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MILITARY MONOGRAPH

TITLE: DEFENSE OF LITTLE SWITZERLAND

SCOPE: This is a story of the defense of a six mile sector along the Sauer River in Luxembourg by 2nd Battalion of the 12th Infantry Regiment. This unit, a part of the 4th Infantry Division, had just returned from Hurtgen Forest for rehabilitation and a well earned rest in an area known as Little Switzerland. Understrength, with each platoon responsible for a mile of wooded, rugged terrain, the battalion was attacked early on the morning of the 16th of December, 1944 by the bulk of the German 212th Volksgrenadier Division. The action of the 2nd Battalion was chosen primarily because this unit received the brunt of the enemy attack in this sector. The successful defense of this area and how it was accomplished is described by the battalion executive officer.

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Prepared by: Glenn W. Zarger
Major, Cavalry

REGRADED _____ BY AUTHORITY

OF E.O. 10501

BY Sgt Binn ON 1 Dec 87

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"Your fight in the Hurtgen Forest was an epic of stark infantry combat; but in my opinion, your most recent fight--from the 16th to the 26th of December--when, with a depleted and tired division, you halted the left shoulder of the German thrust into the American lines and saved the city of Luxembourg and the supply establishments and road nets in the vicinity, is the most outstanding accomplishment of yourself and your division."¹

These were the words of Lieutenant General George S. Patton, Jr. as he paid tribute to the men of the 4th Infantry Division in a message to the Ivy Leaf's commander early in January, 1944.

After Hurtgen Forest, Luxembourg appeared to be Heaven. Dry, warm houses were a welcome change from fox-holes full of icy water and incessant shellings. Since the division's sector extended some thirty-five miles, each platoon covered about a mile. (See map A) Although there was snow, rain and cold for men on post, it was a comparative rest. But the rest was not destined to last for long.

For the first week the front was absolutely quiet. There was little patrol activity and only an occasional artillery round.

1. History of 4th Infantry Division, 12th Infantry Regiment, p. 37.

GERMANY

SAUER RIVER

ECHTERNACH

BERDORF

LAUTERBORN

SCHWARZE ERAG

WALDBILLIG

CONSDORF

SCHEIDGEN

MICHELSHOF

TO CITY OF LUXEMBOURG

N

1F 12

2F 12

1G 12

2G 12

3F 12

3G 12

F-G

90 x 4

2 = 3

LEGEND

- ① MAIN ROAD
- OTHER ROADS
- ~ STREAM
- ▣ BUILDING

SCALE
APPROX. 1 1/2 INCHES TO MILE

Map A

The morning of the 16th of December started very calmly in the 2nd Battalion Command post in Consdorf. The S-3 left the CP about 0600 to go to Echternach to pick up a civilian car for the regimental commander. At the same time, the S-2 and S-4 left for F Company in Berdorf on a routine inspection. The executive officer (myself) was sitting in the CP thinking of jobs for the S-1 to do.

At 0630 artillery began to fall on the town. A few minutes later one of our supporting artillery battery commanders rushed in with the news that his CP and fire direction center had been hit as well as an M7 artillery piece. He also said he was displacing to a new location. About 0700 the wire to F Company went out but no one was particularly alarmed since it was assumed that the enemy artillery had done it. A lieutenant from F Company came in the CP about an hour later to ask for a radio and to announce that an enemy patrol of platoon strength was observed approaching Berdorf from the North.

The S-4 returned from Berdorf about 0945 and reported that F Company was in a real scrap. At the same time similar news was received from G Company.

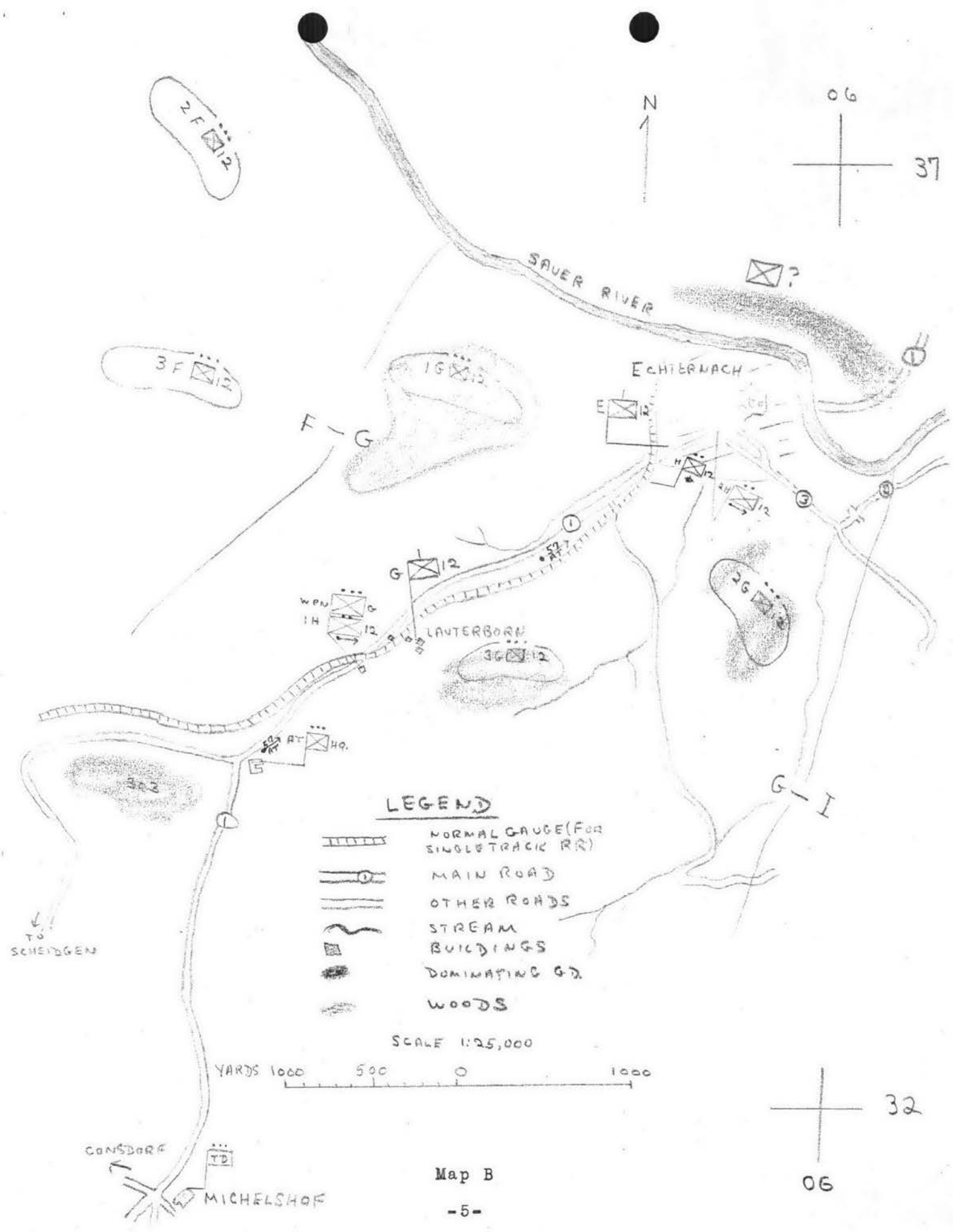
Oddly enough the wire line to Cannon Company located beyond Berdorf was still in, so the battalion commander called the company commander to see what the situation

was there. Some shooting was reported in the direction of Berdorf and the company commander promised to look into it. Before hearing from him again one of Cannon Company's officers called in to say that they were now engaged in a small arms fight. Cooke, the Cannon Company commander, came into the battalion CP about 1000 to confirm any doubts as to the size of the fight and stated he had moved his 105's to a new location.

After hearing this news the battalion commander directed me to go to G Company to learn the situation there. The S-1 grinned as I walked out because he knew that since there would be a staff officer at G Company, as well as the other two companies, his presence was pretty well assured at the CP.

On the way up Highway Number One, I studied the map to bring myself up to date on G Company's outpost locations and strength as I had a feeling I would be there at least the rest of the day. I felt this way because the regular G Company commander was in Paris on a 72 hour pass and was not due to return until the following day.

G Company, I noted, had an effective combat strength of about sixty-five men. The company was maintaining three outposts which were located to support E Company's defense of Echternach. (See map B.)



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Outpost Number One was located on the high ground directly west of Echternach and was manned by thirteen men. Outpost Number Two was on the high ground north of Echternach and was occupied by nine men. Outpost Number Three was located about 600 yards east of the point where the railroad crossed Highway Number One near Lauterborn and consisted of twelve men. A section of heavy machine guns from the heavy weapons company and a depleted weapons platoon from G Company were located about 300 yards southwest of the company command post.

On the way up to G Company, I decided to stop at the battalion antitank platoon CP to see if wire communication was in with G Company. One of the antitank platoon wiremen who had just returned from G Company stated that he had seen both Germans and Americans lined up on the road near the forward 57mm gun position which was about 1500 yards southwest of Echternach. The wireman did not know which were prisoners. Lt. Welch, the platoon leader, was getting ready to go forward and investigate this situation.

I decided that an armored vehicle was necessary for any further forward movement. My jeep driver was sent back to Michelshof to request a scout car from a detachment of tank destroyers which was located there. The lieutenant commanding the tank destroyers said that his scout cars were being repaired, and as no other assistance was offered the

driver returned alone. As the jeep approached the antitank platoon command post, it was fired on by a burp gun. The driver dove into a ditch and made his way into the building as the jeep careened into the fence on the other side of the road.

The fact that the enemy had penetrated that far made the situation now appear critical. A message was sent back to the battalion command post via one of the antitank half-tracks. The vehicle was fired on by machine gun and rifle fire as it drove out of the courtyard but it got away successfully.

About noon I decided that it would be necessary to continue on to G Company to find out more of the situation. Another half-track was used and we first tested for fire by "poking" the nose of the vehicle out of the courtyard. It drew no fire so we dashed down the road toward Lauterborn.

Upon arriving at G Company's CP, I was quickly brought up to date on the situation. Wire communication was out to all outposts except number three. Radio communication was in with E Company but battalion could not be contacted. They had been receiving fire from all four sides since 0845.

About 1330 a report on the situation at G Company was sent back to battalion via an antitank platoon half-track. The half-track drew some artillery and mortar fire as it started down the road. As it reached the antitank platoon CP, the vehicle came under enemy small arms fire.

At 1400 a sentry came in G Company's CP and reported that a large group of Germans and Americans were coming up the road but he didn't know which were prisoners. About that time someone fired and someone else yelled, "Cease firing!" By the time the confusion was quieted, the Americans who were marching ahead of the Germans had reached a point behind a stone wall which stood at the side of the road about thirty yards from the building we were in. This shielded the Americans from fire while the Germans behind remained exposed. The order to fire was given and the American prisoners hit the ditches behind the wall. There were about fifty Germans in the group together with fifteen American prisoners. The Germans had four machine guns and several burp guns. The affair settled down to a fire fight with the American prisoners pinned down behind the wall.

As the fire fight with the Germans along the road continued, the ammunition shortage began to grow more serious. Only about a hundred rounds of small arms ammunition remained. Orders were issued that no soldier would

fire a shot unless he had a definite target. This order was well obeyed and all men held their fire until they were sure of a "bull".

In the meantime, I had been in radio contact with the S-3 in Echternaeh. We had excellent communication with each other but neither of us were able to contact anyone else. The nature of the terrain and climatic conditions were such that we could only depend on the 300 radio when no hill masses intervened. This made coordination on the part of the battalion commander a very difficult problem, particularly when wire communication was out with all companies.

Meanwhile, the battalion commander had sent A Company of the first battalion with a platoon of light tanks with the mission of reestablishing contact with G Company. The force coming up the road from Michelshof had contacted the enemy east of Hill 313 and were engaged here for several hours. One platoon of A Company took Hill 313 while the rest of the force pushed on to Lauterborn. When they arrived at the company position about dark, the tanks moved past the American prisoners lying in the ditches and sprayed both sides of the road ahead. Most of the German survivors had apparently withdrawn on the approach of the tanks as only one prisoner was taken, other than one who was

badly wounded. The rest were all dead. All the Americans who had been prisoners lasted out the afternoon unhurt with the exception of two who had been previously wounded in the fight when they were captured.

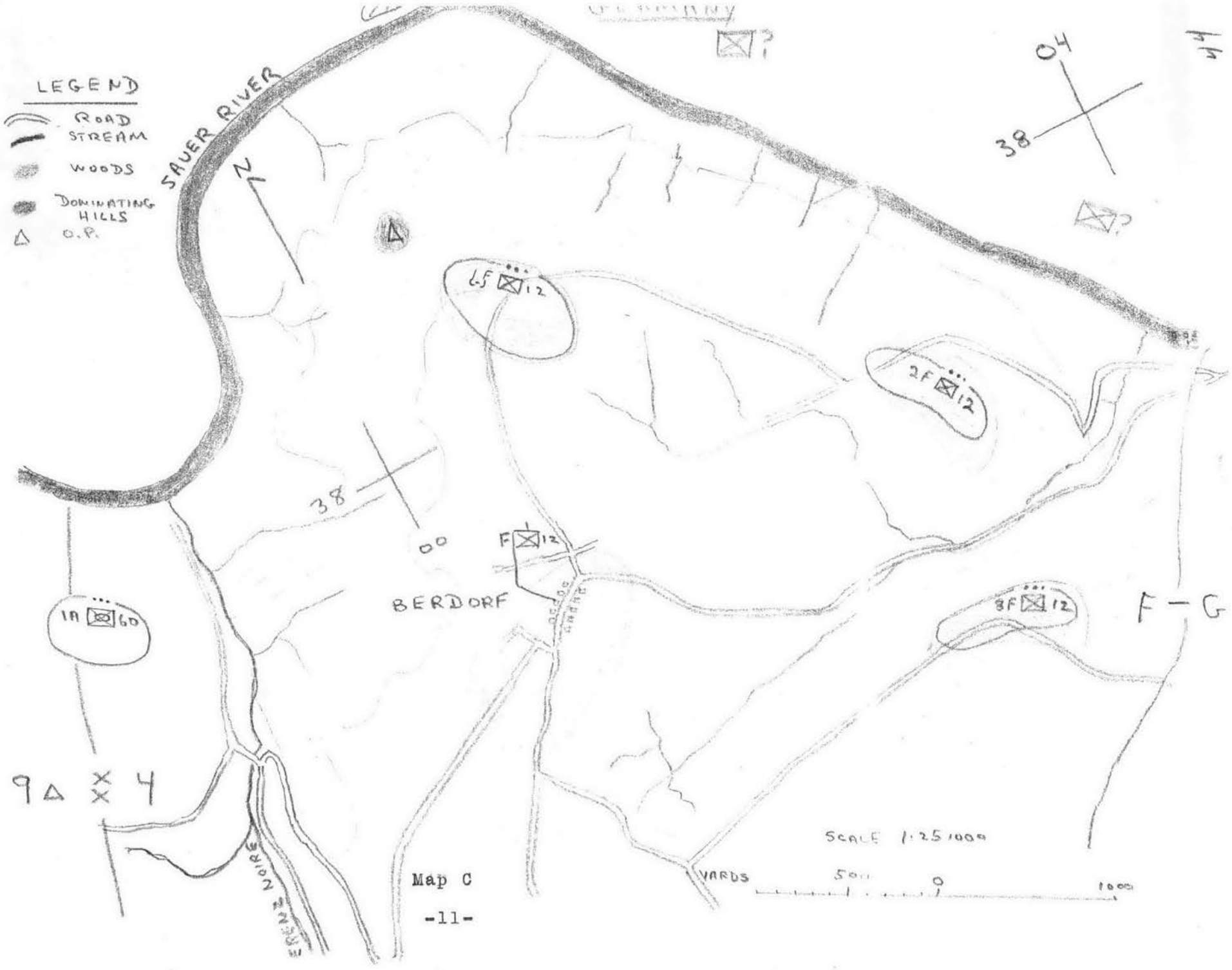
In the meantime, in F Company sector the S-2 and S-4 arrived at the CP in the Park Hotel in Berdorf. (See map C.) They were informed that the observation post on the roof of the hotel had just observed troops approaching on the road from the north. The S-2 and the company commander hurried to the roof and through the early morning fog observed some troops in a column of twos approaching the town.

Shortly after, the fireworks began! The S-4 had decided to return to the battalion command post to relay the information of what was now realized to be an attack in force. As the jeep passed the main road junction in Berdorf, it was fired upon by two or three burp guns at close range. However, it picked up speed and continued on to battalion. The driver had been hit five times but drove all the way back to Consdorf. The S-4 had numerous holes through his seat but was not hit.

The swift advance by the Germans cut off all the outposts of F Company. The only weapons larger than an automatic rifle in the CP were several bazookas and one 50 caliber machine gun.

LEGEND

- ROAD
- STREAM
- WOODS
- DOMINATING HILLS
- O.P.



Map C
-11-

SCALE 1:25,000
500 0 1000
YARDS

The Germans closed in swiftly on Berdorf. The force coming from the north occupied several houses along the east-west road just north of the hotel, while a force coming from the east occupied a part of the village proper.

The enemy troops on the north were stopped as they reached a cemetery on the northwest edge of Berdorf. The Germans that had occupied a few houses on the north edge could not move as they were pinned down by automatic rifle fire.

Lt. McConnell, the F Company officer who had gone to battalion earlier, was observed walking toward the CP with a German soldier directly behind him. (Lt. McConnell had assumed up to this point that the hotel with company headquarters must have been captured.) When he came within 50 yards of the hotel, one of the men in the CP looked out a window and yelled, "Is that your prisoner?" "Hell, no, I'm the prisoner!" was the reply. The German soldier upon seeing that the hotel was occupied by American troops immediately marched McConnell back to his platoon leader.

A few minutes later, the men in the CP saw the Germans approaching again with Lt. McConnell leading the group. Presumably the German platoon leader thought that the surrender of the Americans in the hotel was a foregone conclusion. The German sergeant instructed Lt. McConnell

(in German) to tell the Americans to come out and surrender. However, McConnell took a chance that the German could not understand English and yelled, "Everybody pick a target and fire at the same time." Then he grinned at the sergeant who grinned back. Inside the hotel command post the company commander gave the command to fire. When the firing ceased, there were 33 Germans dead and one prisoner--the platoon leader.

Inside the hotel the German sergeant pointed out on a map where the crossing was being made in F Company sector. This information was immediately relayed to battalion with a request for artillery on the crossing.

For the rest of the day the American fire kept the Germans pinned down and continued to deny the enemy use of the roads running south of Berdorf.

German artillery fired frequently at the hotel CP and by the end of the day had destroyed much of the roof and had made part of the third floor untenable. Fortunately, the Germans did not use any large caliber direct fire weapons, and they did fire a number of artillery concentrations on positions where their own troops were in the village.

Just prior to dark firing was heard to the south of Berdorf and the company commander hoped it would be reinforcements but he had no way of knowing. Actually, this was

B Company of the 1st Battalion, 12th Infantry Regiment with a platoon of light tanks and a platoon of medium tanks of the 70th Tank Battalion. This force had been stopped by the Germans that night about a mile south of Berdorf.

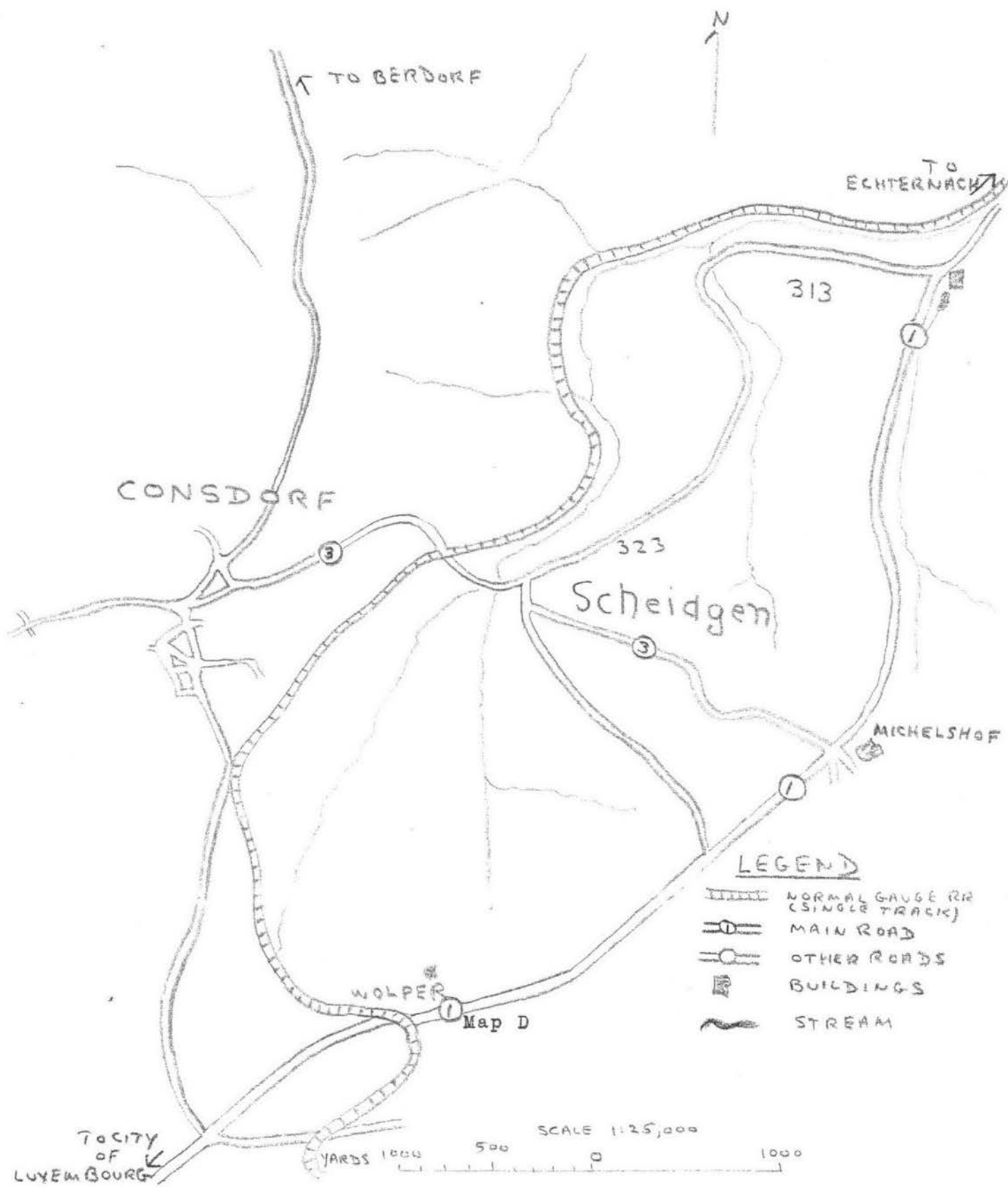
On the morning of December 17th, the second day of the enemy offensive, the Germans had infiltrated to a depth of about four kilometers into our lines and had two of our rifle companies isolated. E Company was isolated in Echternach and F Company in Berdorf. By now the situation was clearer not only in our sector but along the whole front. The entire corps front to the north was under attack; five divisions had already been identified. A full Volksgrenadier Division had been thrown against our regiment and their intentions were obvious. They had surrounded and bypassed Echternach and were moving southwest toward Scheidgen. If they could break through here they would ride Highway Number 1 down to the city of Luxembourg, then drive their panzers eastward into the Ardennes as they did in 1940.

At 1350 two hundred enemy infantrymen were sighted at a point just west of Hill 303 and were moving in a westerly direction. The platoon from A Company, composed of about 18 men, that was in position of Hill 303, was immediately moved to Scheidgen in the event that the enemy

should attack south. Plans were quickly made for a coordinated defense with a reconnaissance platoon of a tank destroyer battalion that was already in position at Scheidgen. (This tank destroyer unit was under division artillery control.) (See map D.)

I then went to Michelshef to coordinate the defense with a tank destroyer platoon in position at this important crossroad. When I reached there, I discovered the platoon had withdrawn. I immediately returned to Scheidgen and planned to use the radio of the tank destroyer unit there to find out if any instructions had been given for this unit to withdraw. Upon reaching the main crossroad in Scheidgen, my driver stopped the jeep alongside one of the buildings and I dashed across the road to check on one of the positions.

No troops or tank destroyers were in sight and it was deathly quiet in the village--so quiet that a chill ran up my spine. Suddenly one shot broke the silence and my driver was hit. I dragged the driver into an old mill across from the church and found his wound was not too serious. Shortly after we entered the mill, a terrific artillery barrage fell on the crossroad and I recognized it as our own artillery. It was then that I realized we were apparently the sole defenders of Scheidgen, and our artillery



was shelling the crossroad to deny its use to the enemy. It was decided that our chances were slim if we made a run for the jeep because we were receiving some fire from the vicinity of a manure pile about 30 yards directly behind the jeep. Further investigation showed that the enemy was also to our west about 80 yards away in the draw.

I told my driver that I would attempt to get back to battalion on foot and get some help as quickly as possible and that he would be okay if he stayed right where he was and did not try to move. As I dashed across the road, I was fired on from both the east and the west. Suddenly, a German soldier to the west of the church spotted me and fired one long burst with a burp gun. This was my lucky day as he shot high and to my rear. I breathed a sigh of relief as I rounded the cemetery wall and quickly ran into the draw south of the church. I was just ready to slow down to a trot when I almost collided with five young German soldiers moving in a skirmish line in the same direction. Seeing them too late to stop, I gave a yell such as is only heard in Class B Westerns and the Germans hit the ground. I quickly swung to the side and dashed into the woods ahead of them before they had a chance to get off a shot. I then worked my way around to Michelshof to make a final check and found this location completely deserted.

Continuing south parallel to Highway Number 1, I found the tank destroyer platoon lined up in column along the road in the vicinity of Welper. This platoon had previously been in position at Michelshof. I then proceeded on to the battalion CP at Gensdorf.

I reported to the battalion commander the situation as I had seen it at Scheidgen and Michelshof and requested tanks and any men that could be spared to accompany me back to Scheidgen. None were available but the regimental antitank company was committed at Scheidgen and successfully attacked and took the dominating high ground just west of the town. The situation was temporarily solved.

In F Company's sector the situation became exceedingly desperate on the 17th as five enemy companies attacked southward up the Schwarze-Ernz River valley toward the town of Mullerthal. A task force was formed to intercept the enemy on the high ground south of Mullerthal. When the enemy met this task force they changed direction and turned west into the 9th Armored Division sector and were engaged by the 60th Armored Infantry Battalion of the 9th Armored Division.

Cannon Company of the regiment was now going into position near Scheidgen and had just completed its gun position locations when it was attacked. This force later was

identified as elements of the 316th German Infantry Regiment. So desperate was the fight that ensued that the men fired their 105's point blank at the attackers at ranges of less than 100 yards. Cannon Company held.

On the morning of the 18th, three task forces from CCA 10th Armored Division attacked in multiple columns in our battalion sector. This unit was on a separate mission and their attack was in "cooperation" with the 12th Infantry Regiment and was not under orders of the 4th Infantry Division.

In F Company sector a task force of CCA arrived at the south end of Berdorf about 0900. This force was composed of two platoons of armored infantry and a company of tanks. An attack was launched in conjunction with B Company which was pushing through the village. About seventy-five yards were gained but there was no further advance that day.

Another task force attacked toward Echternach. Two tanks got into the town and found E Company's CP location. They reported that three other tanks were on the outskirts of the town and they would return to their unit that night but would return to G Company the following morning. E Company reported that it had received orders from General Barton that there would be no retrograde movement; that it had received no contrary orders; that they had killed 150 Germans; that they would therefore stay and kill some more.

On the morning of the 19th, tanks again reached E Company in Echternach. They helped reconsolidate its positions and the company was just going to take some tanks and see if they could locate the light machine gun section, when the tankers apparently received a call to return to their own area outside of the town. Casualties were evacuated with the tanks.

Prior to the time the task force had moved into Echternach, battalion had received the instructions that E Company withdraw. The battalion commander had received no information to the effect that this task force had orders to leave Echternach or E Company would have been ordered to leave with this tank unit. In the meantime, German tanks moved into Echternach and all attempts to reach E Company failed. The S-3 decided to send out an officer to get the tanks and bring them back again. As the officer raced in a jeep from the factory CP, an enemy tank fired point blank at the vehicle but the shot went wild. The jeep made it safely through a gauntlet of fire back to Consdorf.

About 2000 on the night of the 19th of December, E Company was contacted by radio and directed to withdraw to G Company in small units. E Company replied that it was impossible because of the lack of communications with all of the defending small groups.

Early on the morning of the 20th about 0100, the unit was directed to withdraw by 0200 as heavy artillery concentrations would fall on Echternach at 0200 and 0400 and the town would be bombed at noon. It is not known if this message was fully understood as radio communications were very poor at this time.

The last message received from E Company was at 1221 Wednesday, December 20th. It said in effect, "I'm coming out and returning to you." But when the great Ardennes offensive was over, it was sadly but definitely established that E Company, in the face of overwhelming odds, and completely cut off from any hope of reinforcements, had been forced to surrender on December 20th. The battalion S-3 later gave this graphic account of the final hours in Echternach:

"The Germans surrounded us with tanks and a battalion of infantry. We fought for five days and four nights. We had one bazooka and one light machine gun left; that was our only support. By the fifth day we had lost most of our men and at about two o'clock in the afternoon the Germans forced the rest of us into one building. We tallied about 20 in all. We fought that way for about three hours more. Then the Germans closed in for the kill with both tanks and infantry. We were located in the garage and tanks were firing into it from both the front and the rear. We suffered eight or ten casualties in one blast. That convinced

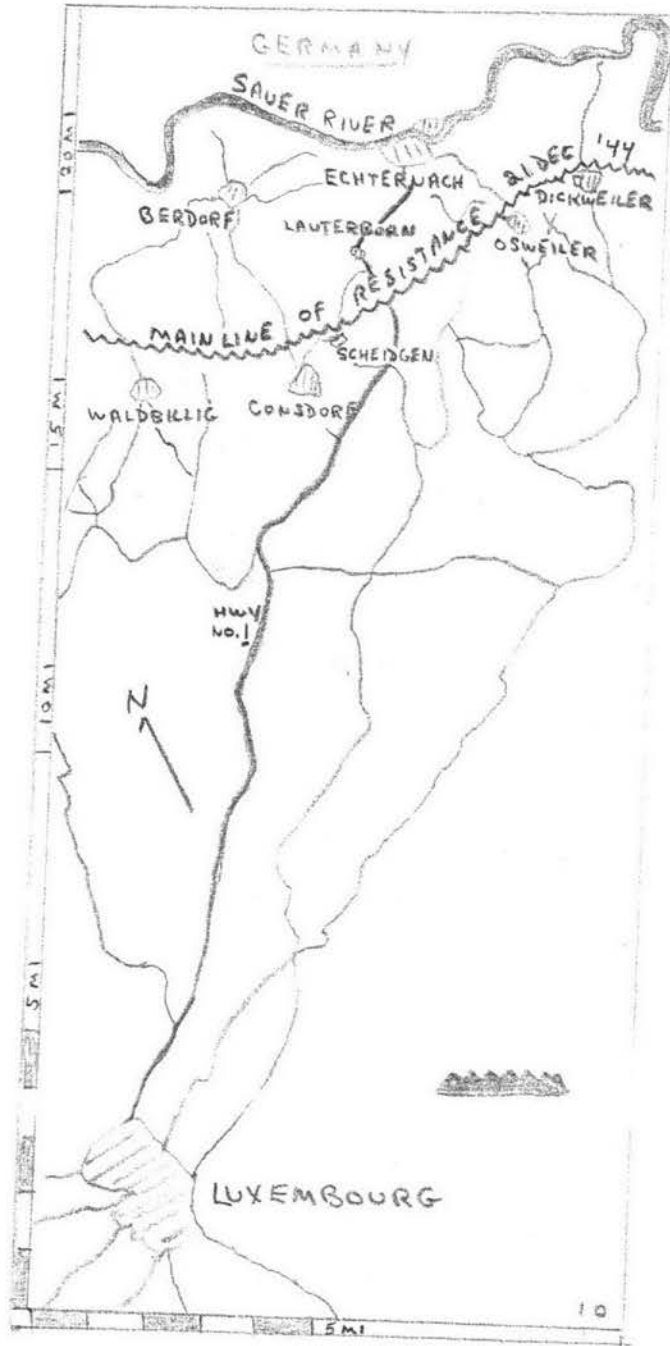
MacDiarmid, McWhorter and myself that it was hopeless to fight on. At about four-thirty or five o'clock on the afternoon of the 20th we were forced to surrender. Of one thing I am certain--for every one of our men the Germans killed or captured, we killed at least two of theirs. When they marched us toward their lines, we counted at least 350 dead Germans.²

On the 20th the Germans attacked all day in both F Company's and G Company's sectors. Companies A and G were ordered to withdraw from Lauterborn to the vicinity of Michelshof. Companies B and F were ordered to withdraw to positions about a mile north of Gonsdorf. Both withdrawals were successfully accomplished the night of the 20th of December.

When the 2nd Battalion consolidated its lines on December 21st, F Company had only twenty-one men. G Company had approximately forty plus seventy military police, signalmen, clerks, and cooks which were sent from division headquarters. (See map E.)

When F Company moved into their new position between 0100 and 0200 on the morning of the 22nd of December, they had no overcoats or blankets and their foxholes were half filled with icy water. They held this position for three days and nights and repulsed several strong enemy attacks. It snowed during the night of the 22nd and the

2. Colonel Gerden F. Johnson, History of Twelfth Infantry Regiment in World War II, p. 251.



Map E

temperature dropped well below freezing. It was not until the next morning that overcoats and blankets were given them. During these three days the twenty-one man company lost seven men--one killed, three wounded and three frozen.

The last concentrated attack in the battalion sector was made on the 22nd of December. A regiment of the enemy attacked the line in the vicinity of Michelshof. The defenders held their fire while they counted 148 Germans advancing across an open field. When they came near, tanks, tank destroyers, engineers, and infantry opened fire. Only three Germans crawled away. There were 142 counted dead-- a murderous slaughter. One lone German surrendered.

The 2nd Battalion, 12th Infantry Regiment was relieved in its sector about 1600, December 24th, 1944.

In general, this battalion played an important role in holding the south shoulder of the great German counteroffensive. The full weight of the 212th Volksgrenadier Division was thrown into this attack against this battalion. The dogged determination of this unit and the reinforcing units to hold the road net and the dominating terrain within its sector saved many miles for our troops on their subsequent counterattack to the north. Our troops refused to be panic-stricken by mass infiltration of German battalions as deep into our lines as five kilometers. Units held ground

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and fought the Nazis even though they were surrounded and cut off for periods of three or four days. Their accomplishment should serve as a lesson to all that success of defensive operations of this type depends directly on the actions of individual soldiers.

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