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MANCHUS AT THE CROSSROADS: DEFENDING THE NORTHERN
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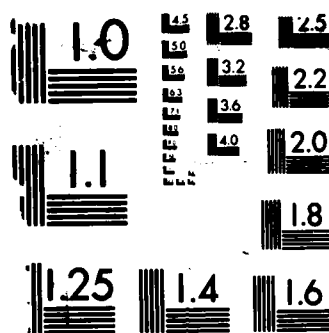
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MANCHUS AT THE CROSSROADS
DEFENDING THE NORTHERN SHOULDER OF THE BULGE

BY

LIEUTENANT COLONEL C. D. McMILLIN

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MANCHUS AT THE CROSSROADS

Defending the Northern Shoulder of the Bulge

An Individual Essay

by

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US Army War College
Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania 17013
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In seven days of battle, in December 1944, the 1st Battalion, Ninth Infantry suffered over 500 killed, wounded and missing. What began as an attack to penetrate the final defenses of Germany soon became a fierce defensive battle for an obscure crossroads on the German-Belgian border. By standing firm at a critical place and time, and seriously delaying Hitler's last great offensive at a crucial phase, the battalion made a significant contribution to eventual victory in the Ardennes. This paper examines the action of one battalion, as well as its parent regiment and the 2nd Infantry Division in securing the northern shoulder of the Bulge. In so doing, it also attempts to illustrate the linkage between successful tactical actions and decisionmaking at the operational level.

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MANCHUS AT THE CROSSROADS

Defending the Northern Shoulder of the Bulge

The "Manchus" of the Ninth Infantry Regiment probably shivered as they moved into their attack positions on the night of 12 December 1944. An early winter snow storm had dumped two feet of snow on the Ardennes and the two small Belgian villages of Rocherath and Krinkelt, where the soldiers sought shelter as best they could. Tomorrow their regiment would lead the attack of the 2nd Infantry Division into the teeth of the Siegfried Line, Hitler's "West Wall," and the final barrier to carrying the war into the heart of Germany. They would have perhaps shivered all the more had they known what the next fateful week held for them. In the crucible of the forthcoming epic battle, that would become known as "the Bulge," their mettle and that of their regiment would be tested as never before in all its 156-year history.

Since 1798 when some "troubles with the French" prompted the initial raising of a Ninth Regiment of United States Infantry, colors so inscribed had been proudly carried in all the nation's wars. Raised, disbanded, and raised again as the republic flirted with the perceived evils of a standing army, the regiment saw action in the War of 1812, fighting at both Lundy's Lane and Chippewa. In the War With Mexico, at Chapultepec, the regiment's second-in-command, taking over from the fallen colonel, tore down the fortress flag. Rebirthed for a final time in 1856 as the army expanded to keep pace with an expansionistic nation, battle honors from the War Between the States and nearly 400 engagements with the Indians were soon added to the colors.

By the turn of the century after participation in the War With Spain, notably at San Juan Hill, several campaigns against insurgents in the Phillipines and in the China Relief Expedition of 1900, the regiment was one of the army's more renowned, and widely known as the "Fighting Ninth." From China came the nickname "Manchu Regiment," and the regimental motto "Keep Up the Fire," the dying words of yet another fallen colonel.

It was in the First World War that the regiment first fought as part of the 2nd Division, seeing action at Chateau-Thierry, St. Mihiel, and the Meuse-Argonne. It was also in France, in 1918, that the current Commanding Officer of the regiment, Colonel Chester Hirschfelder, won his first DSC, commanding the regimental machine gun company.

Its long history notwithstanding, it was in the 1944 campaign in northwest Europe that the regiment had earned its current reputation as a "veteran" outfit. Landing as part of V Corps, amidst the carnage of "Bloody Omaha" beach on 7 June 1944, one day after D-Day, in 68 days of close-quarter battle the regiment advanced 70 kilometers through the Normandy bocage. After the Allied breakout from the beachhead, the regiment along with the rest of the 2nd Infantry Division was detached from V Corps, and joined VIII Corps to clear the Brittany peninsula and secure the key Atlantic port of Brest.

Designated by Hitler as a "fortress," to be held for a minimum of 90 days, the heavily fortified city was defended by the elite fallschirmjagers of Major General Herman von Ramcke's 2nd

Parachute Division. Von Ramcke, a veteran of Crete, conducted a tenacious defense, but after nearly a month of bitter city fighting the equally tenacious American infantry prevailed. The initial surrender, and the German commander's pistol, was accepted by the CO of the regiment's 3rd Battalion, Major Bill Kernan.

A respite was then to be had, if there was such a thing for the infantry of which the Allied command found themselves so critically short in the autumn of 1944. For nine weeks, from early October to early December, while both the British and American First Armies tried unsuccessfully to crack the defenses of northern Germany,¹ the Manchus, with the rest of the 2nd Division, occupied an extended sector in the Ardennes. Activity in this "quiet" sector was largely one of static defense and patrolling. During this period, many Manchus, evacuated in Normandy and Brittany, returned to their units and new men were integrated into the ranks. It was therefore a relatively rested, refitted, and above all seasoned regiment (and division) that was designated for relief in place by the newly arrived 106th Infantry Division, and alerted for return to V Corps to conduct offensive operations.

The orders received on 6 December by the division commander, Major General Walter Robertson, himself an old Manchu who had commanded both a battalion and the regiment before its deployment overseas, were for an attack in reinforced division strength to penetrate the Siegfried Line and seize the Roer River dams.

The dams, seven in number, controlled the flow of the Roer and its tributaries, and were therefore critical for the potential they gave the Germans to reinforce the terrain and hence strengthen their defense of the Ruhr. This region, the industrial heartland of Germany was, and had been since September, one of the major operational objectives of the Western allies. The attack would be supported by the 99th Infantry Division, another "new" division, through which the 2nd Division would attack. By mutual agreement between the division and corps commander, the attack was set for 13 December. The division would be reinforced by the attachment of a combat command of the 9th Armored Division.² To enhance surprise, no forward patrolling was permitted.

The relief by the 106th Division, fresh off the boat from the United States, began on 10 December. To the chagrin of Robertson it proceeded much more slowly than anticipated, due in part to heavy snowfall, but also, at least in the view of Robertson, to the "timidity" of the 106th.³ It was therefore not until 11 December that the Ninth Infantry was relieved, and not until the next day that the 2nd Division as a whole was able to finally hand over its responsibility for its Schnee Eifel position.

A concerned Robertson, considered "one of the most experienced and respected division commanders in the Army,"⁴ asked to delay his attack, scheduled to begin at early morning the next day, by 24 hours. V Corps headquarters, in consultation

with First Army, denied this request. As a consequence, the division would have to attack the heavily fortified Siegfried Line with only one battalion of its artillery registered, without time for reconnaissance, with little precise intelligence, and in weather that would not only hinder ground mobility, but totally rule out either air support or reconnaissance. A daunting task, but one that would pale when compared to the tasks with which the division would be faced in just a matter of days.

For even as the Ninth, and their brother infantrymen of the 23rd and 38th Regiments treked north in preparation for their attack, a much more ambitious offensive undertaking was in the final stages of preparation just a few miles to their east. In the heavily forested Eifel region of Germany the panzers, panzergrenadiers, fallschirmjaegers and stolid infantrymen⁵ of two German panzer armies were creeping forward into their attack positions. Moving only at night, under the strictest of security measures, and covered by a clever deception scheme, nearly 30 German divisions were preparing to strike an unwary, if not complacent, Anglo-American high command a blow intended to unhinge the alliance and force a settlement on the Western Front.

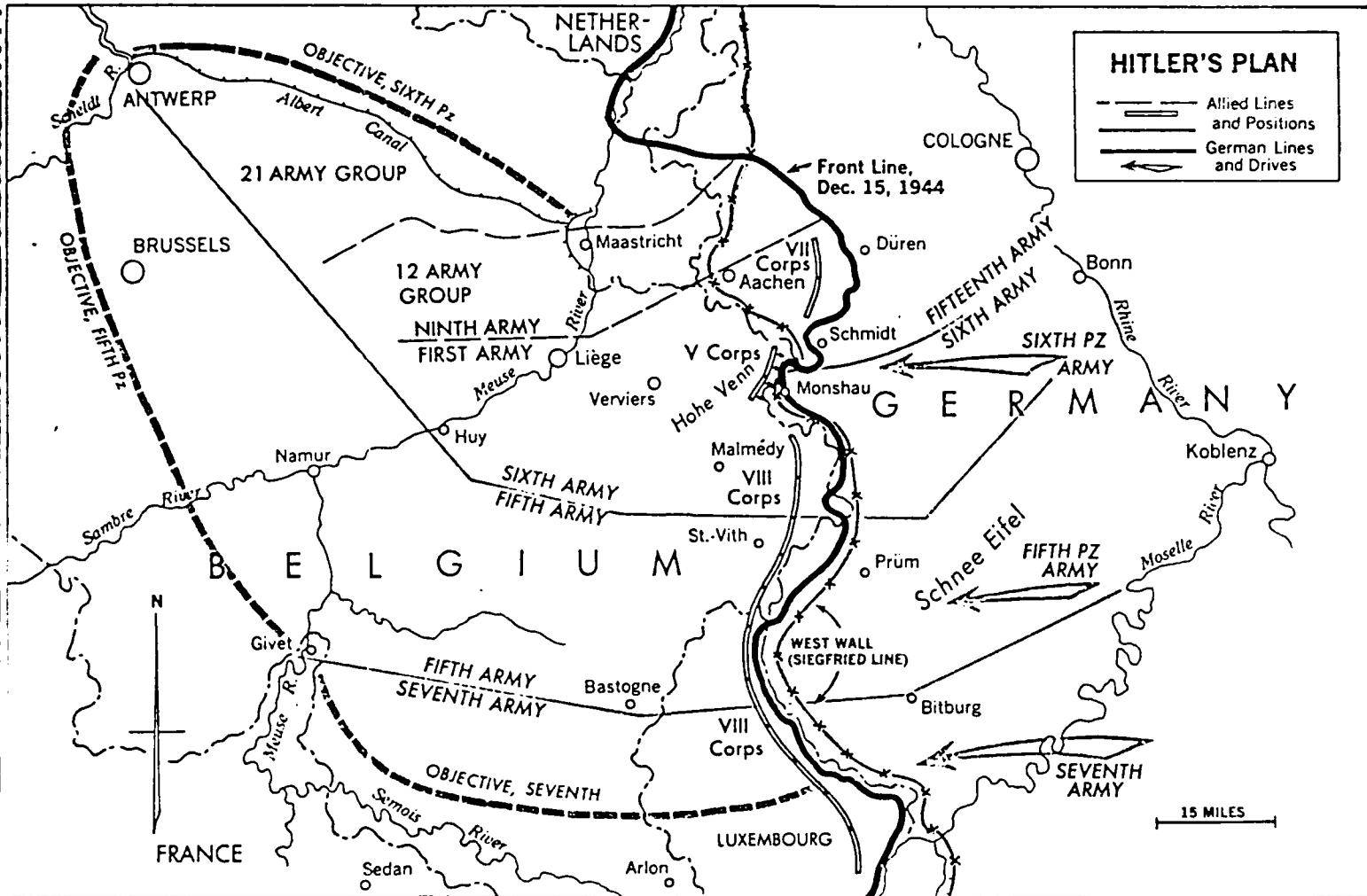
Cleverly conceived by Hitler personally, over the objections of his generals, the counteroffensive was clearly a gamble, but one with a clear strategic aim. To achieve a political settlement in the West, Hitler literally intended to drive a wedge between the British and American armies, severing up to 30 allied divisions from their logistical infrastructure, and bringing

about either their capitulation or destruction. Such a catastrophe, he reasoned, would force the British and Americans to accept something other than the unconditional surrender of the Germany, their publicly declared war aim. This, in turn, would split the Allies along east-west lines, isolating (and allowing Germany to concentrate militarily on) her most feared nemesis, Soviet Russia. The military means for achieving this ambitious, and last-hope, objective were two panzer armies, recently refitted and reequipped as best the strained resources of the Third Reich would allow. A third army, composed largely of infantry would support the panzers.

The operational objective of the two panzer armies was the recently opened, but not yet fully functioning Belgian North Sea port of Antwerp. Attacking out of the Eifel and through the thinly held Ardennes, through which German armies had moved with such surprise and rapidity in both 1914 and 1941, the armies would attack northwest toward Liege, cross the Muese River, and finally drive on to Antwerp. By so doing, they would sever the British 21st Army Group, the American 9th Army, and part of the American 1st Army from the two American Army Groups⁶ to their south. It was envisioned as a classic German "Kesselschlacht," or battle of encirclement and annihilation, that would cut the northern armies lines of communications with the channel ports and beaches, prevent the development of the port of Antwerp into a major logistical base, and most importantly unhinge the very cohesion of the Allied effort in the West (Figure 1). It was a

Figure 1

German Plan of Attack



Source: The Bitter Woods.

gamble of the highest order, for which his generals argued Germany's military means were insufficient - but so they had similarly argued in 1940. "O-Tag" (Zero-Day) for the operation, christened "Wacht am Rhein" (Watch on the Rhine) was set for 16 December.

Had they been privy to Hitler's plan the Allied high command would probably have been as pessimistic as their counterparts of the German General Staff. In fact, despite indicators to the contrary reported by the front line units in the Ardennes, the official Allied estimates only gave the Germans credit for the capability and intention to conduct limited-objective spoiling and counterattacks in an attempt to forestall further Allied attacks into Germany itself. In their view, Runstedt, the German commander in the West, "would act according to the rational and accepted canons of the military art."⁷

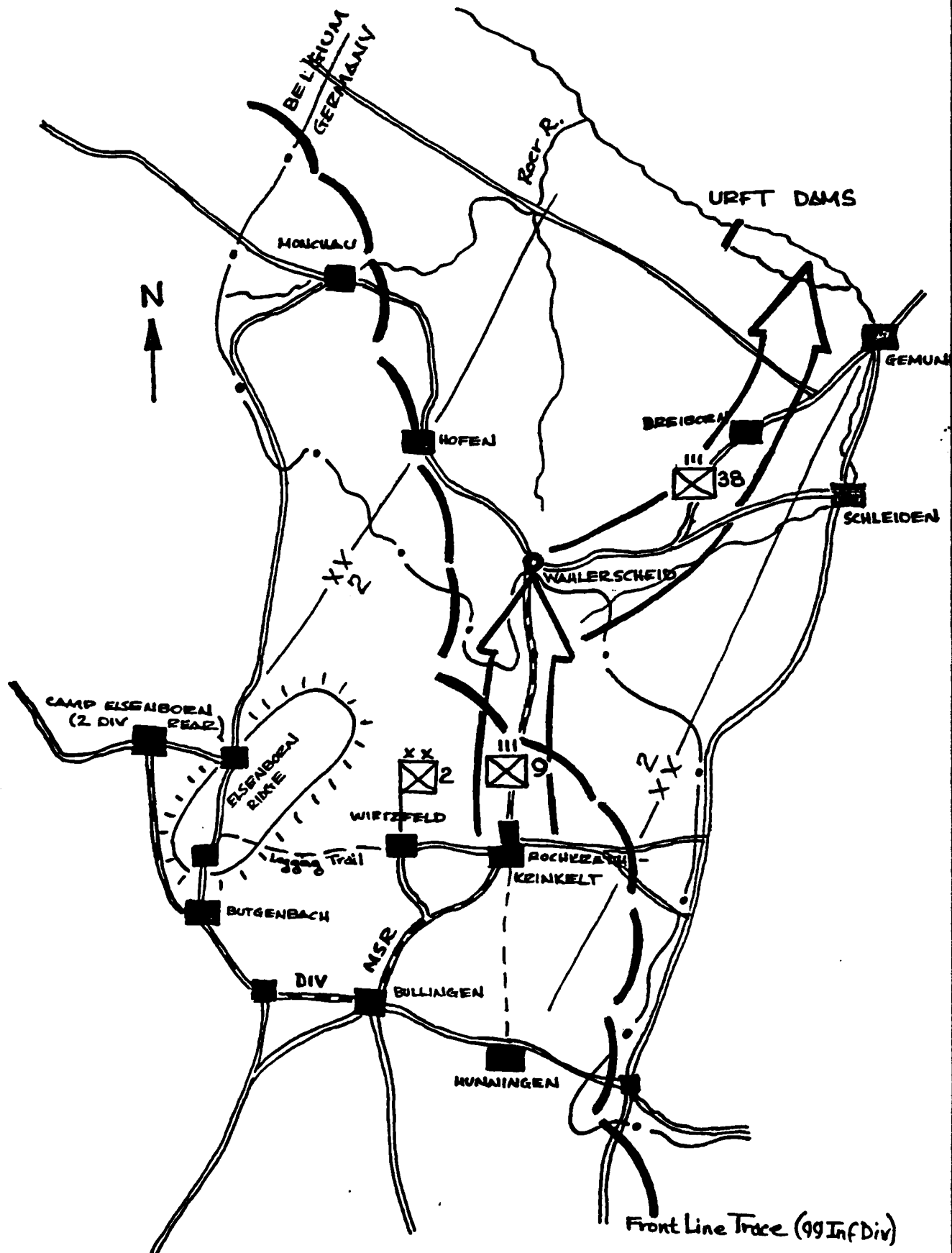
In fact, despite the most sophisticated intelligence system ever enjoyed by a military commander, "Allied intelligence officers had committed the most grievous sin of which a G2 is capable. They had looked in a mirror for the enemy and seen there only the reflections of their own intentions."⁸ As one might expect of past masters of strategic surprise, an integral part of the German plan, including the intentionally misleading name of the offensive, was a deception theme that played on these mistaken Allied notions of German intentions. So it was, that on the eve of the offensive, the American 12th Army Group G2 situation map portrayed only five weak German divisions opposite the Ardennes.

Fortuitously, at least one senior American commander took the threat of even a limited German counterattack seriously. A Leavenworth classmate of Eisenhower, and his one-time boss in the War Plans Division of the Army General Staff, Major General "Gee" Gerow was now the seasoned commander of V Corps. Perhaps out of a respect for the German genius for aggressively conducted defense learned the hard way in Normandy, he was concerned that just such tactics might wreak havoc with the attack of the 2nd Infantry Division. Accordingly, somewhere in the process of thinking through the conduct of the attack, he designated a fall-back position should one be required. This position, called by the Americans the Elsenborn Ridge, was a broad, sprawling piece of high ground that dominated the countryside for miles around. Despite the importance Gerow placed on this key piece of ground, little did he know that three of the five routes selected for the German main attack crossed this key feature, or that its retention would eventually shape the forthcoming battle and set the stage for victory in the Ardennes.

A glimpse at a graphic display of the 2nd Division's plan of attack might have revealed a scheme of maneuver not unlike a typical Army "school solution." (Figure 2) Attacking from south to north, astride the only road that led from the attack positions in the villages of Rocherath and Krinkelt, the Ninth Infantry would lead the attack, pass through the lines of the 99th Division, fight through the fortifications of the Siegfried Line, to seize the key Wahlerscheid Crossroads immediately to

Figure 2

2nd Infantry Division Plan of Attack



Source: "Heartbreak Crossroads".

their rear. The 38th Infantry would follow the Ninth, and upon seizure of the road junction, continue the attack toward the Roer dams. The 23rd Infantry and the attached Combat Command "B" of the 9th Armored Division, five maneuver battalions, were to be held in the reserve, prepared to exploit the situation. Eight battalions of artillery were available to support the attack.

Classically arrayed, "two up and one back," the Ninth would attack with the 1st Battalion to the left (west) of the road, the 2nd Battalion on the right (east) of the road, and the 3rd Battalion following in reserve. Support for the attack was confined to a single circuitous route that ran from the attack positions south and west before turning west and eventually north to the division rear at Camp Elsenborh, an old Belgian Army cantonment, astride the Elsenborn Ridge. The division engineers were tasked to clear a more direct main supply route by improving a one-way, boggy, logging trail that ran due west from the attack positions.

The conduct of the attack was not nearly so tidy. Despite the nature of the German defense, due to the inadequate preparation time, the attack was conducted more as a movement to contact, than a deliberate attack of a prepared position. Crossing the line of departure as scheduled, the troops were soon soaked as a temporary warming trend melted some of the snow. Throughout the morning the Ninth advanced approximately four miles without contact. Progress was hampered not only by the snow and thick forest, but also by mines and abatis that blocked the road. At

approximately midday, as the leading elements emerged from the forest to be confronted with an anti-tank ditch and five belts of wire and mines, the Germans opened an effective fire on both the 1st and 2nd Battalions, driving them to ground.

Throughout the remaining daylight hours casualties mounted as small groups of infantrymen probed for gaps in the German defenses. Artillery bursting in the tree tops was particularly lethal. A thick fog and the lack of prior registration hampered the employment of supporting fires. Bangalore torpedoes, painstakingly lugged forward through the forest, literally fizzled due to wet fuses. Casualties were heaviest in the more exposed 1st Battalion. The 2nd Battalion, afforded better cover and concealment, suffered less, and one squad from G Company was able to push forward through an uncovered gap in the German barrier system. However, due to the wounding of the company commander, it would be two days before word of this breach reached the battalion commander.

Night fell early in the Ardennes, and by 1700 attempts to break into the German defenses were broken off. Although the German shelling slackened, another form of misery took its place. A hard freeze set in and soon froze the wet clothing of the men. Due to both intermittent shelling, and the condition of the only road, attempts to bring forward both a hot meal and the men's bedrolls failed. It was only the first of several miserable nights ahead. Overnight, plans were made to renew the attack the following morning. The division's history would later record,

"the enemy fortification was impervious to quick attack and required reconnaissance and preparation...",⁹ an observation no doubt already well known to the veterans of Normandy and Brest, but nonetheless relearned once again the hard way.

The attack was renewed at first light on the 14th only to be broken off by noon due to difficulties in accurately employing artillery in the broken wooded terrain, and hazy weather that again ruled out any possibility of air support. As the 15th dawned again too hazy for air support, Robertson declared no further daylight attacks would be attempted. Preparations began for a night attack. By now, word of the gap in the German barriers found the first day of the attack finally reached the CO of the 2nd Battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Walter Higgins. Plans were made accordingly.

At dark on the 15th an eleven-man patrol from G Company again infiltrated the German fortifications, this time eliminating one pillbox, and by wire laid behind them as they advanced, reported their success to Higgins. Led by Higgins, Companies E and F followed through the gap, laying engineer tape in their wake. Following the tape, the 1st Battalion soon followed. In bitter close quarter fighting that continued throughout the night, the two battalions widened the breach, eliminating 24 pillboxes, inflicting numerous casualties, and taking 161 prisoners. Reinforcing this success, Hirschfelder, the Regimental CO, suffering from pleurisy but refusing evacuation, committed the 3rd Battalion, which by dawn had secured the

Wahlerscheid Crossroads without a casualty, driving a 3,500-yard salient through the Siegfried Line. Robertson, not a division commander to be tied to his CP and commanding "well forward," soon had the 38th Infantry moving to pass through the Ninth.

Despite the stunning success of the night attack, victory had not been achieved cheaply. Seventy-two hours of exposure to nearly continual enemy fire and severe weather had cost the Manchus 737 casualties, and the division nearly 1,000. Most of the Ninth's casualties were in the 1st and 2nd Battalions, and nearly 400, in the staff parlance of the day, were "non-battle," specifically from trench foot and exposure. Wahlerscheid, the regimental objective, became known to the troops as "Heartbreak Crossroads."

It is perhaps unfair to speculate what might have been saved both in terms of lives and time had Robertson's request to delay the attack been granted, and a more flexible approach, allowing for forward patrolling, reconnaissance and exploitation of enemy weaknesses permitted. Nonetheless, it is fair to note that stealth, infiltration and concentration on the narrowest of axis, not to mention improvisation and perseverance on the part of the troops, had prevailed, where a classically templated attack, hurriedly conducted so as not to upset a time table drawn up days in advance, had failed.

Whatever may have been their inclination for a breather, it was not to be. For even as the Manchus set about consolidating their position at "Heartbreak Crossroads," the rumbling of

artillery in the 99th Division sector to their south heralded the launching of "Watch on the Rhine" by the 5th and 6th SS Panzer Armies. In "a textbook demonstration of the employment of concentration along a relatively narrow and vulnerable front to effect a breakthrough"¹⁰ the two panzer armies were falling on the boundary between V and VIII Corps. The weight of the attack was concentrated on two "green" American divisions, and another recently badly bloodied in the Huertgen Forest.¹¹

Making the main attack, the 6th SS Panzer Army, consisting of five infantry and four panzer divisions and totalling nearly 800 tanks and assault guns supported by 1,000 artillery pieces and rocket launchers, would strike the 99th Infantry Division, the southernmost division of V Corps. To the south, the 5th Panzer Army mustering four infantry and four panzer divisions, would make a supporting attack in the sectors of the 106th and 28th Infantry Divisions, the two northern divisions of VIII Corps. These three divisions, deliberately posted in the Ardennes for seasoning, in the case of the 99th and 106th, and refitting, in the case of the 28th, were each spread over a front of 20 miles, nearly twice the doctrinal divisional frontage. Consequently, the Germans would enjoy an overall 3 to 1 advantage in infantry strength, and achieve an advantage of 6 to 1 at their points of attack.

Led by Waffen SS Oberstgruppenfuhrer Josef 'Sepp' Dietrich, a World War I sergeant, former chauffeur to Hitler, commander of his bodyguard regiment and later the 1st SS Panzer Division on

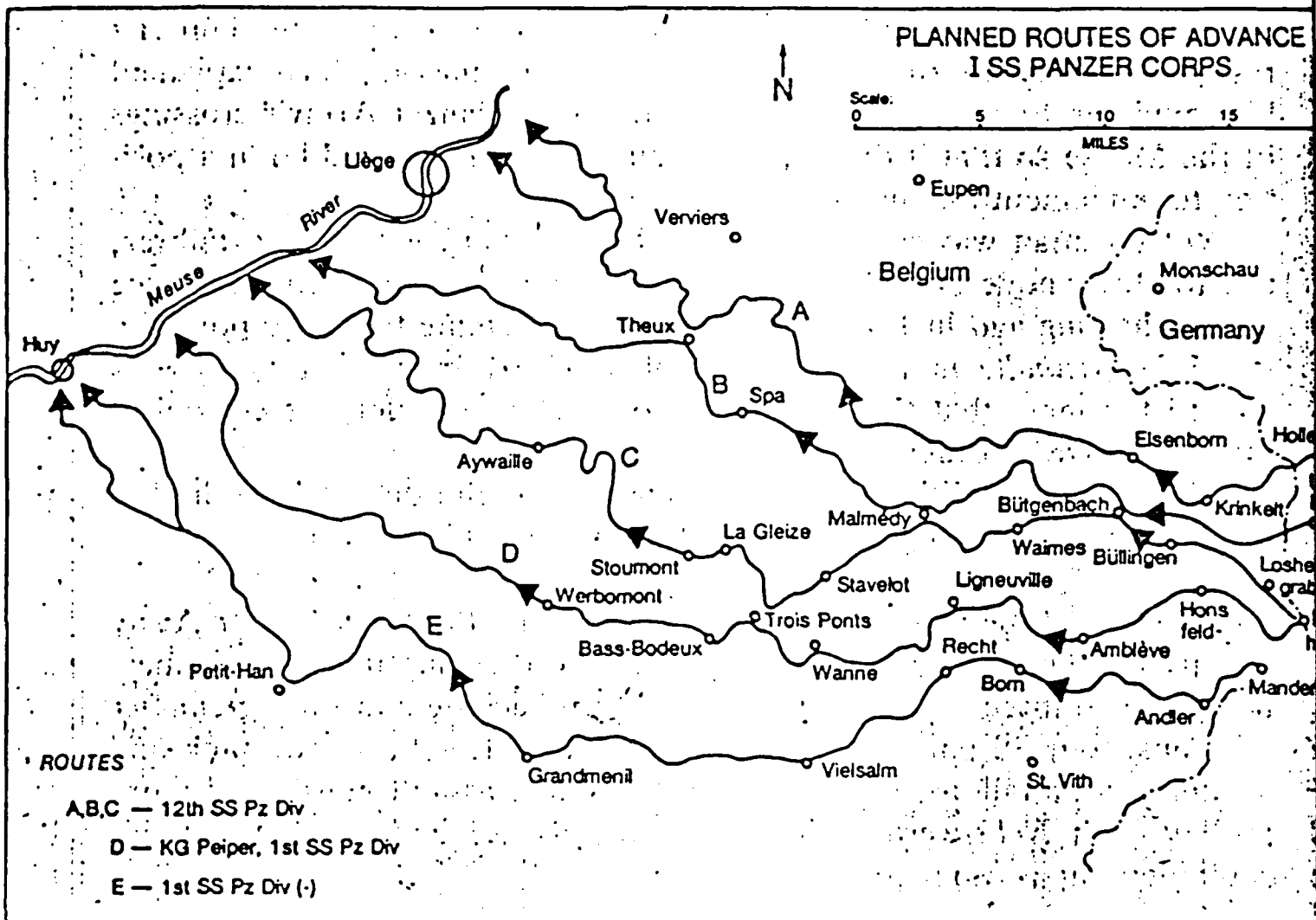
the Eastern Front, the 6th SS Panzer Army had been assigned the preeminent role in the offensive by Hitler personally, and specifically tailored for it. Spearheaded by four SS panzer divisions¹² the army was to punch through the Ardennes, secure river crossings across the Meuse on either side of Liege, and dash for Antwerp, a distance of approximately 200 kilometers. Perhaps misled by the ease with which the Germans had moved through the Ardennes in 1914 and 1940, Hitler visualized reaching the Meuse in two days.¹³ More realistically, Dietrich and his chief of staff envisioned four: specifically, one day to penetrate the defense, two days for advance through the Ardennes, and one day to secure the crossings.

The army was to attack in three echelons. Two volksgrenadier and one parachute division were allocated to initially break the crust of the defense and open the way for the panzers. Two panzer divisions, the 1st and 12th SS, would follow close behind the three infantry divisions, and race for the Meuse River crossings without regard for their flanks, while the infantry formations wheeled north to protect and widen the northern shoulder of the penetration. Two additional panzer divisions would follow to draw abreast of the leading divisions after crossing the Meuse for the final push to Antwerp.

Five routes or "rollbahns" were selected for the main attack. (Figure 3) In the German tradition of "Auftragstaktik," or mission-oriented command and control, they were intended as general axes of advance, rather than restrictive control

Figure 3

German Routes of Advance



Source: A Time for Trumpets.

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measures. Nevertheless, the twisting and tortuous terrain of the Ardennes made them constrictive and largely confined to roads and tracks, with little room for maneuver. Although the five were deemed adequate to support the attack, "failure to obtain the use of any of the five would impose severe strain...to fail to gain as many as three could well be disastrous."¹⁴ Although Panzer commanders were authorized to vary their routes, the two southern "rollbahns" were assigned to the 1st SS Panzer and the three northern ones, which transitted Elsenborn Ridge, were assigned to the 12th SS Panzer. Each division would be led by a tank-heavy "kampfgruppe" formed around the divisional panzer regiments.¹⁵

Forsaking the use of "storm detachments" such as those used by the 5th Panzer Army to his south,¹⁶ Dietrich's three infantry divisions began their attack on the 99th Division at approximately 0700 on 16 December, following a 90-minute artillery preparation. Although some American units collapsed or were overwhelmed, many fought back bravely, such as the Intelligence and Reconnaissance Platoon of the 394th Infantry Regiment which held the division's southern flank against the attacks of an enemy parachute battalion¹⁷ for most of the day. Surprised, outnumbered, stretched thin, if not indifferently led, the 99th did not collapse as the Germans had expected. Although the division conducted far from a cohesive defense, brave and stubborn fights by platoons and companies tied down the Germans attempting to fight through the positions throughout the day. By nightfall the commander of the 1st SS Panzer Corps was "fuming"¹⁸ that his

panzers had yet to be released. In the south the 5th Panzer Army made somewhat better progress.

Throughout the morning of the 16th Robertson monitored the situation in his own division, as well as the fighting in the 99th's sector, from his forward CP in Wirtzfeld. Robertson had reason to worry; his eastern or right flank was protected by the northern regiment of the 99th, the 395th, and his tenuous MSR ran south, parallel to the front and only slightly to the rear of the 99th Division, now embroiled in a fight for its life. After a conversation with the Deputy V Corps Commander in late morning, in which he was warned, "go slow and watch your step, the overall situation is not good,"¹⁹ he became concerned that his leading regiments might be cut off by the German attack. At noon, on his own authority, he stopped the advance of the 38th Infantry by now approximately 1,000 yards north of Wahlerscheid. He then went forward to amplify his instructions to the commanders of the attacking regiments, and to issue a warning order for a withdrawal. Hirschfelder, the senior regimental commander, was tasked to coordinate the withdrawal of the two forward regiments, regiments, five battalions of which, were in contact with enemy.

Throughout the afternoon the situation worsened. Returning to his CP, Robertson soon found that the attached 9th Armored combat command had been detached by First Army to assist the beleaguered VIII Corps. V Corps in turn committed two battalions of the 23rd Infantry to shore up the defenses of the 99th Division. Now left with only a one battalion reserve, Robertson

pressed Gerow, who in turn pressed Courtney Hodges, the First Army commander, to break off the 2nd Division's attack.

A visit to the 99th CP, in a villa to the rear of his, hardly reassured Robertson. Amidst an atmosphere of total confusion, the 2nd Division commander found the 99th's commander playing the piano.²⁰ Although told that the 99th was in contact with all its units and that the situation was under control, Robertson nonetheless continued to press the corps commander to break off the attack, and worked well into the night to work out the details of a withdrawal he had not yet been authorized to conduct. Although still under orders to attack the next morning, he told his regimental commanders that the attack would be renewed only on his express orders.

If Robertson and Gerow were convinced that the German activity amounted to more than just a spoiling attack, their superiors at First Army and 12th Army Group were not. Unable to confer with his boss, Omar Bradley, commanding the army group, who was enroute by car to a meeting at SHAEF²¹ in Paris, Hodges held the view that the attack was a limited one. It should not be allowed to upset the continuation of the 2nd Division's attack, which he mistakenly believed was its objective. He therefore ordered that the attack proceed. Bradley, too, when finally informed of the German offensive upon his arrival at Eisenhower's headquarters late in the afternoon, held much the same view.

As the fighting continued throughout the night, and the Germans shifted forces to overcome the unexpected resistance encountered, the view prevailed. For whatever reason, however, when Gerow again pressed his point early in the morning on 17 December, Hodges demurred. Again out of communications with Bradley, who was now enroute back to his headquarters, Hodges told Gerow simply, "to do as he saw fit."²² It was scarcely an example of the inspired and decisive battlefield leadership of which books are later written, but it nonetheless gave his aggressive subordinates the room they needed to set in motion the decisive chain of events that would insure a firm hold on the critical northern "shoulder" of the rapidly developing German penetration. At 0730 on 17 December, Robertson was ordered to withdraw his division at once to the Elsenborn Ridge.

So it was that an hour before daylight on 17 December, as the Germans renewed and reinforced their attacks along the front of the 99th Division, that the commander of the 2nd Infantry Division found himself faced "with what was probably the most complex maneuver encountered by any division commander in World War II."²³ Denied of the hours of darkness by the misreading of the battle at higher headquarters, he was now confronted with the most difficult of tactical maneuvers, a daylight withdrawal while in contact with the enemy. To make matters worse he was soon informed of the precipitous withdrawal of the headquarters of the 99th Division, and that his own CP and rear were threatened by the marauding panzergrenadiers constituting the flank guard of

the 1st SS Panzer's "Kampfgruppe Pieper."²⁴ Committing his only reserve, a battalion of the 23rd Infantry to secure his southern flank and rear, he moved forward to direct not only the withdrawal of his own division, but also that of the intermingled and now rudderless battalions of the 99th, now under attack not only by infantry, but tanks of the following panzer divisions as well. He would spend the remainder of his day "stalking up and down the Rocherath-Wahlerscheid road,"²⁵ issuing verbal orders, encouraging and setting the example for his men. At 1000 hours he ordered the forward regiments to begin their withdrawal.

Ordered by Gerow to first secure the key road junctions of Rocherath-Krinkelt and Wirtzfeld as an intermediate strongpoint until the 99th Division could be extricated, the division plan was first to withdraw the Ninth, followed by the 38th Infantry. The Ninth would secure Wirtzfeld, and the 38th the twin villages; on order, the regiments would then withdraw to and defend the Elsenborn Ridge. The first battalion of the Ninth, the 2nd, began withdrawing at 1120 hours, followed soon after by the 3rd Battalion. Nevertheless it was 1300 hours before Lieutenant Colonel Bill McKinley's 1st Battalion was able to break contact, and 1500 hours before it began its road march rearward along the division MSR, on its way passing sacks of unopened Christmas mail.

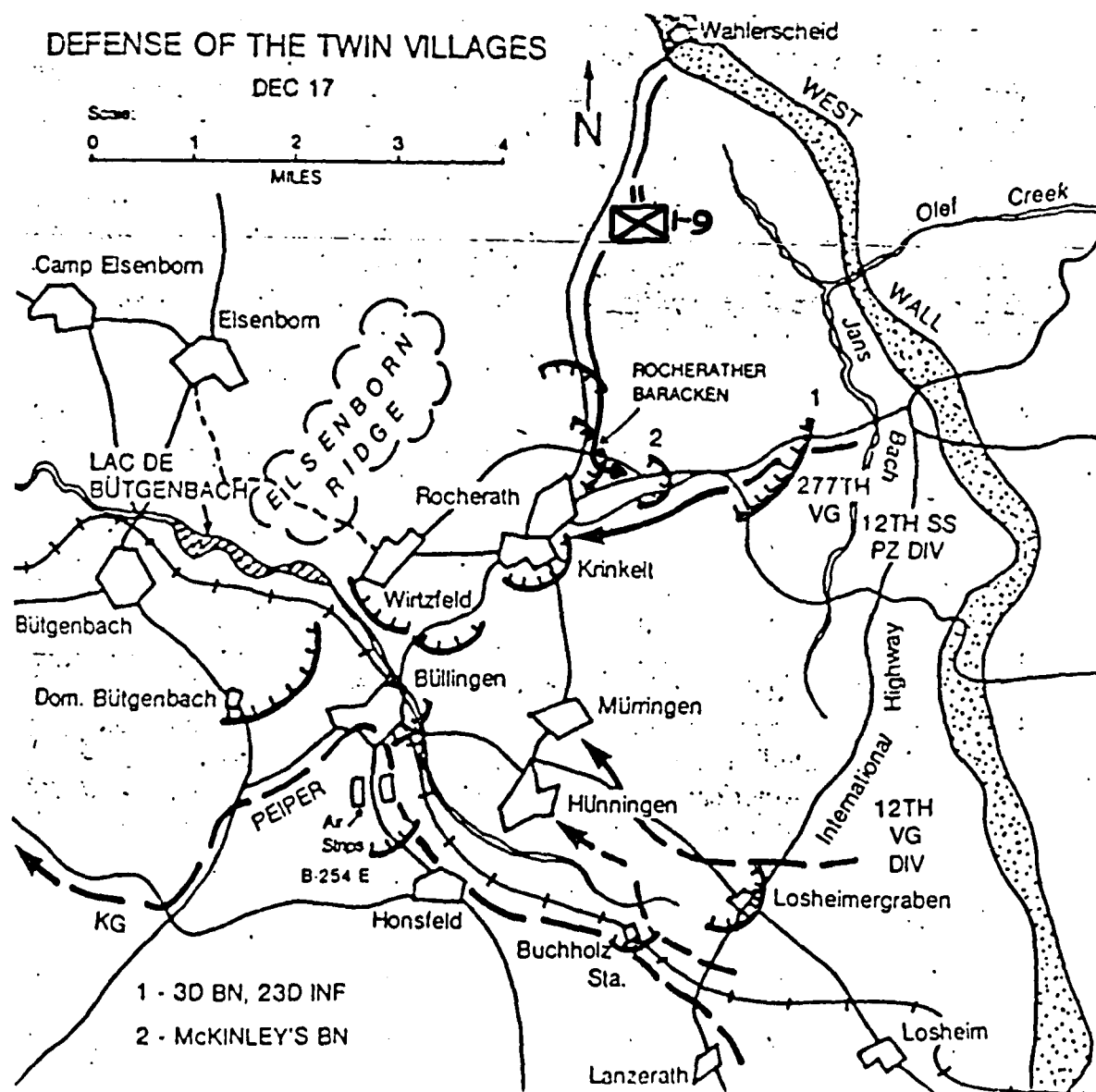
At 1600 hours, Robertson forward (east) of Rocherath-Krinkelt visiting the CP of 395th Infantry Regiments, which he had prudently and on his own authority taken under command,

observed a rapidly deteriorating situation. Intercepting the Manchu column 400 yards north of Rocherath he stopped the last company of the 3rd Battalion, K Company, and directed it, as well as the battalion's machine gun and Ammunition and Pioneer platoons, into hasty defensive positions blocking a road and trail junction some 1000 yards east of the villages. (Figure 4) McKinley's 1st Battalion, following close behind, was also diverted east to the junction. McKinley and Robertson went forward to conduct a personal reconnaissance. Pointing out the ground to McKinley, Robertson attached K Company and the other 3rd Battalion elements to him and ordered "hold the road junction until ordered otherwise."²⁶ He further warned that elements of the 99th Division, including some attached tanks, would soon be withdrawing through his position.

Faced with a situation not unlike the Spartans at Thermopylae or Chamberlain at Little Round Top,²⁷ in the gathering darkness and amidst the confusion created by a disorganized stream of withdrawing individuals and small groups from the 99th Division, McKinley set about organizing his defense. Out of communications with his regiment now closing on Wirtzfeld, McKinley had slightly more than 600 men to accomplish his task, 400 from his own depleted battalion, as well as some 200 from the 3rd Battalion and an attached platoon of tank destroyers. While the battalion's sergeant major and operations sergeant established the CP in an abandoned artillery bunker, McKinley deployed his companies. North of the main east-west road was

Figure 4

Defense of Rocherath-Krinkelt



Source: A Time for Trumpets.

K Company. B Company was deployed astride the road, and A Company south of it. C Company, reduced to 50 all ranks in the bitter fighting around "Heartbreak Crossroads," was placed in reserve to the rear of B Company. Additional bazookas and anti-tank mines were obtained from the tank destroyers. Due to training conducted during earlier quiet periods the battalion was able to field 22 bazooka teams. Other Manchus fashioned daisy chains of AT mines, and positioned them to drag across the road upon the appearance of enemy tanks. Fortunately for the battalion, just before 1830 hours, the attached artillery liaison officer was able to establish radio communications with the supporting 15th Field Artillery Battalion.²⁸ No single activity in organizing the defense would prove to be more critical. This link would strengthen the defense with the fires of seven battalions of artillery, the priority of whose fires Robertson had allocated to McKinley.

Among those passing through the thin line of Manchus hurriedly digging-in was Captain Charles MacDonald, 23rd Infantry, and the remnants of his company, badly decimated in an attempt to shore up the defenses of the 99th Division. In his classic on infantry combat in the Second World War, Company Commander, MacDonald would later record the grim determination of the defenders of the twin villages when challenged as to their identity thusly:

"Ninth Infantry. It ain't enough we attack for five f_____ days. We gotta' turn around and take up somebody else's defenses."²⁹

Even before they could complete their digging that resolve was to be tested as tanks and panzergrenadiers of the 12th SS Panzer Division began to penetrate the American defenses.

At approximately 1830 hours B company reported the approach of three unidentified tanks, accompanied by approximately a platoon of infantry. Remembering the instructions of his division commander that friendly troops and armor could be expected to withdraw through his position, McKinley passed the word to let them pass. Before it was realized that the intruders were in fact German they had passed through the battalion's position, moving on toward the twin villages. Although this small force would cause considerable havoc in the villages throughout the night as it played a deadly cat-and-mouse game with the 38th Infantry still in the process of withdrawing and organizing a defense of the villages, it was a mistake that would not be repeated.

Not less than an hour later, in a now pitch black and foggy night, another German probe bumped the battalion's position. In close-quarter fighting four enemy tanks were destroyed by mines and bazookas. For at least three hours German attempts to force the road to the twin villages persisted, and at least five separate attacks of infantry and tanks were thrown back, as bazooka teams stalked tanks, and riflemen accounted for their crews and accompanying infantry. Private Soderman, a bazooka gunner in K Company, personally accounted for three tanks and would later be awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Artillery fire was particularly effective, especially the massed fires of "time-on-target" missions, a specialty of American artillery, which the Germans particularly feared.³⁰

By midnight the German ground attacks stopped, and McKinley was able to report by a land line finally established with the 38th Infantry in Rocherath that:

"We have been strenuously engaged, but everything is under control at present."³¹

Although German artillery fire continued to fall on the position throughout the night, casualties were evacuated and the battalion received a resupply of ammunition. In the twin villages the 38th Infantry consolidated its positions, its withdrawal, although hampered by artillery fire and the small German force that penetrated the defense at nightfall, having been protected by the determined defense of McKinley's battalion. Throughout the night stragglers of the 99th Division continued to make their way rearward. Many were collected by 2nd Division units and integrated into its ranks.³²

At 0700 hours on 18 December the 12th Panzer Division, now well behind its timetable, renewed its attack. Supported by heavy artillery fire the division's 25th Panzergrenadier Regiment, supported by a battalion each of tanks and assault guns, closed on the Manchu position, assisted not only by the predawn darkness, but a heavy fog that reduced visibility to 100 yards. For two hours the battle raged. At approximately 1000 hours the Germans were able to envelope the battalion's open flanks, and both A and K Companies suffered heavily. German

tanks began to roll up the A Company position, working their way from position to position along the thin line of fighting positions.³³ The company commander, the third in a week, reported his position overrun and called down artillery fire on his own position. The 2nd Division's gunners responded with a heavy 30 minute blanket of defensive fire that temporarily stopped the German advance.

At 1100 hours, with only B and C Companies remaining as effective fighting units, McKinley reported "situation desperate." With the defensive positions of the 38th Infantry now solidified in the twin villages to his rear, McKinley was given permission to withdraw his battered battalion. However, now decisively engaged, McKinley and his men were now in no position to break contact and withdraw. Grimly the men stood their ground. Perhaps best exemplifying the doggedness of the defense were D Company machine gunners Plummer and Sibley who resolutely manned their heavy water-cooled machine gun until it and they were taken out by a German tank at point blank range. Both would later be posthumously awarded Silver Stars, and the battered gun recovered and enshrined by the regiment as one of its most treasured trophies.³⁴ Only in one case did soldiers attempt to "bugout," and this small group of six men were personally intercepted by the battalion commander and sent back to their unit.

Just when annihilation must have seemed certain the battalion's anti-tank platoon leader appeared on the scene with a platoon of the division's tank battalion. A local counterattack

was quickly improvised, and this action in concert with the ever responsive artillery support,³⁵ gave the Manchus the freedom of action required to begin to break contact. By noon the survivors were fighting their way to the rear, battered and bloodied, but still functioning as a fighting unit. McKinley and his S3 were the last to leave to the cries of "hande hoch"³⁶ from the advancing panzergrenadiers. Later this nameless junction east of Rocherath would be aptly christened "Purple Heart Crossroads."

Withdrawing through the 38th Infantry the men assembled in Krinkelt, their attack position of only seven days before. Of the over 700 men of the 1st Battalion, Ninth Infantry that had begun the attack on Wahlerscheid on 13 December, only 197 could now be counted as "present for duty." A Company had been reduced to five men, and the attached K Company to twelve. Early that evening the Battalion S4 appeared with a hot meal, and the "battalion" was visited by Robertson. However, before the men were allowed to eat and obtain their first real sleep in a week, they were resupplied with ammunition and reorganized into a composite company of six rifle squads and a mortar and machine gun platoon. As such, with all the division's other units committed to battle, they were designated the division reserve.

Throughout the remainder of the 18th the division's defense of the twin villages held firm. On 19 December, the day Dietrich had hoped to be across the Meuse, the 12th SS Panzer Division began breaking off its attack around Rocherath and Krinkelt, moving south and west, shadowing the 1st SS Panzer as it

continued its plunge westward into the Ardennes in an attempt to bypass the stubborn American defenses. On the night of the 19th the 38th Infantry withdrew from the villages, to be followed before first light on the 20th by the Ninth Infantry from Wirtzfeld. With his own division, and 99th now placed entirely under his command by Gerow, Robertson secured the Elsenborn Ridge. With his flanks north and southwest secured by the veteran 9th and 1st Infantry Divisions³⁷ respectively, the northern shoulder was now firmly in American hands. Although the German offensive would not reach its high-water mark until Christmas Day, and it would not be until late January 1945 that the German salient into Allied lines was reduced,³⁸ the Elsenborn Ridge position would not be seriously threatened. On the same day, the German priority of effort was shifted from the 6th SS Panzer Army in the north, to the 5th Panzer Army in the south.

What the 2nd Division had accomplished in three days of desperate fighting was to blunt the "Schwerpunkt," the main effort, of the German offensive within five miles of its start line, and deflect that effort from a northwesterly direction of attack toward Liege and the Meuse, to a westerly and futile drive into the Ardennes, where without a secure northern flank it would eventually run its course and be destroyed.

Although perhaps not apparent at the time, the "jamming" of the northern shoulder of the penetration, orchestrated by Gerow and directed by Robertson, was an application of the World War I lesson "that holding the shoulders is the most effective response

to an enemy breakthrough."³⁹ This "doctrinal response" and similar actions on the southern flank of the salient, "assured common efforts to shore up the shoulders of the penetration and confine it to a narrow tunnel with vulnerable flanks."⁴⁰ Although much tough fighting was still being waged at such places as St. Vith and Bastogne, Hitler's last great gamble was ordained to failure. (Figure 5)

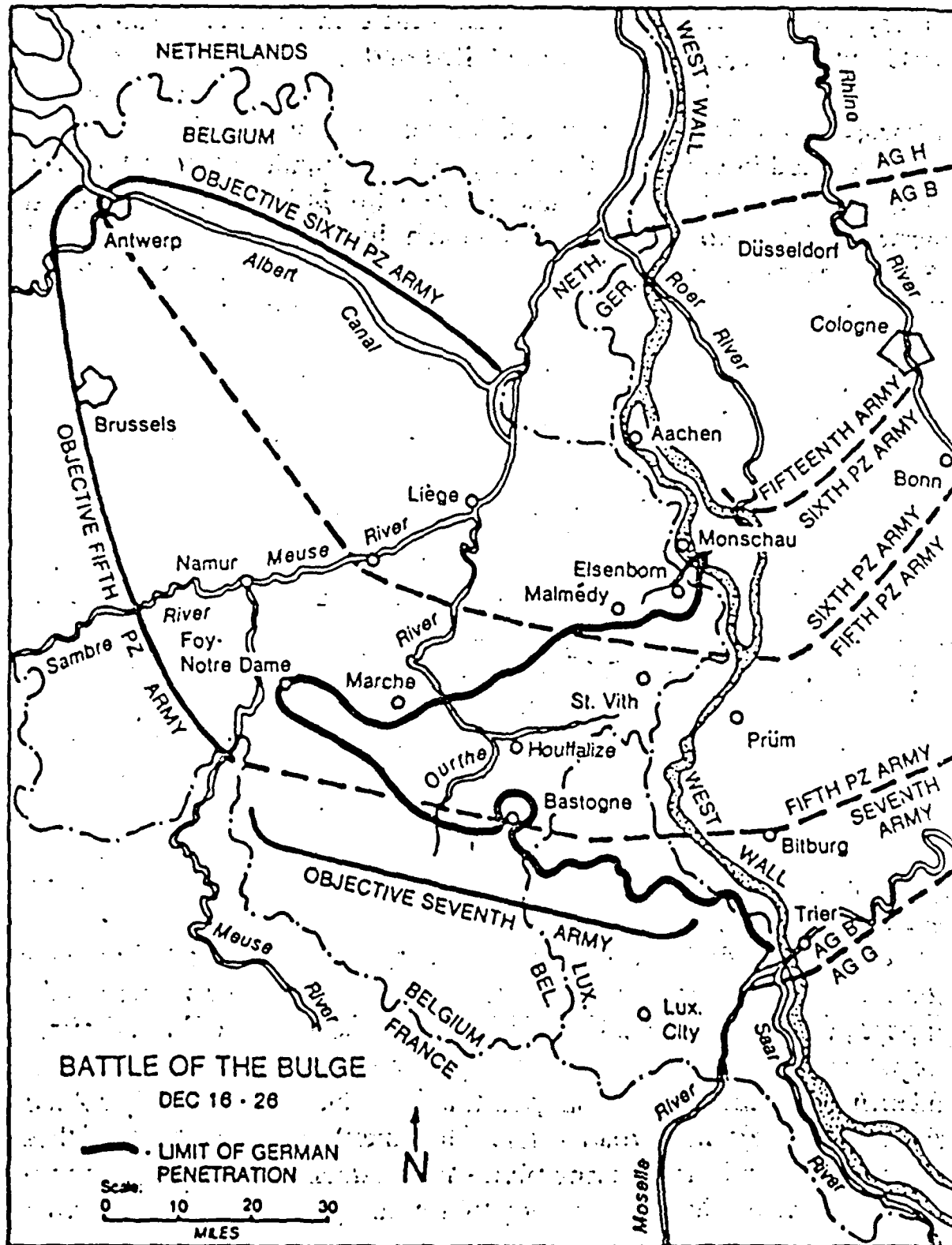
Of the brave stand of the 1st Battalion, Ninth Infantry in defending "Purple Heart Crossroads" Charles MacDonald would later write In A Time For Trumpets:

"...for all the heroic defenses of many another American unit during the German offensive, probably none exceeded and few equalled McKinley's battalion and Company K in valor and sacrifice."⁴¹

For besides destroying 17 enemy tanks, inflicting nearly a thousand casualties, and delaying the German attack at a particularly critical stage, in the larger scheme of things, the action would prove to have been pivotal. "You saved my Regiment," remarked the CO of the 38th Infantry to McKinley after the battle. Indeed it was more than that. By denying the panzers the road to the twin villages critical time was bought enabling not only the withdrawal of the 38th, but for the defense of the twin villages to be solidified and eventually the Elsenborn Ridge to be secured - denying the 6th SS Panzer Army three of its five routes to the Meuse. The 30 December 1944 edition of The New York Times would record:

Figure 5

Limit of German Advance



Source: A Time for Trumpets.

"By the gallantry of one battalion a regiment was saved; and so on until the heroism of this one battalion had pyramided into a victorious defense at the precise point where the Germans had expected to break clear through our lines and inflict a devastating defeat.... This battalion played a crucial role in averting a disastrous defeat in this greatest battle in American history."⁴²

The hyperbole of the press notwithstanding, the fighting east of Rocherath and Krinkelt, often overshadowed by the actions of more publicized units elsewhere, nonetheless helped set the stage for the major operational decisions that would turn "the Bulge" into an American victory. For it was not until the morning of 18 December, as McKinley's battalion was embroiled in a fight for its very existence, that the SHAEF reserve of two airborne divisions were committed to the fight. Not until the next day was the decision taken for Patton's Third Army to be reoriented for a counterattack into the southern flank of the penetration. And finally on the 20th, as the withdrawal to the Elsenborn Ridge was finally completed, Ike, in a controversial decision, assured the continuity of the Allied defense north of the penetration by transferring control of the First and Ninth American Armies to Montgomery.

Perhaps the lesson for today, as the Army immerses itself in a long overdue examination of the operational art, is to be found in the following quote from Weigley's Eisenhower's Lieutenants:

"The victory in the Ardennes belonged preeminently to the American soldier. The generals failed to foresee the German counteroffensive, did not prepare for it as a contingency... (and) were able to eventually regain control because of their soldiers' stubbornness and bravery did most of the job for them."⁴³

The action by an intelligently employed, well-led, proud and cohesive battalion at "Purple Heart Crossroads" exemplified not only this stubbornness and bravery, but serves to illustrate the inextricable linkage between successful tactical actions and effective operational planning and decisionmaking.⁴⁴

ENDNOTES

1. The battles around Arnhem and in the Huertgen Forest in the fall of 1944 were both futile attempts by the Allies to break into the German industrial heartland.

2. The forerunners of the current brigade headquarters, combat commands were the tactical headquarters around which the combat elements of the armored division were task organized. A typical combat command consisted of a battalion each of armored infantry, tanks, and artillery, as well as a company of engineers and a AAA battery.

3. Interview with Walter M. Robertson, MG, Operations of the 2nd Infantry Division, 5-20 December 1944, 15 April 1944.

4. John S. D. Eisenhower, The Bitter Woods, p. 221.

5. In an effort to shore up morale, many of the German infantry divisions, still the backbone of the army, were granted the honorific title "volksgrenadier."

6. The Western Allies were arrayed on a broad front from north to south, with the British 21st Army Group in the north (1st Canadian and 1st British Armies), the U.S. 12th Army Group in the center (9th, 1st and 3rd U.S. Armies), and the U.S. 6th Army Group in the south (U.S. 7th Army and French 1st Army).

7. Hugh M. Cole, The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge, p. 57.

8. Charles B. MacDonald, A Time for Trumpets, p. 79.

9. U.S. Army, Combat History of the Second Infantry Division in World War II, p. 84.

10. Russell F. Weigley, Eisenhower's Lieutenants, The Campaign of France and Germany, 1944-45, p. 469.

11. The 28th Infantry Division and several other veteran divisions had been badly decimated in fighting around Schmidt in October and November. A battle that has been called an "American Paschendale."

12. Hitler's favored formations, the SS Panzer Divisions received priority for both personnel and equipment and at this stage of the war were the only German divisions at full "establishment" strength. The 6th SS Panzer Army was deliberately assigned four of these divisions.

13. In 1940 Guderian's panzers, including Rommel's 7th Panzer Division, had reached the Meuse in 24 hours.

14. MacDonald, A Time for Trumpets, p. 161.

15. The panzer divisions consisted of a panzer (tank) regiment, and two panzergrenadier (armored infantry) regiments.

16. A German tactic, dating to 1918, that used small, specially trained assault groups to infiltrate ahead of the main attack to disrupt the continuity of the defense.

17. By 1944 the Luftwaffe airborne divisions were no longer the elite formations of earlier years. They were largely composed of Luftwaffe ground personnel hastily retrained as infantry.

18. MacDonald, A Time for Trumpets, p. 182.

19. Ibid., p. 180.

20. The command was eventually committed to the fighting around Bastogne.

21. Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces.

22. Weigley, op. cit., p. 471.

23. Eisenhower, op. cit., p. 221.

24. The division's leading battle group that had broken through on the southern flank of the 99th Division. Its commander would later gain infamy for the massacre of American prisoners at Malmedy.

25. Weigley, op. cit., p. 472. For his actions during the battle, Robertson was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross.

26. MacDonald, A Time for Trumpets, p. 380.

27. At Little Round Top, during the battle of Gettysburg in July 1863, Colonel Joshua Chamberlain, commanding the 20th Maine Volunteer Infantry, was ordered "to hold that ground at all hazards." In a bitter struggle he and his regiment did, thereby securing the left flank of the Army of the Potomac.

28. Throughout World War II the field artillery's communications proved to be much more reliable than that of the infantry it supported.

29. Charles B. MacDonald, Company Commander, p. 101.

30. The 2nd Division artillery of four battalions (three 105 mm and 155 mm battalions) was reinforced by three 155 mm howitzer battalions of Corps Artillery. One battalion alone on this day would fire 5,000 rounds.

31. MacDonald, A Time for Trumpets, p. 383.

32. Some accounts indicate as many as 2,000 were so employed by the 2nd Infantry Division.

33. Unlike the Germans who were adept at organizing their infantry defenses in depth, often on reverse slopes, throughout the war American infantry had a tendency to organize linear defenses on forward slopes making them particularly vulnerable once penetrated or outflanked.

34. "The Manchu Machine Gun" is still proudly displayed by the Regiment at all its official functions.

35. After the battle McKinley was effusive in his praise of the artillery.

36. "Hands up!"

37. Divisions made available to Gerow by First and Ninth Armies, and positioned by him to build up the northern shoulder.

38. The Ninth Infantry would reenter Germany in early February, retracing its steps through the Siegfried Line to "Heartbreak Crossroads."

39. Eisenhower, op. cit., p. 192.

40. Weigley, op. cit., p. 469.

41. MacDonald, A Time for Trumpets, p. 397.

42. William C. C. Cavanaugh, Krinkelt-Rocherath, The Battle for the Twin Villages, p. 111.

43. Weigley, op. cit., p. 574.

44. For its actions in defending "Purple Heart Crossroads" the 1st Battalion, Ninth Infantry was awarded a Presidential Unit Citation.

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