salm River near Vielsalm. In the north, CCR would use the road from Petit Thier. CCA would use the same road to withdraw through CCR. CCB/9th Armored Division would begin the withdrawal by moving through "Task Force Jones" near Beho and Bovigny in the south. CCB/7th Armored Division would withdraw almost due west once CCB/9th had cleared. The 424th Regiment would follow CCB/9th. The last unit to cross the Salm would be the 112th Regimental Combat Team which would cross only on Hasbrouck's order once he was sure Jones' task force and CCR had

101
crossed.

The Germans kept the pressure on through the night of 22-23

101. AAR, 7th AD, Annex #3A: Order for Withdrawal of 7th AD west of Salm River.

December, so the withdrawal could not begin until about 0700 hours 23 December. Consequently, the defenders conducted this difficult operation during daylight hours, for the most part. Hoge's CCB/9th Armored Division duly initiated the withdrawal at 0705 hours, late by five minutes because he had been "ferociously engaged by the enemy"¹⁰² since the middle of the night. Also,

Hoge had received the order late.¹⁰³ Fortunately, the night of 22-23 December was quite cold, so the units withdrawing in the early morning were able to take advantage of hard frozen surfaces that just the day before were nearly impassible mud. During the day, however, heavy traffic and rising temperatures re-instituted muddy conditions. Some vehicles had to be abandoned because they had become hopelessly mired in frozen mud, and other vehicles, especially tanks, later had to be abandoned when they became too deeply mired in thawing mud.

The three main routes to the Salm River were in good shape. Hoge's command, in fact, got out of the pocket without incident, as did the 424th Regiment following him. In the north, things did not go so well. The Germans attacked CCA as it began its move. However, CCA got out with German tanks as close as 100

102. *ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

103. Battle at St. Vith, p. 25.

feet to the tanks of CCA's trailing company. CCR managed to

104

withdraw after CCA with little difficulty.

CCB/7th Armored Division and Jones' task force encountered serious problems. LTC Vincent L. Boylan, commander of the 87th Cavalry Squadron, commanded the CCB covering force, which consisted of a tank company, a tank destroyer company, and an infantry company. Clarke ordered him to hold north and east of Hinderhausen so that CCB could withdraw via Hinderhausen and Commanster to Vielsalm. But when Boylan arrived to assume command of the covering force, part of it had already started to follow CCB towards Commanster. Boylan roused the assigned units out of the march column and into position east of Commanster. Unfortunately, Boylan did not retrieve the assigned tank company, which continued on toward Vielsalm. Nevertheless, Boylan's remaining companies delayed, maintaining contact with the

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Germans, through successive positions west of Commanster.

In the meantime, CCB cleared the area and crossed the Salm River as planned. Then Boylan broke contact and withdrew toward Vielsalm. At mid-afternoon, he encountered the last screen established by the 112th Regiment, about two or three miles east of Vielsalm. The covering force deployed into a defensive

104. Cole, pp. 407-422.

105. AAR, 87th Cav (Rcn), pp. 8-10.

position while Boylan went to Vielsalm to determine for himself that everyone else had withdrawn. At Vielsalm, he discovered the division command post was still in the town with nothing between it and the advancing Germans except his small force and a detachment from the 112th Regiment. After radioing his unit to hold in place, Boylan reconnoitered toward Salm Chateau, where he found Germans in residence. Returning to Vielsalm, he established platoon-sized blocking positions on the north and south of town and ordered a reconnaissance platoon to move back east towards Commanster to re-establish contact with the Germans. Boylan's covering force then held this small pocket until the command post cleared Vielsalm. The covering force finally crossed the Salm River at 1925 hours, 23 December. ¹⁰⁶

Boylan's force had an easy time of it compared to Jones' task force. Jones started his withdrawal at 1430 hours after CCB/9th Armored Division and the 424th and 112th Regiments had cleared his area. North of him, at Cierreaux, the 112th Regiment held a blocking position through which Jones had to pass after leaving Bovigny. However, the Germans were at Cierreaux as well with the Fuhrer Escort Brigade's tanks leading the way. At 1300 hours Hasbrouck had committed the division reserve, which included only two tank destroyers, to hold the road open. Despite this additional force, the Germans forced the 112th Regiment to the

106. *ibid.*

north by 1600 hours. The infantry crossed the Salm River near Cierreaux while the Jones' heavy vehicles raced north towards
107
Salm Chateau.

Jones moved north unaware that the Germans had already cut off his escape to the north. The Germans were also closing the doors to Jones' south with the 2nd and 116th Panzer Divisions. Jones learned the bitter facts when his attached artillery, moving ahead of him, successfully ran a gauntlet at Salm Chateau by racing through the town, guns blazing. The artillery passed through the "startled enemy" and "roared over the bridge at

108
Vielsalm." The remainder of Jones' column halted on the road south of Salm Chateau with the river on their left and high ground on their right. The Germans attacked them from everywhere except the river, destroying nine of their vehicles as darkness fell. During the fighting, Jones searched frantically for a way out. At 2300 hours, after losing eleven more vehicles, the remnants of the task force followed a route reconnoitered by the S-2. They forded the Salm River and headed northwest towards the road from Salm Chateau to Sart, losing three more vehicles in marshy ground. They finally reached the road at about 0300 hours, 24 December. Here they were attacked again, losing four

107. Cole, pp. 407-422. See also AAR, 814th TDB, pp. 2-3.

108. *ibid.*, p. 421.

tank destroyers, but taking four German tanks in exchange. Finally, the bedraggled survivors of Jones' task force passed through the 82nd Division and into assembly areas.

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4.6 The Outcome

For seven days the forces at St. Vith held their positions against an enemy which had surprise and superior numbers in their favor. The Germans failed to concentrate their combat power, however, and failed to seize the critical road junctions in a timely manner.

One factor that probably caused the Germans to proceed so cautiously was the fact that elements of the 7th Armored Division were in St. Vith at all on the 17th when their intelligence had identified them in the Linnich area on the 16th. It is supposition, but they must have been surprised, and they must have felt that if these troops could be moved such a distance and be in the thick of the fighting so quickly, other dispositions could be effected as expeditiously.

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The major German commanders all expressed surprise at both the fierceness of the defense and the presence of tanks. The 62nd Volks Grenadier Division commander, Generalmajor Kittel, knew he faced the 106th Division and did not expect strong

109. AAR, 814th TDE, pp. 2-3.

110. Battle at St. Vith, p. 27.

resistance. He noted that fighting in his sector on 18 December was tough. The Americans "held tenaciously" and the American

artillery "fired very often and extremely accurately."¹¹¹ The artillery often pre-empted German attacks before they gained any momentum. On 20 December Kittel observed that "large numbers of

tanks had appeared."¹¹² On 21 December, when he approached St.

Vith, he said American "tanks were everywhere."¹¹³ Of the 106th Division, he commented that resistance was strong, "contrary to

what we expected."¹¹⁴

General Lucht, LXVI Corps commander, said on 17 December his 18th Volks Grenadier Division had come up "against strong enemy

defense and tanks."¹¹⁵ This remark is surprising when one recalls that 17 December was the day that Clarke conducted a makeshift defense with two engineer battalions and an infantry platoon. Clarke's own troops did not get into the fight until

111. Kittel, MS#B-028, p. 8.

112. *ibid.*, p. 10.

113. *ibid.*, p. 11.

114. *ibid.*, p. 30.

115. Lucht, MS#B-333, p. 10.

early that evening. Von Manteuffel noted that the Americans "reacted more quickly than was expected," and that the defense of St. Vith was fierce.

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The Germans also had to be concerned with the stubborn nature of the resistance they found. The American units did not simply dig in and await German attacks. On the contrary, the 7th Armored Division units patrolled, probed perceived weak spots, and counterattacked aggressively. The quickness and effectiveness of the counterattacks concealed the limited strength and confusion of the Allied troops. The subsequent probing nature and limited objectives of the German attacks after 16 December made possible the impressive efforts to organize and

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conduct the successful defense. True, St. Vith was lost, but only temporarily. The defense by 7th Armored Division and attachments gave other units the time to block the German penetration. In the following weeks, the Allies, to include a rested and re-fitted 7th Armored Division, re-claimed the lost ground enroute to Germany.

116. von Manteuffel, MS#B-151a, p. 119.

117. *ibid.*, p. 28.

Chapter 5

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ACTION

5.1 Immediate Significance

The Germans attacked on 16 December in a sector where they enjoyed advantages on the order of three to one in men overall (six to one at the spearheads) and two to one in tanks (four to one, if one includes assault guns).¹¹⁸ They had worked hard to achieve great surprise, incorporating deception operations, electronic warfare, and rear area combat. They employed some effective techniques fighting at night. The generally overcast weather reduced, if not negated, what otherwise would have been dominant Allied air superiority. In short, the Germans enjoyed seemingly overwhelming combat power that should have led to quick success at least in the St. Vith area, if not all the way to Antwerp. The chief accomplishment of the 7th Armored Division and other American units in the defense was that they delayed

118. Russell Weigley, Eisenhower's Lieutenants (Bloomington, In.: Indiana University Press, 1981), p. 574.

German westward movement. In the process, they kept the attention of large German formations needed elsewhere.

The delay could hardly be termed "victory" for the Americans, but it was a significant factor in the outcome of the battle. Since the wet weather pretty much restricted traffic to the roads, the American defense of key road junctions bogged down the German attacks and, perhaps more importantly, the German resupply effort. The pile up of German combat and support units near the front produced great traffic jams which limited the flexibility of German commanders to influence or sustain the action. The stubborn resistance gave the Allies time to move other forces into the area first to contain, then blunt, and finally reduce the German penetration. The American troops that fought at St. Vith lost some ground and had some reverses, but they bought the time that enabled others to win the battle.

5.2 Long-Term Significance

Once the German attack was stalled, the outcome of the war was no longer in doubt. Before the battle there was considerable Allied wishful thinking that it was only a matter of time until Germany was defeated. After the battle, however,

119. John S.D. Eisenhower, p. 19.

there was incontrovertible evidence to support the claim. The Germans suffered about 100,000 casualties at a point in the war when they could no longer afford such losses. The Germans already had combed their air force, navy, hospitals, schools and lists of old reservists for men to man Volks Grenadier divisions. More manpower simply wasn't available. Similarly, equipment that had been carefully and painfully accumulated was gone. The last of the veteran, crack panzer units had been defeated. The battle was decisive: it "broke the back of the German war machine."¹²⁰

German Army Group B commander Generalfeldmarschall Model said before the start of the battle that the offensive was Germany's last chance to conclude the war favorably.¹²¹ Therefore, when the battle was lost, so was the war. Other people take the view that the outcome of the war was already clear, but the "defeat

greatly accelerated the end of the war."¹²² A different strategy could have prolonged the war, but probably not have reversed its outcome. The Germans had men and equipment and favorable terrain along the "West Wall" with which to defend their homeland. Such a defense would have caused the Allies difficulty, and perhaps

120. *ibid.*, p. 457.

121. *ibid.*, p. 153.

122. Moll, MS#B-688, p. 88.

may have made the Western Front more a war of attrition (as opposed to one of maneuver). The Allies were in a far better position in terms of manpower and industrial production than was Germany for such a war, so Model's assessment is probably correct. When the Ardennes counteroffensive was lost, so was the war. Afterwards, it really was only a matter of time until Germany surrendered.

5.3 Military "Lessons Learned"

In Europe today, allied forces stand ready to defend against a foe numerically superior in men, tanks and guns. If the enemy attacks, undoubtedly he will use deception, electronic warfare and rear area combat operations. Additionally, he is likely to use chemical weapons. Surprise and bad weather are other multipliers the enemy may employ. The allied defense likely will be characterized by attempts at quick reinforcement, supply problems, and confusion. The strong similarities between this potential battle and the St. Vith campaign tempt one to adopt a NATO-flavored look at lessons learned. The lessons are not new, but the degree to which they remain valid merits some attention.

The principal lesson of interest concerns the fact that outnumbered defenders can do well against great odds. The key for the defenders near St. Vith was to take advantage of the few

things favorable to them. No doubt NATO would need to do likewise.

5.3.1 Use of Terrain and "Active" Defense

The generally restrictive terrain, particularly as "reinforced" by the weather, offered significant advantages to small, even hastily-organized groups of defenders. First, the St. Vith defenders knew where to expect the enemy to move -- on the roads. Consequently, road junctions nestled in natural defiles or built-up areas made excellent locations for strong points. The entire story of this battle is punctuated with attacks and counterattacks at places like Poteau, Gouvy, and Baroque de Fraiture, as well as around St. Vith itself. Furthermore, both German and American units had to rely on fixed bridges a great deal. This situation placed additional limits on routes of advance. As a result, American efforts to defend or destroy bridges played a significant role in delaying the attackers.

The Germans usually attacked along the roads, so they were unable to bring their superior numbers to bear effectively. The consequence was that large forces were committed piecemeal. It was possible for defending company-sized forces to hold off an entire division for some time because the defenders rarely had to

deal with more than a battalion of attackers at one time. Once the lead elements of an attack were stopped, the Germans found it increasingly difficult to commit more forces. For that matter, the Germans found it difficult to bypass or flank some strong points, partly for lack of roads, and partly because of growing traffic jams in their own rear area.

Additionally, the defenders did not simply dig in and wait to be attacked at various strong points. The defense was an active one in the sense that the defenders took what offensive actions they could. They fought a flexible delaying action, continually trying to retain as much as initiative as possible. Hasbrouck and Clarke each retained as large an armor-heavy, mobile reserve

as he could and used it repeatedly to counterattack.¹²³ The defenders enjoyed "interior lines" within their nearly surrounded area, so movement of reserve forces from one area to another could be done quickly, even though the defenders were also restricted to the roads. The defenders also patrolled aggressively. When possible, German attacks were blunted with artillery as they organized or began to move. When German attacks were successful, the defenders did not "stand to the last man." The defense was flexible, giving ground when it had to while delaying the attackers. As Clarke explains it, this tactic

123. The Battle at St. Vith, p. 29.

was meant to keep the force intact and under control to continue
the fight.¹²⁴

On several occasions, engineers fought as infantry. Although there were situations that clearly demanded such employment, there was a tendency to let employment become routine. The battle made clear the lesson that use of engineers in their capacity as "trained technicians" paid greater dividends than their use as infantry. "A squad equipped with sufficient TNT could, in the right spot, do more to slow the enemy advance than a company armed with rifles and machine guns."¹²⁵

The lessons are clear: make wise use of defensible terrain, be aggressive although defending, and, as Clarke would say, "don't let confusion become disorganized."¹²⁶

5.3.2 Small-Unit Action and Flexibility

There was great confusion at St. Vith throughout the seven-day defense. Individual resourcefulness and initiative helped offset some of the confusion. In many respects, the

124. Bruce C. Clarke, "The Battle of St. Vith - A Concept in Defensive Tactics", an unpublished article believed to have been written in 1964, p. 5.

125. Cole, p. 329.

126. Clarke, op. cit.

success at St. Vith was the result of small-unit actions rather than of brilliant generalship. Rarely was there time to inform higher headquarters of the situation and await well-staffed plans and decisions. Brigade-level headquarters were probably the highest level at which one might argue there was much "current" knowledge of the battle. Success in the Ardennes "belongs to the soldier," ¹²⁷ not to the generals.

The nature of the organization of American armored divisions also contributed to success at St. Vith. Under the combat command concept, company- and battalion-sized units were often "task-organized" in various assortments among the combat commands. Consequently, routine operations followed very flexible procedures. Unit commanders learned the senior commander's general scheme and intent, then took almost independent actions to accomplish their missions. They could change their actions or task organizations during the battle to react to unexpected events. Detailed needs, reports, or instructions were communicated back and forth as needed, frequently by messenger or liaison officer. It was not uncommon (nor a particular problem) for small units to be out of radio contact with higher headquarters for hours at a time. Combat commands and divisions were out of radio contact with their higher headquarters sometimes for more than a day. Yet, amid a

127. John S.D. Eisenhower, p. 574.

very fluid situation, the 7th Armored Division, CCB/9th Armored Division, and elements of the 106th and 28th Divisions were able to function effectively.

5.3.3 Rear Area Combat Operations and Logistics Support

The 7th Armored Division Trains initially moved to Salm Chateau on 17 December. Enemy action at the front and in the rear area caused the trains to move further west to LaRoche on 18 December, to Marche on 21 December, to Harze on 22 December, and then to Sprimont on 23 December. The "rear area" was generally not very well delineated on anyone's operations map. Artillery, engineer, maintenance and supply units often had to fend for themselves against German infantry and tanks. The trains had to establish outposts, roadblocks, and even counterattack forces out of its own resources, to include weapons systems under repair. When the situation left no alternatives, mechanics manned quasi-operational tanks or assault guns and did the best they could. Artillery and anti-aircraft artillery weapons proved useful in direct-fire roles. Supply convoys were usually escorted by no more than the combat vehicles (if any) being returned to the front lines. More often than not, front line units dispatched truck convoys to the rear to locate supplies and return. Ambushes of these convoys were common, but supplies got

128. AAR, 7th AD Trains, and Battle at St. Vith, pp. 26-27.

through, sometimes on only a few surviving, overloaded trucks

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under the command of a corporal or a private.

CCB/7th Armored Division pooled its service facilities for the sake of efficiency. Vehicles which could be evacuated from the front lines were repaired at a consolidated maintenance shop run by an officer from the 31st Tank Battalion. This shop was also responsible for salvage of abandoned vehicles. Vehicles "beyond repair" (no doubt a situationally dependent judgment)

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were cannibalized for parts.

The surrender of the 422nd and 423rd Infantry Regiments taught the Allies an immediate, painful lesson regarding aerial resupply. MG Jones made the needs of these regiments known on 17 December, but the airdrops expected on 18 December never occurred despite periods of adequate weather. No responsibility for the failure could be fixed, which is not too surprising given the fact that the aerial resupply would have had to originate in England. The Allies learned the hard way to plan for responsive,

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nearby aerial resupply.

129. *ibid.*

130. Battle at St. Vith, p. 26.

131. Cole, pp. 170-172.

5.3.4 Morale and Readiness

No doubt American morale was down on 17 December. The 106th Division had two regiments encircled and the 7th Armored Division had to force its way through fleeing troops to arrive at St. Vith. News of the "Malmedy Massacre" spread very quickly, which instilled both extra fear and determination in the American

¹³² soldiers. The Germans planned to employ several rear area combat forces, including some who dressed like Americans and spoke English. Their missions were to disrupt traffic, start rumors, and cause whatever trouble possible. Although few of these forces actually deployed, rumors about them were rampant. In this sense, at least, the German plan worked better than

¹³³ expected. Casualties, as much due to weather as battle, plagued the defenders, and it was often impossible to evacuate or

¹³⁴ treat casualties in a timely manner.

Despite such adversities, the morale of the defenders actually improved during the ordeal. The longer the defense

¹³⁵ held, the better morale became. The 7th Armored Division was

132. Cole, p. 263.

133. Toland, pp. 16-72.

134. Cole, p. 123.

135. Battle at St. Vith, p. 29.

a well-trained, battle-tested unit, and "credit ... must go to

the unnamed officers, noncoms, and men." ¹³⁶ The key is that the 7th Armored Division, unlike the 106th Division, was "combat ready" before the fight began.

5.3.5 Leadership Aspects of Conducting a Withdrawal

Several features of the withdrawal warrant examination. Both Hasbrouck and Clarke (and probably several others) realized early on that a withdrawal would be necessary. It was important, however, to maintain a "forward-leaning" frame of mind. With stragglers and fleeing troops all around, it was no small task to establish a line of defense in the first place. It was even more important not to let the planning for a withdrawal cause renewed flight.

Hasbrouck arranged to reconnoiter and improve potential withdrawal routes in an inconspicuous fashion. He withdrew "nonessential" vehicles well ahead of the main withdrawal. He planned for an adequate covering force to enable the main body to break contact with the enemy. He also planned for control officers to be stationed at key places to help keep the withdrawal orderly. His plan was short, clear, and to the point. Once begun, the withdrawal was very much the same,

136. Cole, p. 406.

despite enemy pressure. It should be noted, however, that there
was no enemy tactical air power to interfere.

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5.3.6 Lessons from German Perspective

The 1st SS Panzer Division commander, Peiper, summed up the lessons he learned as follows:

- 1) Provide for a speedy resupply of fuel.
- 2) Keep the roads from clogging.
- 3) Use combined-arms, not just infantry, to breach enemy lines.
- 4) Attack on a wide front, concentrate at soft spots found.
- 5) Use more infantry with tanks.
- 6) Put tactical bridging with each armor unit.
- 7) Make each combat team self-sufficient.
- 8) Use generals (facetiously) as traffic policemen.

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We recognize Peiper's list as a universally useful one even today. In it one can sense Peiper's frustration at having to rely on others to provide him support. Peiper's mission was to punch through the American lines and dash west without regard for his flanks. Lack of fuel limited his advance, clogged roads slowed his resupply, and lack of bridging restricted his

137. Battle at St. Vith, pp. 25 and 29, and AAR, 7th AD, Annex #3A: Order for Withdrawal of 7th AD west of Salm River.

138. John S.D. Eisenhower, p. 280.

maneuver. By 21 December his command was surrounded. Peiper and most of his men escaped on foot the night of 23 December, but the elite 1st SS Panzer Division dropped from the rolls.

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Dietrich's 6th Panzer Army's use of horse-drawn artillery proved to be a severe problem. The artillery did not keep pace with the assault elements and the horses did not fair well in the battle. Dietrich also had too few trained engineers and too

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little powered equipment. Most of the German units suffered a serious lack of truck transport, which tended to limit supplies. Food for the troops was plentiful, but fodder for the horses was totally inadequate. Ammunition was usually in good supply, but fuel and anti-armor weapons were usually in short supply. Repair and re-issue of weapons and equipment was virtually

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nonexistent.

139. Cole, pp. 368-377.

140. *ibid.*, p. 77.

141. Moll, MS#B-688, pp. 84-85 and Rudolf Langhaeuser, 560th Volks Grenadier Division, 15 - 29 Dec 1944, MS#B-027, pp. 26-27.

5.4 Epilogue

American units fought a valiant delay at St. Vith because most of them were adequately prepared and possessed dogged determination. The ultimate victory at St. Vith came as a result of massive reinforcements while the delay was being fought. The six-day delay was barely enough. There is no doubt that the Soviet military studies battles such as this one with great care, and the Soviet Union has taken great pains to insure its army will not have the same handicaps that limited the Germans. Have the NATO nations done likewise? It's something to think about.

Appendix A

AMERICAN ORDER OF BATTLE

U.S. FIRST ARMY

(Hodges)

Forces that Fought in the St. Vith Sector:

V Corps

99th Infantry Division
southern-most elements

VIII Corps (Middleton)

106th Infantry Division (Jones)

Organic:

422nd Infantry Regiment (Descheneaux)
423rd Infantry Regiment (Cavender)
424th Infantry Regiment (Reid)

106th Division Artillery (McMahon)
589th Field Artillery Battalion (Kelly, Parker)
590th Field Artillery Battalion (Lackey)
591st Field Artillery Battalion (Hoover)
592nd Field Artillery Battalion (Weber)

81st Engineer Combat Battalion (Riggs)
331st Medical Battalion (Belzer)
106th Signal Company
106th Quartermaster Company
106th Reconnaissance Troop (Fossland)
806th Ordnance Company
106th Military Police Platoon

Attached or supporting units during this battle:

14th Cavalry Group (Devine, Ridge, Duggan, Damon)
18th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron (Damon)
32nd Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron (Ridge)
275th Armored Field Artillery Battalion (Clay)

634th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Battalion
820th Tank Destroyer Battalion
168th Engineer Combat Battalion (Nungesser)
C/965th Field Artillery Battery (240-mm)

28th Infantry Division

112th Regimental Combat Team (Nelson)
229th Field Artillery Battalion

9th Armored Division

Combat Command B (Hoge)
14th Tank Battalion (Engeman)
27th Armored Infantry Battalion (Seeley,
Deevers, Cummings)
16th Armored Field Artillery Battalion (Wesner)
D/89th Cavalry Reconnaissance Troop
B/9th Armored Engineer Company
B/2nd Medical Company
C/131st Ordnance Maintenance Company
B/482nd Anti-Aircraft Artillery Battery
A/811th Tank Destroyer Company
Detachment from 489th Ambulance Company

7th Armored Division (Hasbrouck) (Attached from Ninth Army)

Organic:

HQ, Combat Command A (Rosebaum)
HQ, Combat Command B (Clarke)
HQ, Reserve Command (CCR) (Ryan, Warren, Tompkins)
HQ, Division Trains (Adams)

7th Division Artillery (Martin)

434th Armored Field Artillery Battalion (Dubisson)
440th Armored Field Artillery Battalion (Hart)
48th Armored Field Artillery Battalion (Milner)

Units:

17th Tank Battalion (Wemple)
31st Tank Battalion (Erlenbusch)
40th Tank Battalion (Brown)
23rd Armored Infantry Battalion (Rhea)
38th Armored Infantry Battalion (Fuller, Griffin)
48th Armored Infantry Battalion (Chappins)
87th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron (Boylan)
33rd Armored Engineer Battalion (Deemer)
77th Armored Medical Battalion (Boland)
129th Ordnance Maintenance Company (Hughes)
147th Armored Signal Company
7th Armored Division Military Police Platoon
7th Armored Division Band

Attached or supporting units during this battle:

203rd Anti-Aircraft Artillery Battalion (McFarland)
814th Tank Destroyer Battalion (Jones)
965th Field Artillery Battalion (240-mm)
440th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Battalion (Stone)
396th Quartermaster Truck Company
446th Quartermaster Truck Company

Appendix B

GERMAN ORDER OF BATTLE

ARMY GROUP B

(Model)

Forces that Fought in the St. Vith Sector:

6th Panzer Army (Dietrich)

I SS Panzer Corps (Priess)
3rd Parachute Infantry Division
1st SS Panzer Division (Peiper)

II SS Panzer Corps (Bittrich)
2nd SS Panzer Division
9th SS Panzer Division

5th Panzer Army (von Manteuffel)

LXVI Corps (Lucht)
18th Volks Grenadier Division
62nd Volks Grenadier Division (Kittel)
Fuhrer Escort (Panzer) Brigade (Remer)

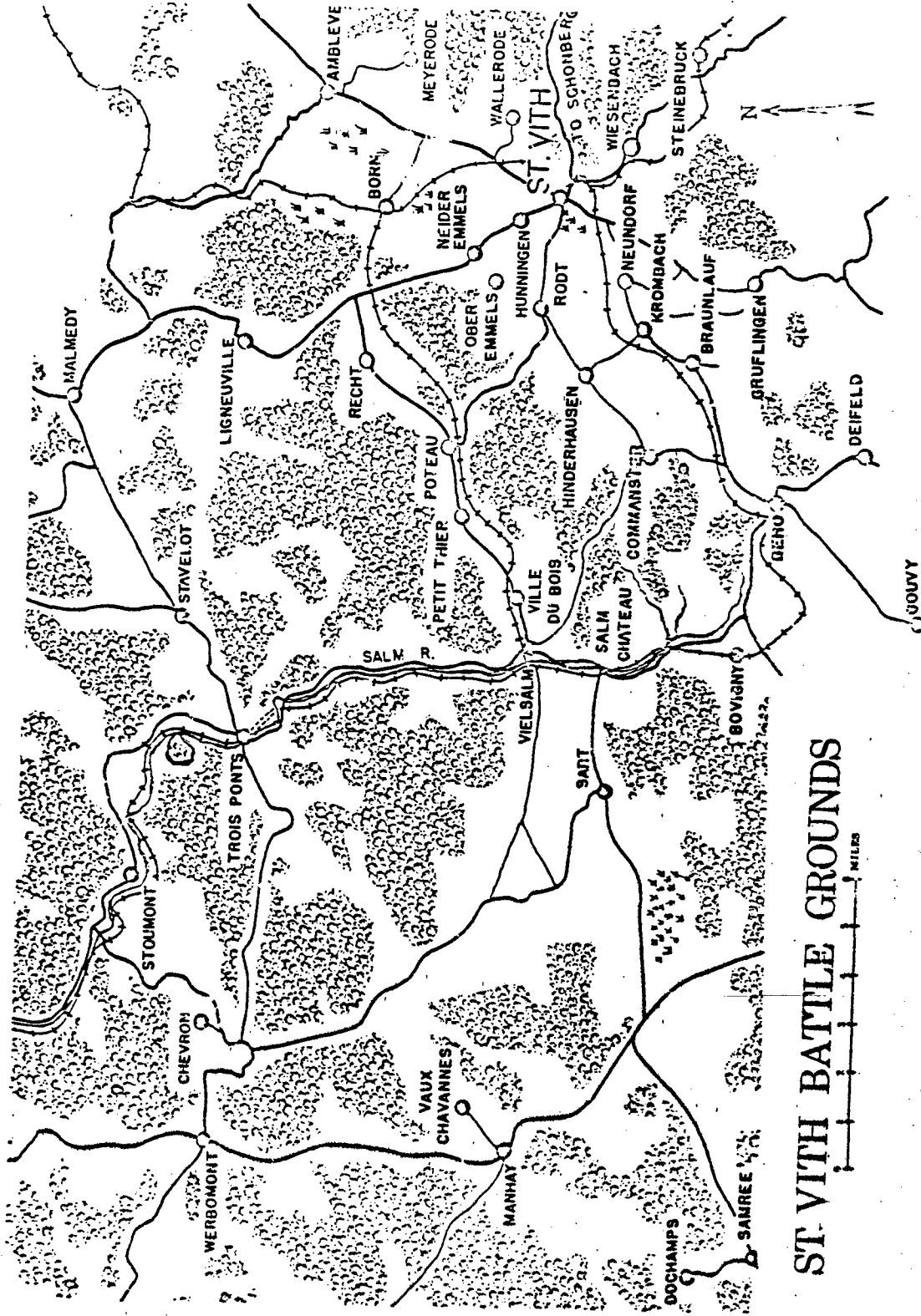
LVIII Panzer Corps (Krueger)
116th Panzer Division (von Waldenburg)
560th Volks Grenadier Division (Bader)

XLVII Panzer Corps (von Luettwitz)
2nd Panzer Division

Appendix C

MAP OF THE ST. VITH AREA

This map was originally published in The Battle at St. Vith by the U.S. Army Armor School, inside rear cover.



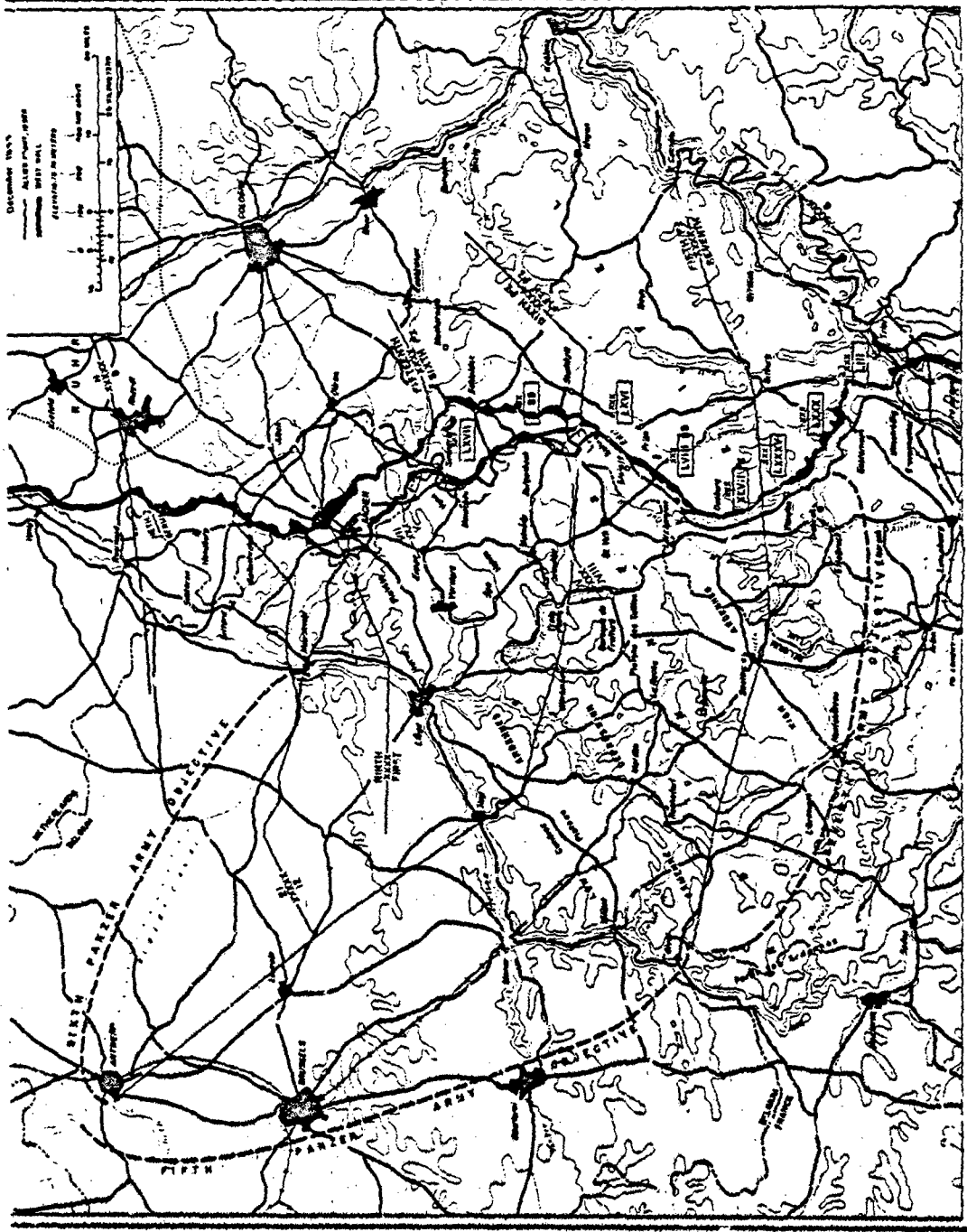
ST. VITH BATTLE GROUNDS

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Appendix D

MAP OF THE GERMAN COUNTEROFFENSIVE PLAN

This map was originally published in The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge by Hugh Cole as his Map I.



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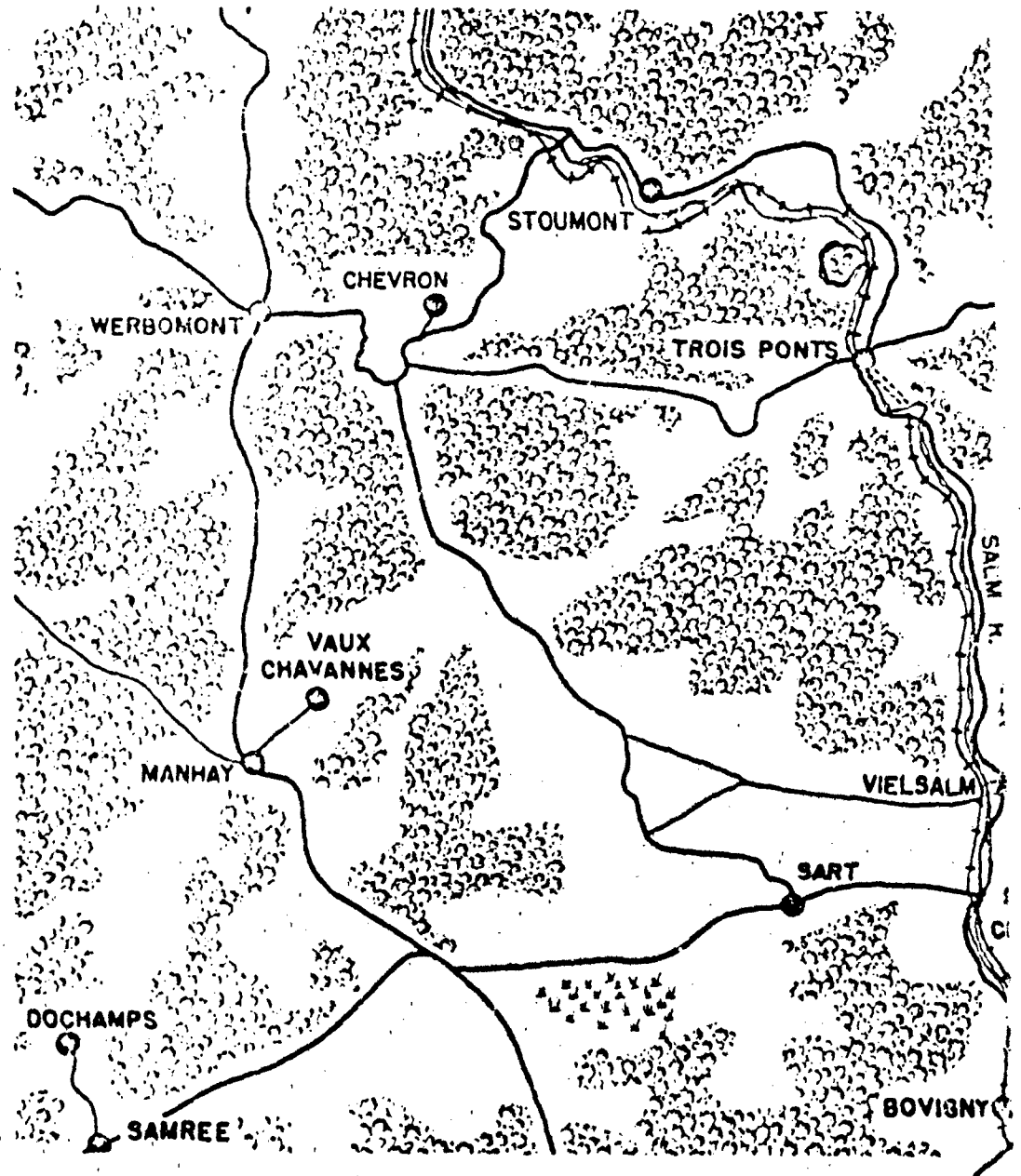
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Appendix C

MAP OF THE ST. VITH AREA

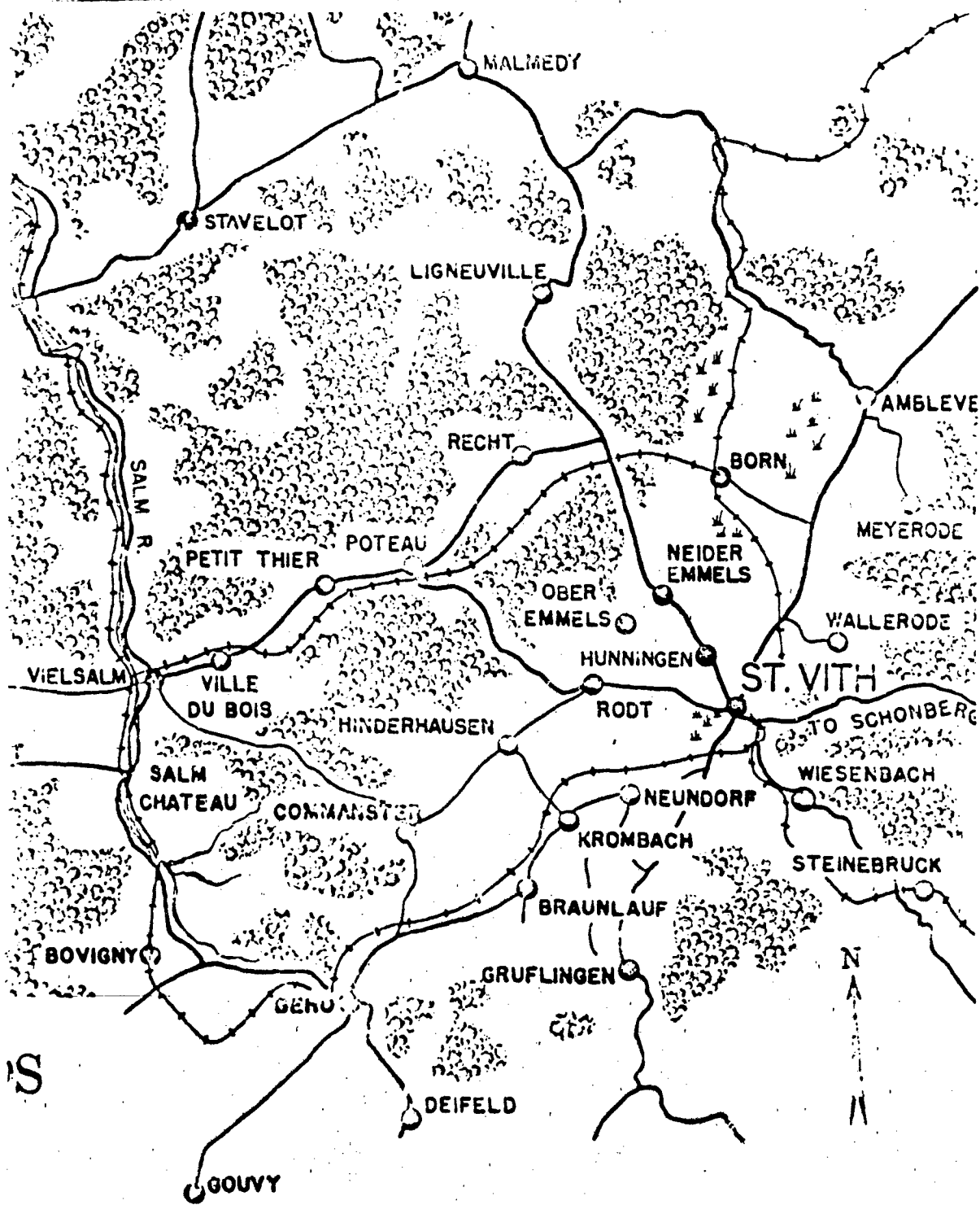
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ST. VITH BATTLE GROUNDS



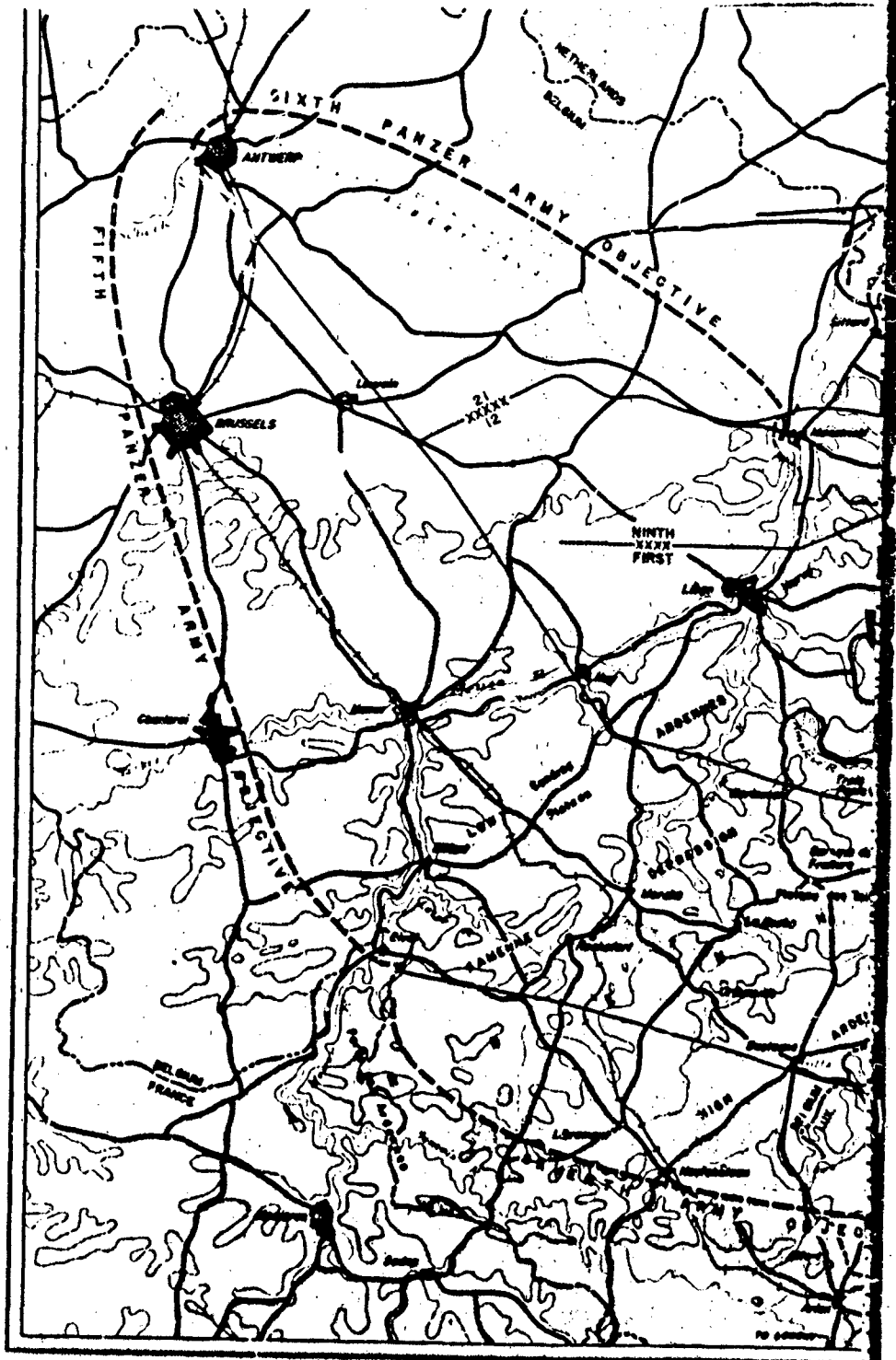
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Appendix D

MAP OF THE GERMAN COUNTEROFFENSIVE PLAN

This map was originally published in The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge by Hugh Cole as his Map I.



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