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OPERATIONS OF THE 106TH INFANTRY DIVISION IN THE  
BATTLE OF THE BULGE, 15-22 DECEMBER 1944  
(Ardennes-Alsace Campaign)

Type of operation described: AN INFANTRY DIVISION DEFENDING AGAINST  
AN ATTACK IN HILLY, WOODED COUNTRY, AND THE DEFENSE OF THE TOWNS IN  
THE AREA

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INDEX..... i

BIBLIOGRAPHY.....ii

ORIENTATION..... 1

    Introduction..... 1

    The Situation on the Western Front..... 1

    The General Situation..... 2

    The enemy situation and plans..... 4

    Summary of the Situation. 15 December 1944..... 4

THE 106th DIVISION IN THE BATTLE OF THE BULGE (Narrative)..... 5

    The Germans Open Up..... 5

    The 422nd and 423rd Bow Out..... 10

    The Fall of St Vith..... 11

    Summary of the Action..... 12

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM..... 12

LESSONS..... 14

MAP 1 The Western Front 15 December 1944

MAP 2 Unit Sectors 106th Division

MAP 3 German Plan for the Offensive-December 1944

MAP 4 Action of 106th Division and Attached Units. 15-22 December 1944

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OPERATIONS OF THE 106TH INFANTRY DIVISION IN THE  
BATTLE OF THE BULGE, 15-22 DECEMBER 1944  
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ORIENTATION

Introduction

1. General

You can say one thing about the German counteroffensive of December 1944: It has furnished a lot of people a good chance to sound off on their views as to how a war should or should not be fought.

True, in a nation like ours, everyone is privileged to second guess the people who conduct the government and even those who have sacrificed their lives on the battlefield. The Battle of the Bulge is no exception. Certainly, the lessons learned there, and the mistakes made, are worthy of discussion, and, as far as that goes, such discussion should make better soldiers of us all. However, it seems to me that all too often, talk of the 106th and its widely publicized battle, centers around derisive comments as to the fighting ability and courage of the officers and enlisted men of the division. I have heard army officers make direct statements that there were too many cowards and incompetents in the battalions of the division. Lets settle that once and for all by realizing that the division was made up of young, trained fighting Americans, the same as any other division in the army. Battle experience was lacking, and the division had more than its share of new replacements that had not been trained together to work as a team, but that hasn't been a novel situation in any war.

The purpose of this short history, then, is first to consider the reasons the attack was launched by the Germans, what they desired to accomplish, their plan for doing it, and finally, by following the action, give army officers the facts from which to begin a study of the battle without rumors affecting his thinking.

2. The Situation on the Western Front

By the 15th of December 1944, the Allied armies held a line in the West, generally from NICE, on the Mediterranean coast, north to

the center of The Netherlands. (1) The Italian boot was almost entirely in our hands. The few scattered pockets of resistance in southern France were well contained. (2) One particular advantage now held by the Allies was the fact that the port of Antwerp, through which a tremendous amount of military supplies was pouring, was in our hands. This would make a big difference when it came to starting our push across the Rhine and into the heart of Germany. Further, Russia had the enemy stopped cold in the East. Hitler must have realized that some sort of offensive action on his part, was the only possible way to gain the time he needed to perfect his planned new air weapons which he thought would bring about our defeat. The time was ripe for a german show, and they really put one on. The fact that it was pretty much of an enemy action warrants a pretty thorough look at the situation from their point of view. But first, lets bring the Allied picture in the Ardennes up to date.

### The General Situation (3)

#### 1. Freindly Forces

During December 1944, immediately prior to the time the 106th division went into the line to relieve the 28<sup>th</sup> division in the VIII Corps zone on the First Army front, the Sixth and Twelfth Army Groups were poised for the final drive into and through central and southern Germany, and the Twenty-first Army Group was in the process of cleaning out the remainder of The Netherlands, in preparation for seizing the great german ports and other territory in the north. In general, the mission of the First Army was, along with the Ninth Army in the north, was to first destroy the enemy west of the Rhine, secure the bridgeheads across the river, and then continue the attack eastward. (4) Elements of both armies had reached the Roer river, which could be considered the last real defensive position in the sector, west of the Rhine. At least from the standpoint of the Ninth Army. (This fact assumes greater importance when viewed in the light of the Ninth Army's important part in the plan of encircling the Ruhr industrial area to the north. The V Corps on the north flank of the VIII, to which the 106th was to be assigned, was attacking to seize certain dams on the Roer, control of

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(1) Map 1.  
(2) B-1 (Map 1)  
(3) B-1 Pg 7  
(4) B-1 Pg 1

which by the Germans kept Ninth Army units virtually stalemated at the Roer river line, <sup>Q</sup> to the fact that the enemy would have been able to flood out and considerably delay any attack. The VIII Corps held the southern portion of the First Army zone, in general along the OUR river, (5) with a mission described in orders as "aggressive defense". The VII Corps was north of the Vth on the Roer banks.

By 1530 on December 12 1944 the 106th division, with the 14th Cavalry Group, the 275th Armored FA Battalion (105mm), the 820th TD Battalion and the 634th AAA (AW) Battalion attached, (6) assumed the responsibility for a twenty-two mile front in a rugged, hilly, forested area extending in general, along former German Siegfried line defenses between the V Corps zone and the 28th division to the south, and were ordered to relieve the 2nd division, "man for man, and gun for gun". (7) Dispositions of the regiments and the 14th Cav Grp are shown on map 2.

Much has been said about the inadequacy of the positions the 106th assumed. Let it suffice here, to say that, in the first place, our men were, in many cases, in positions or very near positions that had previously been occupied by the enemy, and secondly, many of the villages occupied by our troops in the area were surrounded by hills with excellent fields of direct fire into them. (8) Further, I have often heard it stated that the people of the 2nd division were just a little bit "too busy" to properly orient their relief. Lets <sup>ON</sup> remember to stick to established facts, however.

It is a matter of history that the defense area taken over by the 106th was considered a quiet one. It seems reasonable to assume that a false sense of security had been built up in the minds of the personnel of the division prior to the counterattack. A typical example of the attitude that existed on our side was an order published by the 423rd infantry on the 10th of December. It reminded all men that they should guard against becoming trigger happy, to be sure and not interfere with attempts of German soldiers to surrender, and to remember that if they were too aggressive it would only bring trouble to them by causing the enemy to become more aggressive himself. This attitude, coupled with the fact that rugged terrain and weather

- (5) B-1 pg 2
- (6) B-2 pg 3
- (7) B-2 pg 3
- (8) B-3

made supply difficult, (9) leads one to believe that at the critical time of the attack the division generally was just not quite prepared for it.

## 2. The enemy situation and plans

It is now general knowledge that late in 1944 Hitler was firmly of the opinion that there must be a quick start of that all out offensive he had been planning. At least one writer tells us, (10) that the only purpose of the attack was to slow up the Allied advance so that Germany would have a longer time to perfect new weapons and other defenses of her homeland; that even they, realized that their "On to Antwerp" cry was just a little bit hollow. However, that is another story, and is brought up here simply to emphasize the fact that the Germans must have planned on using captured Allied supplies, especially gasoline, to support their attack. And who knows? They might have gone a long way. In military history, many plans have succeeded partly because they seemed impossible. In brief, the German plan (11) was to launch a surprise ground attack through the Ardennes, (see Map 3 for an illustration of the plan), reach the MEUSE river, then swing north toward the port of Antwerp. There seems no doubt that had this plan succeeded the end of the war would have been delayed a great deal, to put it mildly. In addition, there was to be a parachute attack behind our lines, and also an ambitious scheme to use German soldiers in American uniform and with captured American vehicles to do sabotage and create panic in general behind our lines, and, it is rumored, make an attempt to assassinate General Eisenhower.

## 3. Summary of the Situation. 15 December 1944

So there you have it: A German force of twenty two divisions (12) eight of them armored divisions, all the supplies the enemy could muster, effecting complete surprise, in weather that denied us use of our air superiority to any great extent, planning to make an all out Infantry-Tank attack over territory considered at best only fair tank country. Probably worse than fair. Possibly the enemy troops in the line were not the cream of the Super Race, but still they had, according to G-2 reports that came out later, too much later by the way, been specially trained and instilled with the idea that they were making a last ditch fight for their country.

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(9) the road net to many positions was bad.

(10) B-4

(11) B-5 pg 103

(12) B-5 pg 104

And on our side: Our forces taken completely when it did) come. A green division bearing the brunt of the attack in positions zeroed in by enemy artillery. Positions that turned out to be not too sound anyway. But we had one thing more. A bunch of men that turned out to have the strength, the courage, and the fighting hearts that it took to slow up the attack to the point that before too many days it was evident that the Germans had shot their last bolt and it wasn't enough.

THE 106TH DIVISION IN THE BATTLE OF THE BULGE (13)  
(Narrative)

The Germans Open Up

At 0530 16 December, the Germans started their big push with an artillery bombardment all along the division front. The shelling lasted until 0615, doing considerable damage to communications and installations in general, including those in ST VITH, the location of division headquarters. After this, there was an advance of enemy foot and panzer units according to the German plan.

In the north, the enemy advanced rapidly and succeeded in penetrating the defenses of the 99th division to the north of the 106th's zone, then proceeded to strike for the town of SCHONBERG. The advancing Germans made short work of pushing through the main elements of the 14th cavalry group, which was defending a front of seven miles in territory hardly suitable for taking advantage of their inherent mobility. All contact with the 99th division was lost, and the enemy threatened the north flank of the 422 Infantry, which was also being pushed by enemy from the south. In order to relieve this situation, that night at 2000, the division commander, Major General Alan W Jones, sent the division reserve (2nd bn 423rd) from its position in defense of SCHONBERG, to the north to secure the left flank of the 422nd. Evidently because of misunderstood orders (14) the battalion moved south toward BLEIALF on the night of the 16th, so, for the time at least, was no help to the 422nd. In summarizing the situation of the 422nd after the first day of fighting, the original front line positions had held against

(13) Map 4

(140 B-3 pg 44

Note\*-Material for this history of the action was taken from all available records in TIS library pertaining to VIII Corps and the 106th Div. Sources include G-3 Journals and Periodic reports, G-2 Periodic reports, messages between commanders and various other unit reports and overlays, all of which were carefully compared with reference material listed in the bibliography.



light enemy attacks but it had been forced to roll with the german punch from the north, and the supporting artillery was forced to displace after doing a good job of slowing up the enemy during the day. In other words, the regiment was still in there fighting but needed help. At least, the enemy had prevented from completely getting into the rear of the regiment and still had a lot of fighting to do before he could be in position to make a concentrated attack on ST VITH. Remember that ST VITH was a very important point to the enemy because of its command of the road nets through the area.

In the 423rd infantry sector the enemy struck at several points and especially in the area where the regiment was linked up to the 424th. The front positions were kept fairly intact but the germans had gotten into the rear from the south. Contact with the 424th was lost. The regiment was weakened of course, by the fact that one of its battalions was being used as division reserve, and it had been necessary to round up all service troops possible to defend the southern portion of the regimental front. Actually the 423rd like the 422nd had held up the enemy sufficiently to keep him out of the key areas necessary for making his attack on ST Vith, same as the 422nd had done further north.

The 424th Infantry was also hit all along its front during the first day. The main enemy penetration turned out to be through the area southeast of WINTERSPELT. Fighting was heavy at all points but by the end of the day, the reserve battalion having been committed in defense of WINTERSPELT, THINGS were pretty well in hand, but of course both flanks were in danger.

Summarizing the division situation at the end of the first day of action, it can be seen that although the enemy advanced generally still there had not been a general breakthrough of the lines. In order to keep up the schedule of his plans, the enemy had to make time in capturing ST VITH. He hadn't done it. While the first day certainly cannot be called the turning point of the battle, after all, the germans were to go a long way, still, I believe that were it not for the resistance put up by the division, the enemy might well have been on their way to a quick dash through to ST VITH within the next two days. As it was, when they did take the town, the over all

defense of the Bulge area by the combined power of the Twelfth and Twenty-first Army Groups had taken such shape that the whole counterattack plan had, for all practical purposes, failed. Regardless of all that of course the situation was now critical in the division zone. The 14th Cavalry had been overrun. There had been a penetration between the 423rd and the 424th and also in the southern portion of the 424th sector. On the bright side of the picture, Corps had attached CC B of the 9th Armored division to the 106th and had promised that the 7th Armored would be in the area by the next morning. Official reports show that the division organic units suffered 400 casualties during the first day, while there were three hundred in the 14th Cavalry. According to Division Artillery reports, approximately 12 artillery pieces were either lost or out of action.

In conjunction with the opening of the enemy ground attack, the enemy had, according to plan, dropped approximately eight hundred parachutists in the area north of the division zone. Their mission was to prevent reinforcements from getting into the area from the north. As it turned out later these troops were rounded up rather quickly by other units and the plan had little success.

At the same time, information was received through documents captured in the 424th zone, of the activities of the enemy in connection with Operation "Greif", which was the German plan mentioned earlier by which enemy troops disguised as American soldiers would create what disturbance they could behind our lines. This operation, which, it was later revealed, was under the direction of the notorious Otto Skorzeny, famed for his part in the rescue of Mussolini, and other daring feats, was actually initiated and had some measure of success. But in the long run, it seems to me, it served only to impress upon the Americans, the need for careful security measures in the rear areas. Higher headquarters immediately made it a point to publicize the plan and immediate measures were taken in all areas to apprehend all participants in the scheme.

During the second day of the offensive, the drives of the enemy began to take the shape of one prong from the direction of the SCHONBERG area advancing southwest and the other on a northwest axis,

HABSCHIED-LOMMERSWEILER, both heading toward ST VITH. The division had been ordered by Corps to hold the general line in rear of the OUR river at all costs. (15) This was to become an impossible task, but on the other hand, there was still fighting to be done forward of that line.

Shortly after midnight on the night of 16-17 December, contact was made with CC B 9th Armored, and General Jones immediately ordered that unit to destroy the enemy in the vicinity of WINTERSPELT, and then withdraw the armor to an area near STEINEBRUCK on the west bank of the OUR, prepared to counterattack from there.

Early on 17 December, the enemy started to shell the town of BLEIALF in the 423rd sector and during the day, captured the town, turned north and joined another enemy force advancing from in front of SCHONBERG. As a result of this drive, the 422nd and 423rd with their attached units had been virtually bottled up in their areas. Elements of the 14th Cavalry reported that they were fighting the enemy in front of SCHONBERG. All regiments were ordered to withdraw to the OUR river line at 1445. This included the 424th on the south. Of course the 422nd and 423rd would have to fight their way back and it meant driving the enemy out of SCHONBERG.

In the meantime the battered 14th cavalry had managed to pull its forces together and had established a semblance of a line between BORN and MEYERODE, but during the day, it had been necessary to fall <sup>back</sup> running from BORN southeast through WALLERODE. Now, the enemy was occupying SCHONBERG in strength. At noon, the Cavalry further withdrew and seemed out of the fight.

The 422 Infantry, threatened by the enemy on the left, turned its positions facing north, and while no definite enemy push was made toward them, they were still practically out of contact with any of the rest of our forces. They had received word from division that armored help was on the way, so the position running from the original front line east through SCHLAUSENBACH, was held. The enemy was of course, immediately to their left in SCHONBERG.

During the day, the 424th was being hard pressed. On the previous night, the enemy had infiltrated into WINTERSPELT. The Germans fought through from there on another route to ST VITH. CC B 9th Armored finally was

committed from the vicinity of STEINEBRUCH, but the over all picture was changed very little and the armored forces later withdrew west of the OUR. Late in the day, the command was weakened by the dispatch of two companies and attached Tank Destroyers and a battery of AAA to the north to help stop the enemy on the division left flank.

At this time it would be well to review the situation as to attached troops as well as organic units attached to the regiments, and further, the Div Arty situation: The 81st Engineer battalion, organic to the division had been pressed into service in defense of ST VITH, fighting in an infantry role. Division had lost contact with the 590th and 591st FA Battalions, firing in direct support of the 423 and 424th regiments respectively. The 589th was bottled up in the area around RADSCHIED, with the isolated 422 and 423rd. The 592nd, in general support, had initially been given the mission of reinforcing the fires of the 589th. The 275th FA Battalion, which at the start, had supported the 14th Cavalry, was in position near ST VITH. During the morning, 17 December, the 168th Engineer battalion was also defending ST VITH and its commander was put in charge of the defense of the city. He had under his control, beside his own battalion, parts of the 81st Engineers, one platoon of the 820th TD Battalion, which had also been with the 14th Cav originally, and the defense platoon of division headquarters.

By the end of the day (17 December) the enemy was hammering at ST VITH from the north and while not so close on the south were still a very big threat. CC B 9th Armored was helping to strengthen the defense of the OUR river to the south. CC B 7th Armored had arrived, (12 hours later than was promised by corps) and was taking part in the defense of ST VITH. The remainder of the 7th Armored was on the way and possibly could help stem the tide on the north. What was left of the 14th Cavalry was pressed into service again and was trying to retake the town of BORN and secure the left flank of the 7th Armored. It was learned later that by this time the 422 and 423 were definitely surrounded, but were still in radio contact with division on an intermittent basis. The enemy was in position in the south to attack the OUR river line, but they seemed to be making their biggest effort pushing at

ST VITH. The enemy was in position to take command of the road from ST VITH to the rear and seemed to be probing for a chance to get into the town that way. On 18 December the main action seemed to be around ST VITH. The 14th Cav was again virtually driven out of action in the vicinity of POTEAU, to the northwest of ST VITH, but CC B 7th Armored was in the fight now and regardless of the continued threat, we were still holding out at the end of the day. South of ST VITH, the defenders were trying to make contact with CC B 9th Armored, but that outfit was having troubles of its own. The enemy forced a crossing of the OUR river and for a time contact was lost between the armored forces and the 424th. Patrols, however, finally met, and also linked forces in front of ST VITH for the first time from their new positions to the rear around NEIDENGEN.

The position of the 424th on the 18th of December was anything but solid. To the south, the Germans had smashed into the whole front of the 28th division. The 28th's north regiment, the 112th was isolated and was also out of contact with the 424th. The 424th did have contact of sorts with the 27th Armored Infantry of the 9th armored on its left. The regiment held its position roughly on an axis WEWELER-BRACHT-ST VITH, during the day. In their area, the enemy was still east of the OUR. The division command post evacuated ST VITH during that day and opened at VEILSALM at 1800.

#### The 422nd and 423rd Bow Out

Before daylight 18 December the two encircled regiments had received orders by radio directing them to advance westward from their positions and attack SCHONBERG. Commanders of the regiments, who were in contact with each other, agreed that the 423rd would move out first, but there was no detailed coordination between them. (16) Incidentally there are numerous messages, letters, and other statements in the official division records in regard requests for and promises of an air drop of supplies for the surrounded units. However supplies were never dropped. (17), according to statements of men in the area, and I have never been able to find evidence that they were.

Both units started their task of making their way over unfamiliar ground toward SCHONBERG. Most of the 423rd made it and by the morning of 19 December were on the outskirts of the town. The 422nd was not so

lucky. They met plenty of the enemy on the way and only a small force reached SCHONBERG to link up with the 423rd again. There were simply too many enemy in the area. Our side never had a chance. That day was just about the finish of the two regiments. It was too bad. True, the weak attack they were able to threaten with had the effect of further delaying the enemy pressure on ST VITH and thus was of value, but it seems, that properly supplied, the units could have held out in their original positions and have been of more value in the long run. I certainly agree with Colonel Ernest Dupuy, writer of the division history, that if the ill fated attack on SCHONEBERG had to be, then by all means it could have been more thoroughly planned and coordinated. I have heard from seperate scources that during the early morning 19 December the 422nd elements that reached SCHONBERG engaged in a fire fight with the 423rd before the units identified each other.

#### The Fall of ST VITH

Elsewhere on the front, the 424th, on the 19th December was still holding a line but was again out of contact with either flank, and its strength was dwindling. Finally, contact with the 112th was again made and that regiment, which still had not been able connect with its own division to the south, was attached to the 106th and by the end of 20 December was protecting the south flank of the division.

The enemy rush was still held clear of ST VITH by the end of 20th December. The 7th armored to the north and the 9th armored to the south were hard pressed though. That night, the engineers started laying additional mines in defense of the city. Germans were striking hard against the 9th armored in the NEIDENGEN area. Remnants of the 14th cavalry were now attached to the 7th armored, as was the 275th FA Battalion. The 106th Division was ordered under control of First Army this day and was to be assigned to the XVIII Airborne Corps.

By the morning 21 December, the germans had completely broken through and around the 28th division on the 106th's south flank. The 112th Infantry, fighting way back in the vicinity of HOUFFALIZE, again reverted to the control of its parent unit. Things were getting hotter and

hotter around ST VITH. East both the north and south flanks, the enemy was in some cases as far west as VEILSALM. The salient was facing the enemy on at least three sides. During the night of the 21st December, the town fell and at last the Germans had control of the road nets he needed for the success of his plans. Of course he was too late. After taking the town, the enemy prepared for an attack on VEILSALM.

That just about ended the 106th's part in this particular battle.

On 22 December, Major General Jones was appointed assistant commander of the XVIII Corps. Brigadier General Herbert T Perrin assumed command. The 424th joined other units in the defense of the VEILSALM area for the day and was ordered to the rear during the night of 22-23 December. By this time Germans were swarming all over the area and it was touchy business for the 424th and the Artillery to break contact, but the move went well. What was left of the division was on its way to a well earned rest. Actually before two days had passed they were committed again, but that is another story.

#### Summary of the Action

In bearing everything the Germans had to offer in the very heart of the counterattack the 106th division was virtually cut to ribbons during the first week of the Bulge. The enemy sorely needed the communication center of ST VITH under their control in order to continue the attack with success in that sector. The town was finally taken and the area was sewed up. But not until their time schedule had been slowed down to an extent that the Bulge was by that time was merely a salient in our lines, soon to be wiped out by the combined strength of twenty two divisions of the best the Allies had. There is no doubt that by the time the 106th was pulled out of the line, the enemy cause was lost.

#### ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

##### 1. Original Defensive Positions

There can be no doubt that the defensive positions, in general, of the division front line units were far from perfect. I believe the whole thing centered around the matter of a false sense of security. The general feeling from the highest headquarters in the Theatre down to the

individual soldier, that a German attack was practically out of the question. I believe that the initial breakthrough would not have been so complete and could have been slowed down a great deal easier if commanders from the regimental level down had really done something about those questionable positions. Much has been said about the wording of the Corps order to the effect that the division should take over the 2nd Division positions man for man and gun for gun. To me, that is certainly not an excuse for unit commanders to have let the matter drop. I believe that immediate pushing of the matter of moving to higher ground and in some cases out of former Seigfried positions which were naturally zeroed in by the Germans, should have been the order of the day. The fact that it wasn't cannot be blamed on higher headquarters.

## 2. German Secrecy Methods

Of course, the enemy did a magnificent job of surprising us, and as a result greatly benefitted from it. But our G-2 reports show that German soldiers and small unit commanders were not well oriented on the general plan. In particular, the parachute invasion failed dismally because, it seemed, that no one was sure of just what the mission was. It seems to me that that is one reason why they were so quickly rounded up by our forces.

## 3. Reinforcements

One thing that stands out in my mind about the first day of action is the position of the Division commander in trying to decide on the disposition of his major units in the fluid situation. Having been promised that an armored combat command would be available to him early on the morning 17 December must have had an effect on his decisions in regard to his battered front line forces. The fact that two regiments were surrounded and finally lost, makes one feel that possibly he could have saved them if he had known that help would not arrive sooner the next day.

## 4. Battlefield Supply

The 422 and 423 combat teams were completely cut off from the rest of the division, but still capable of fighting if supplied. It just doesn't stand to reason that the job of supplying them by air was an impossible task. They were not resupplied, therefore someone along the line didn't take the right kind of action to see that it was done.



## 5. Use of Cavalry Units

Admittedly the area occupied by the division was not in good country for vehicle movement cross country. However, Armor was being used by the enemy. The 14th Cavalry Group, in the north, was in very rough country, defending a large front with no chance to use their vehicles tactically and without the strength in organic weapons needed to defend such a sector. I have been unable to determine that they had been furnished with extra weapons. Even with lines drawn thin, it seems that this unit might have been used to better advantage where the road net was better.

## 6. Coordination of Effort

When division ordered the illfated attack by the isolated 422nd and 423rd regiments on the town of SCHONBERG, coordination of their plans should not have been left to chance. Possibly the mere act of officially appointing of one officer to be responsible for the action would have helped the chances of success.

## 7. The Use of Armor

A large scale attack with expected results as planned by the Germans, certainly needed the help of the continued shock action and the speed of great numbers of tanks. Great surprise was effected, yet the enemy, while he played havoc with our forces, was unable to really get under way because the area picked for the attack was unsuitable for getting the full advantages of his armor at the outset of the drive.

### LESSONS

1. The bravest of men cannot defend inferior positions. Immediate and aggressive action must be taken by small unit commanders to correct unsuitable positions.
2. The value of surprise is lost if in effecting it forces are not adequately briefed on tactical plans.
3. Higher headquarters must make sure that commanders are fully informed as to the true picture of the reinforcement situation at all times. This information, the commander must have in making decisions as to troop positions.
4. There is no excuse for letting administrative details prevent embattled troops from being resupplied by air when there is no other means available.
5. Mobile troops should be employed so as to obtain the advantages of their mobility.
6. Higher headquarters must never fail to accept responsibility for coordination of the battle effort of units of the command, even in the heat of a fluid situation.

7. Armor attacks with long range objectives must be launched in an area of the best ~~task~~ country, that does not have to be secured prior to the main thrust.