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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 501 PARACHUTE INFANTRY REGIMENT,
101ST AIRBORNE DIVISION AT BASTOGNE, BELGIUM, 19-20 DECEMBER 1944
(ARDENNES CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Regimental Operations Officer)

Type of Operation Described: REGIMENT IN A MEETING ENGAGEMENT
AND REINFORCED REGIMENT IN DEFENSE

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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 501 PARACHUTE INFANTRY REGIMENT,
101ST AIRBORNE DIVISION AT BASTOGNE, BELGIUM, 19-20 DECEMBER, 1944
(ARDENNES' CAMPAIGN)
(Personal Experience of a Regimental Operations Officer)

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of the 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division at Bastogne, Belgium, 19-20 December, 1944.

Though this monograph is principally concerned with the action of a regimental combat team in a meeting engagement and a subsequent defense following contact with the enemy, because of the peculiar status of the regiment at the time, and the peculiarly unique situation which caused its commitment, it will be necessary to treat at some length with the actions transpiring at Headquarters higher than the 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment. It is impossible to set these actions apart. The mistakes and inadequacies by virtue of the situation, which had their origin at higher Headquarters, were duplicated and reflected in the actions of the unit described.

In order that the reader will be properly oriented on the events leading up to the commitment of the 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment, it is necessary to consider the situation on the Western Front prior to the time this action opens.

By late November 1944, winter, with all its fury, had come to the Western Front. Icy winds, rain, snow, and fog seriously curtailed effective military operations. Highways which had been constructed to accommodate normal civilian travel became quagmires of loose rock and mud under the heavy military traffic moving about on a nearly stalemated front.

The Allied offensive which had started at the Normandy beaches had ground to a halt generally along the western German frontier. Throughout October and November 1944, few gains had been made in any sector of

the front except around Aachen and Metz. In late November and early December 1944, the Germans, not entirely unknown to Allied intelligence agencies, progressively concentrated a large force of armor and infantry in front of a sector of the line in the Eifel-Ardennes region. This sector, comprising some 88 miles of frontage extending from Bullingen, Belgium, south to Echternach, Germany, had been assigned to the U.S. VIII Corps, with headquarters at Bastogne, Belgium. Because of the defensive strength of the terrain - naturally forbidding to large scale military operations - the Allied line in this region had been intentionally weakened in order to divert troops to the fighting farther to the north. Four combat divisions had been assigned to VIII Corps for the execution of its defensive mission. On 15 December, the southern portion of the Corps line was held in part by the 4th Infantry Division and the 9th Armored Division, less one combat command. From Diekirch, Luxembourg, north to Bullingen, Belgium, a distance of some sixty miles, the line was held by the 28th and 106th Infantry Divisions. The 28th and 4th Infantry Divisions had seen considerable action in the fighting through the Hurtgen Forest and were in the Ardennes region for a rest. The 106th Infantry Division had only recently arrived on the continent from the United States and had gone into the line in VIII Corps sector 11 December. (Please see Map A.) (1)

THE GENERAL SITUATION

Early in the morning 16 December, 1944, under cover of a blanket of fog which had enveloped the Ardennes for more than a week, the Germans launched a coordinated offensive with three newly equipped armies. The German Fifth and Sixth Panzer Armies advancing abreast were to achieve the breakthrough in the Allied line and race to the Meuse River. The German Seventh Army was committed to hold the shoulders on the southern flank of the advance. (2)

~~The Sixth Panzer Army advancing on the north struck the northern~~

(1) A-1, p. 75; A-2, p. 77; A-5, p. 1-5; A-6, p. 231 (2) A-2, p. 104,
105

flank of the VIII Corps at its junction with V Corps in the region of the Eifel. Early successes were gained in this sector in the direction of Monschau and Elsenborn, Germany. (Please see Map A.) (3)

The point of the offensive of the Fifth Panzer Army, which was advancing in the south, struck the center of the thinly held VIII Corps line. Pushing forward with heavy armor, mobile artillery, and overwhelming forces of infantry, major penetrations were made in both the 28th and 106th Division sectors. Both Divisions endeavored to withdraw and regroup forces on successive delaying positions, but due to the rapid Panzer thrusts a continuous line could not be stabilized. Under the weight of the German attacks, units and fragments of units became isolated, were overrun, and defeated in detail. Tactical surprise was complete, with disastrous consequences. Out of the welter of confused reports that trickled in from the front it was impossible to guess the axis of movement, intentions, or possible objectives of the German forces. Interrupted lines of communication from the front made it impossible for VIII Corps Headquarters at Bastogne to get a clear impression of the disposition of their own front line units. (4)

By 17 December two distinct gaps existed in the VIII Corps line through which Panzer units of armor and infantry advanced unmolested, except from scattered strong points of isolated armor and infantry units of the 28th and 106th Infantry Divisions. In the 106th Division sector the 66th Panzer Corps was advancing through a ten-mile gap in the line toward St. Vith. To the south in the 28th Division sector the 58th and 47th Panzer Corps were advancing through a twelve-mile gap toward Houffalize, Bastogne, and Wiltz. The 47th Panzer Corps was specifically committed to invest and seize Bastogne. By nightfall 17 December, the breakthrough in the Allied line was complete. Except on the extreme north shoulder of the penetration in front of Elsenborn and on the south flank near Echternach, the German attack had broken completely into the open. (Please see Map A.) (5)

(3) A-2, p. 104; A-5, p. 4 (4) A-2, p. 106-114; A-5, p. 4-7
(5) A-2, p. 112-115

When the situation on VIII Corps front became critical 17 December, S.H.A.E.F. committed its reserve, XVIII Airborne Corps, consisting of the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions, to 12th Army Group with the mission of operating at Bastogne, Belgium. Bastogne was designated as the area of employment of S.H.A.E.F. Reserve because of the breakthrough which existed on VIII Corps front in the vicinity of Bastogne, and because that town was the focal point of a critical highway net leading through the Eastern Ardennes toward the Meuse River. (Please see Map A) (6)

When control of XVIII Airborne Corps passed to 12th Army Group, the plan of employment was changed somewhat from the original concept of S.H.A.E.F. Instructions were issued ordering the 82nd Airborne Division to Werbomont, Belgium, some 30 miles north of Bastogne to operate under V Corps. The 101st Airborne Division was ordered to move to Bastogne to operate under VIII Corps. XVIII Airborne Corps Headquarters initially would be non-operational. (7)

Leaving 12th Army Group Headquarters where plans had been made for commitment of the 101st Airborne Division to Bastogne, Belgium, let us go to Mourmelon le Grande, France, approximately 120 miles southwest of Bastogne.

THE MOVE TO BASTOGNE 18-19 DECEMBER 1944

On 17 December 1944 the 101st Airborne Division was stationed at Mourmelon le Grande, France, approximately 20 miles from Rheims. At this station little attention was being paid to the combat sectors of the Western Front, and certainly no thought was given to the possibility of being immediately committed to combat. (8)

The 101st Airborne Division had been relieved from the line in Holland 1 December 1944, after 73 days of sustained combat, and assigned to station in a French cantonment area at Mourmelon le Grande as S.H.A.E.F. Reserve. The principal effort of the Division at the time was directed toward rest, retraining, and reequipping for a proposed crossing of the

(6) A-5, p. 8,9 (7) A-5, p. 8-10 (8) A-10

Rhine in early spring. (9)

At 2030 hours 17 December, the Chief of Staff of XVIII Airborne Corps notified the Headquarters, 101st Airborne Division, by telephone that the Division would move 19 December to Werbomont, Belgium, some 130 miles to the northeast. Aside from the fact that there had been a breakthrough on VIII Corps front and that Oise Base Section would furnish sufficient trucks to move the Division on 19 December, the Chief of Staff admittedly knew little or nothing about the situation on the front or the mission the 101st Airborne Division would have upon arrival. Werbomont, of course, was the incorrect destination for the 101st. A misinterpretation of orders and area of employment of the 101st had occurred between 12th Army Group and XVIII Airborne Corps. (10)

It was Sunday evening, 17 December 1944, at Mourmelon, France. The Division had just completed its second week of refresher training, meanwhile exploiting to full advantage a generous pass and leave policy to Brussels, Paris, Rheims, and the Riviera. Indications had been that the Division would spend the winter months in the relative comforts of a cantonment area, training in preparation for the Allied spring offensive. (11)

With the alert from XVIII Airborne Corps, Brigadier General McAuliffe, the acting Division Commander, assembled the Division Staff and Regimental Commanders of the 101st Airborne Division to outline the information he had received from XVIII Airborne Corps. So little was known of the mission or the situation that the tactical aspect of the move was only briefly considered. General McAuliffe told the assembled group, in fact, that all he knew of the situation was that there had been a breakthrough somewhere on VIII Corps front and that the Division had been ordered to move to Werbomont, Belgium, within two days. It was generally believed at the time that the

(9) A-10 (10) A-5, p. 10,11; A-10 (11) A-10

immediate mission of the Division would be as Army Reserve somewhere in that locality, although no information had been given to that effect. The critical situation on VIII Corps front was unknown to General McAuliffe. (12)

During the progress of the meeting a second call was received from XVIII Airborne Corps advancing the date for the move of the 101st from 19 December to 18 December, and adding that the move should commence as early on 18 December as possible. This latest information gave the Division less than twenty-four hours to prepare to move. (13)

Plans were made for the Division to move in three combat team serials at one hour time interval. Units were to carry combat loads of rations and ammunition. (For route selected for the move please see Map A.) The 501st Regimental Combat Team was assigned the mission of advance guard for the Division column, to be followed by the 506th and 502nd Regimental Combat Teams. (14)

Lt. Col. Julian J. Swell, Regimental Commander of the 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment, left the meeting with Gen. McAuliffe with a mind filled with foreboding concerning the prospects of events which lay ahead for the 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment. He had been called upon to arouse his Regiment from the lethargic comfort of a rest area and to move it within sixteen hours into an unknown situation somewhere in the Belgian Ardennes. Not even the question of whether the Regiment would have to fight immediately upon arriving at its destination could be answered. Moreover, as he discerned the situation, the prospects that the Regiment might have to fight from the trucks enroute to the destination stood out as a significant probability. (15)

Lt. Col. Swell was not unduly concerned with the combat aspects of the mission for achievements of the Regiment in past campaigns had justified his confidence in the abilities of the men of the Regiment and in his subordinate leaders. Many new replacements had been received

(12) A-10; A-11 (13) A-10; A-11 (14) A-11 (15) A-11

since the operation in Holland, and there had not been adequate time to train these men; nevertheless Lt. Col. Swell felt that with his hard nucleus of combat veterans the Regiment could be expected to perform creditably in any combat engagement. (16)

The most immediate problem arising from the alert was in the department of supply. The supply situation for an impending move to combat was critical. At least half the combat equipment had been turned in for salvage when the Regiment was withdrawn from the line in Holland. A large part of the individual and crew-served weapons had been turned in to Ordnance for repair, replacement of worn out parts, and had not been returned. The supply of clothing was hopelessly inadequate for winter combat. Inasmuch as the Regiment had been part of S.H.A.E.F. Reserve, with no intention of being committed to combat in the winter, it was low on the priority list for supply of winter clothing. Many men were without overcoats and such combat essentials as steel helmets, cartridge belts, and field packs. There were no arctic shoes available - a single item which could have spared the Regiment of many casualties during the succeeding encounter in the Ardennes snow. (17)

Outside of supply, there were other difficulties inherent with the immediate prospects of a move. The alert found the Regiment short much of its personnel. More than 100 officers and men were on a three-day pass in Paris. Three times that number, including some key commanders, were in Rheims on pass and would not return to the Regimental area until early morning 18 December. (18)

The night of 17-18 December was spent in feverish preparation for the move. Enough road maps of France and Belgium were obtained to make distribution of one to each Battalion Commander and one to selected Regimental Staff officers. It is interesting to note here that these road maps were the only maps which the commanders had when their units

(16) A-10; A-11 (17,18) A-10

engaged the enemy on 17 December. Sufficient strip maps were made to give one to each truck leader for the move. Through the efforts of foraging parties from the supply section of the Regiment, a few of the critical items of supply which the Regiment was short were obtained and distributed to the units. Even considering these additions, the Regiment was still critically short in weapons and combat equipment when it moved 18 December. Trucks were dispatched to Paris and nearby leave centers to gather in the pass groups. Some of the personnel were returned to the Regiment in this manner, but many of the trucks returned empty, unable to find the remainder of the complement. The Regiment was destined to be without the services of those who were not returned that night during the most critical days of the fighting at Bastogne. (19)

For the move the Regiment was organized into four serials. The 1st Battalion was designated as advance guard. Battery B, 81st Anti-Aircraft-Antitank Battalion, consisting of 7 towed 57-mm guns, was attached to the 1st Battalion. The 2nd and 3rd Battalions would follow the 1st Battalion at 30-minute intervals respectively. Last in the column would be Headquarters and Service Companies followed by the 907th Glider Field Artillery Battalion, the direct support artillery battalion for the 501st Parachute Infantry. Artillery liaison parties were dispatched to each battalion, and forward observers moved with each rifle company. (20)

Trucks for the move were furnished by Base Section and were of the 10-ton semi-trailer type which had been withdrawn from their normal supply missions, gathered together, and routed into Mourmelon.

The leading elements of the Regiment crossed the I.P. at Mourmelon at 1400 on 18 December. The column proceeded without incident on the route to Werbomont. At the crossroads near Herbraimont, where the roads fork, one road leading north to Werbomont, the other turning

(19,20) A-10

sharply east toward Bastogne, the head of the column was intercepted and routed on the road to Bastogne. Instructions were received at this time for the Regiment to move to an assembly area $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles west of Bastogne. (Please see Maps A and B.) (21)

If any illusion existed in anyone's mind that the initial mission of the Regiment would be as Army reserve, this was quickly dispelled on the narrow stretch of highway leading into Bastogne.

The highway was choked with retreating stragglers and fragments of units both foot and vehicular - all in the general retreat to the west. There was no order or method to the confusion which prevailed, and evidence of panic was all about. Soldiers, with exaggerated impressions of the situation, spread wild rumors to the men of the 101st of the invincibility of the advancing German columns. Vehicles, both armored and wheeled, raced along the narrow road, stopping, turning, or entering the highway at liberty. There was no plan at all for traffic control. (22)

To add chaos to the congestion on the highway caused by the retreating stragglers, VIII Corps was in the process of evacuating its command post from Bastogne. The heavy vehicular traffic of Corps logistical units moving out of Bastogne became intermingled with the column of 10-ton trucks moving the 101st Airborne Division into Bastogne. A traffic jam resulted which blocked the highway completely. The columns of the 101st closed on one another, and vehicles jammed bumper to bumper for a distance of more than fifteen miles along the road. This traffic congestion delayed the column of the 101st three hours, and required the services of the Assistant Division Commander, acting as Provost Marshall, to get the vehicles untangled and rerouted in the right direction. (23)

The 501st Regiment, leading the Division column, did not close in to the assembly area until after 0200 on 19 December. Such was the

(21,22,23) A-10

traffic congestion on the road it had been necessary for the 2nd and 3rd Battalions to detruck on the road and walk approximately four miles to the assembly area.

Meanwhile within Bastogne things were in a turmoil. VIII Corps Headquarters for all practical purposes was isolated. It had been out of contact with its front line units all day 18 December and consequently knew nothing of the situation, either friendly or enemy, on the Corps front. Since the Corps Headquarters had suddenly become the front line of VIII Corps, it was in the process of quite hastily moving its Command Post to the rear when the leading elements of the 101st were arriving in Bastogne. The majority of the staff sections had already closed out operations and were a part of the traffic jam on the road leading west from Bastogne. Consequently, little help would be forthcoming from VIII Corps in positioning the 101st Airborne Division in the new and unfamiliar area. (24)

The reader will recall from earlier discussion that on 18 December a gap of some twelve miles extending from a point south of Malscheid to Wiltz existed in the 28th Division sector of VIII Corps line. Through this gap armor and infantry of the 58th and 47th Panzer Corps were advancing out in the open in the direction of Houffalize and Bastogne. This sector had been held by the 110th Infantry Regiment, 28th Division. On 17 December the Command Post of the 110th Infantry Regiment was located at Allerborn, Luxembourg; however, no communication of any sort had been received from that regiment since in late afternoon 17 December. Repeated efforts during 18 December to gain communication with the 110th Infantry had met with failure. Consequently, at VIII Corps nothing was known of the situation in that area. As to the location of the command post, in fact, the location of the 110th Infantry Regiment, VIII Corps could only offer a speculative guess. (25)

When the responsibility for defense of Bastogne passed to Gen.

(24) A-2, p. 114; A-10 (25) A-2, p. 113-114; A-10; A-11

McAuliffe, one thing was certain - he would have to start out from the beginning to build up the situation. He had inherited very little information from VIII Corps. The confusion was such that it was impossible to get a clear impression of just what was going on. As an immediate solution and in order to gain something tangible on which to base a plan for the defense, Gen. McAuliffe decided to employ one regimental combat team to move out the Bastogne-Longvilly road the next day, 19 December, to develop the situation, meanwhile holding the remainder of the 101st Airborne Division in an assembly area in the vicinity of Bastogne. (Please see Map B.) (26)

Since the 501st was the first unit of the 101st Airborne Division to arrive at Bastogne, and was just at that time closing into the assembly area, this mission was assigned to the 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment.

Lt. Col. Ewell, the Regimental Commander, in considering his mission for 19 December, felt that the mission as given to the Regiment, which was, "To move out the Bastogne-Longvilly road to develop the situation," was too wide in scope and accordingly requested that he be assigned a more definite mission. Whereupon, in order to clear up the mystery surrounding the situation of the 110th Infantry Regiment and to provide a march objective for the Regiment, Gen. McAuliffe ordered the 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment to move out the Bastogne-Longvilly road at 0600 19 December to contact the 110th Infantry Regiment at Allerborn and to seize the road junction two miles to the east of Allerborn. (Please see Map B.) (27)

It might be well to explain at this point that Gen. McAuliffe had no hopes that the 501st Parachute Infantry would find the 110th Infantry located at Allerborn. With a regimental headquarters located at a distance of scarcely more than 11 miles from Corps Headquarters and no contact between its parent Division Headquarters or the Corps

(26) A-2, p. 174-177; A-10; A-11 (27) A-5, p. 32; A-11

Headquarters over a period of more than 24 hours there was little chance that it was still in that locality. (28)

It is needless to say that Lt. Col. Swell had nothing upon which to base his plan of employment of the 501st Parachute Infantry on 19 December. Contrasting the existing situation with reference to previous engagements of the Regiment, Lt. Col. Swell felt that there was no real difference in the prospective engagement on the next day and the type action to which his unit was accustomed, except that his men could not count upon the disrupting effect that a parachute operation normally has upon the enemy. As for the lack of information, the Regiment was accustomed to going into a situation about which little was known. In past operations his units had been characteristically aggressive and often in cases where caution might have been the more prudent course of action. As Lt. Col. Swell analyzed the situation, on 19 December the Regiment probably would be meeting a strong enemy, well organized, and fired with the confidence of recent victory. Accordingly, it was his decision that methodical caution should govern the scheme of maneuver and the action of the Regiment, if contact were made with the enemy the next day. Based upon this analysis of the situation, Lt. Col. Swell issued instructions to his Battalion Commanders to develop the situation on the ground of contact without effort to bypass the enemy in order to proceed to the objective. In Lt. Col. Swell's own words, "Don't try to beat the enemy to death." As events later in the narrative will demonstrate, this proved to be the most provident set of instructions that could have been issued. (29)

Other than general discussion of the mission, orders for the employment of the Regiment 19 December simply consisted of a designation of a route of march, order of march, and objective. The Regiment with the 1st Battalion leading as advance guard would move in

(28,29) A-11

the same order and with the same attachments as for the move from Mourmelon le Grande to Bastogne. The 101st Airborne Division Reconnaissance Platoon was made available to the 501st Parachute Infantry to scout ahead and to the flanks of the 1st Battalion. (30)

THE MOVEMENT TO CONTACT 19 DECEMBER 1944

At 0600 19 December, the 501st Parachute Infantry moved out in column on the road through Bastogne. Leading the column was the 1st Battalion followed by Battery B, 81st Anti-Aircraft - Antitank Battalion, with 7 towed 57-mm guns attached. Following the 1st Battalion at approximately 1000 yards was the 2nd Battalion. The 3rd Battalion had been ordered to remain in the assembly area west of Bastogne until further orders. The 907th Glider Field Artillery Battalion, less Battery B, which followed the advance of 2nd Battalion, remained in an assembly area in vicinity of the 3rd Battalion. Artillery liaison parties and forward observers were dispatched to move with each Battalion. (31)

Movement through Bastogne was difficult since the roads were still jammed with traffic evacuating the area. The Division Reconnaissance Platoon, which had been designated to move ahead of the Regiment, was blocked in a traffic jam and was unable to join the column. In the murky darkness it was a curious sight to observe the long column of the 501st Parachute Infantry file through the narrow streets. Everywhere the evidence of inadequate combat equipment bore mute testimony to the haste with which this force was assembled and rushed into combat. Some few men who had returned from pass just in time to jump aboard the trucks for the move were still wearing their Class A uniforms with maybe only a helmet or a rifle and often without either. Despite the effort that had been made to improve the supply situation, shortages still existed in overcoats, steel helmets, cartridge belts, and crew served weapons. The morale, however, was high for their attention was divided

(30,31) A-10

between the challenging situation which lay ahead of them, of which they knew nothing except from the exceedingly exaggerated stories they had gleaned from retreating stragglers, and the recent memories of evenings on pass in Paris, Rheims, or Brussels. Until this morning the war had been going on more than 100 miles away and would not come again to them until their next jump - probably across the Rhine in the Spring. (32)

Daylight came 19 December bringing a dense murky fog which limited visibility to scarcely more than 300 yards.

The road over which the column was moving ran through a narrow valley and was flanked on either side by two ridges running generally east and west. North of the Bastogne-Longvilly road the ridge rose gradually from the road bed to the highest terrain feature in the immediate area, Hill 550, overlooking the small hamlet, Bizory, from the west. Further to the east Hill 530 fell off and gradually sloped toward the unimproved Bizory-Neffe road. East of the Bizory-Neffe road the ground gradually rose again to Hill 510 where it commanded the approaches to Bizory, Neffe, and Mageret. The Bizory-Neffe road ran along the bottom of a valley formed by Hills 530 and 510. From Neffe and the western slopes of Hill 510 one could fire straight up the valley into Bizory. South of the Bastogne-Longvilly road high ground continued to a point east of the small village of Mont, where it fell off gradually and sloped toward Neffe and Wardin. A small stream and an unused railroad spur ran parallel with the Bastogne-Longvilly road toward the small hamlet of Neffe, located 4 miles east of Bastogne. (Please see Map B.)

The general nature of the terrain was undulating, and for the most part cleared farm land or pasture, uninterrupted except for small, regularly shaped plantations of spruce trees which were sparsely scattered on the landscape. The terrain was ideally suited for defense.

(32) A-10 (Personal Observation of the Author)

Excellent fields of fire and good observation were available over the gently rolling and quite barren slopes. (33)

The two principal roads in the immediate area were the Bastogne-Wiltz road and the Bastogne-Longvilly road. Both of these roads were Class A highways with hard surfaces in excellent condition. The remaining roads were unimproved with dirt surfaces and for the most part were little better than trails. (34)

The progress of the column out the Bastogne-Longvilly road was slow. The advance elements ahead had to reconnoiter the route as they went, causing much loss in time through stopping, starting, and accordion action in the column. When the head of the 1st Battalion had arrived at a point on the road two miles east of Bastogne, the center of the column came under small arms fire from the ridge on the left (north) flank. The Battalion Commander promptly dispatched a platoon from Company C to investigate the situation. In moving through a plantation of woods about 200 yards from the road, the platoon flushed an estimated squad of Germans. After a short exchange of shots the Germans withdrew to the north and became lost in the fog. Two prisoners from a reconnaissance unit of Panzer Lehr Division were taken in the action. (Please see Map B.) (35)

Flank guards had been placed to comb the ridge line on both flanks, but such were the conditions of visibility that the flank security had moved almost through the German position without either force becoming aware of the presence of the other. It was not until the Germans had heard movement on the road and had moved closer to the road to investigate did they realize that a large American force was moving out the Bastogne-Longvilly highway, and when so alerted had fired upon the 1st Battalion column.

The enemy fire that fell on the flank of 1st Battalion did no damage and was unimportant from the standpoint of the engagement

(33,34) A-10 (Personal Knowledge of the Author) (35) A-10; A-13

itself. However, the fact that the column had unexpectedly encountered the enemy and at a point much closer to Bastogne than had been expected was extremely significant in the light contemplated action of the 501st Parachute Infantry.

Meanwhile the head of the column proceeded east along the road leading toward Neffe. At a point approximately 500 yards west of Neffe where the road runs straight and level into that town a heavy volume of small arms, automatic weapons, and direct fire from tanks raked the 1st Battalion column from straight ahead in the vicinity of Neffe. The initial burst of fire caused the Battalion to take to the ditches on either side of the road. The leading elements of the Battalion opened fire on the enemy column which was moving on the road in the vicinity of Neffe station. At this time the 1st Battalion Commander judged that he was faced immediately with approximately two platoons of infantry supported by tanks. What he did not know, of course, was that he had met head on with the leading elements of Panzer Lehr Division which was proceeding on the road toward Bastogne. Faced with an enemy force to his front and an uncovered left (north) flank, the Battalion Commander ordered Company C, second in the column, to move off the road to the left onto the high ground and attack southeast to envelop which he thought was a roadblock at Neffe. Meanwhile, he ordered Company B, the lead company, to push forward astride the road toward Neffe. (Please see Map B.) (36)

When Company C, moving along the high ground, arrived at a position about 400 yards from the Neffe-Bizory road, the Company came under the same type of fire from Neffe as had pinned Company B to the ground. In addition, tanks were now firing into Company C at long range from the southwest slopes of Hill 510. Unable to advance farther, Company C sought whatever cover was available on the barren slope and commenced to dig in. The ridge line along which the Company had been moving fell

(36) A-5, p. 187; A-10; A-13

off sharply into the same valley in which Neffe was situated. The Neffe-Bizory road ran along the bottom of the valley. Approximately 500 yards east of the road the ground gradually sloped to the crest of Hill 510. The conformation of the terrain in this vicinity is such that an enemy lodged at Neffe and the high ground in the vicinity of Hill 510 could control by fire the barren slopes to the west. Further, an enemy located at Neffe could control by fire the Neffe-Bizory valley. Fire from Neffe and the slopes to the north had halted the advance of Company C as it started to cross the valley. Companies B and C were now almost on line and were engaged with the enemy all along the front. Both the advance of the enemy and the advance of the 1st Battalion for the moment were apparently halted, and the two forces kept up a steady din of firing at 400 yards range. In the initial engagement 1st Battalion lost five men, two of which were killed. (37)

At this point it would be well to mention that enemy fire which the 1st Battalion was receiving was not coming from dug in defensive installations. This was strictly a meeting engagement, and the enemy encountered consisted of reconnaissance units of armor and infantry which had been moving toward Bastogne. This fact, however, was not known at the time. The Battalion Commander had to base his course of action upon what he had seen and could reasonably expect. Accordingly, at this time it was his decision to develop the enemy to his front rather than to bypass and proceed on to his objective.

By 1030 the situation was as follows. Company B had been able to advance down the highway only a scant 200 yards. One platoon of Company B had moved south of the road along the Bastogne creek in an effort to take Neffe from the south. This platoon had advanced to a position about 150 yards from Neffe where it had established a strong point in a stone house which was situated south of the road and overlooking Neffe from a distance of approximately 100 yards. Company C

was held up in the valley by enemy fire from Neffe and from Hill 510 overlooking the valley. Company A had moved off the road and had gone into reserve in the vicinity of a quarry approximately 400 yards to the rear of Company B. Battery B, 907th Glider Field Artillery Battalion, had gone into position in the vicinity of the same quarry in which Company A was located and was delivering observed fire upon the enemy armor and infantry along the road at Neffe without the benefit of registration or survey. (Please see Map B.) (38)

By this time it was apparent to the Regimental Commander that he was faced with an enemy force of armor and infantry which, judging from the volume of fire, appeared to be increasing in size. Contact had been made at scattered points along his left (north) flank through hit and run type actions on the part of the enemy. These engagements had done little harm except harass the movement of the column. However, they served to emphasize to the commander that his left flank was dangerously exposed. His right flank was equally exposed, but he had not been troubled with enemy movement from that direction. In order to determine if the enemy were holding a continuous line to the north of the position at Neffe and to cover the left flank of the column, the Regimental Commander ordered 2nd Battalion to attack northeast to seize Bizory and the high ground in that vicinity. In the event the enemy did not hold a continuous line he had plans to continue the advance toward Mageret from that direction leaving the 1st Battalion to hold at Neffe. With the capture of Mageret he would be sitting astride the enemy's avenue of retreat from Neffe and could force his evacuation from that area. (Please see Map B.) (39)

The 2nd Battalion moved out to the northeast with companies in column at 1030 and by 1200 had reported the capture of Bizory without opposition. However, the Battalion had advanced into Bizory under fire coming up the valley from Neffe and from the southern slopes of Hill 510.

(38) A-13 (39) A-11

At this time the Regimental Commander directed the 2nd Battalion to move cross country to the east and seize Hill 510, Mageret and the wooded hill mass overlooking Mageret from the north. (Please see Map B.) (40)

The 2nd Battalion left Bizory at approximately 1245, advancing across the bottom of the valley east of Bizory. The lead elements of the assault companies had crossed the valley and started to advance up the objective hillside when they were taken under fire by automatic weapons and direct fire from tanks from the crest of Hill 510. An enemy column consisting of five armored cars and two Mark IV tanks followed by an estimated two platoons of infantry was proceeding across the crest of Hill 510 toward Bizory when they observed the 2nd Battalion moving across the valley and accordingly fired into the formations at a range of 300 yards. The 2nd Battalion immediately returned the fire but being on lower ground was at a distinct disadvantage since the enemy was located on the crest of the hill. Long bands of grazing fire swept down the barren slopes and into the 2nd Battalion column. Fire from the 2nd Battalion kept the enemy infantry pinned to the ground, but the two Mark IV tanks moved about on the ridge firing into the 2nd Battalion column almost at will. The tanks were out of range of the bazooka and safe for the moment from any heavier weapon. The vehicles towing the 57-mm guns which were supposed to be attached to 2nd Battalion were caught in the jam of traffic in Bastogne and had not yet joined the column. Thus denied of any further movement in the direction of Hill 510, the two assault companies sought whatever cover was available in the floor of the valley. The same situation as that which occurred in the 1st Battalion was repeated. Again the fight was drawn. The surprise of the meeting and the initial outburst of fire had taken the impetus of advance from both the enemy and the 2nd Battalion.

(Please see Map B.) (41)

(40) A-10; A-11 (41) A-12

Company F, which was following the assault companies to the left rear, did not come under the same fire which had pinned down the remainder of the Battalion. Consequently, Company F was able to maneuver around the left (north) flank and seize the wooded hill mass overlooking Mageret from the north. Company F's action to the rear of the enemy diverted considerable pressure from the front of the 2nd Battalion, but efforts of the two assault companies to advance farther up the slopes of Hill 510 were unsuccessful, and the two assault companies dug in on the low ground in the valley.

In the engagement the 2nd Battalion had knocked out one scout car for certain by a rifle grenade and had probably killed a few of the enemy infantry but in turn the Battalion had sustained eleven casualties, including the Company Commander of Company E. (42)

It is interesting to note at this time that the force which the 2nd Battalion had engaged was a reconnaissance element of the 26th Volksgrenadier Division which was advancing abreast of Panzer Lehr Division toward Bastogne. This Division was specifically committed to invest Bastogne from the northeast. Also of interest is that the consequences of the engagement had the same reaction upon the commander of the enemy force as it did upon the commander of 2nd Battalion. Each force was advancing with caution, and upon contact, despite the fact that the commander of the enemy force obviously had a distinct advantage, each abandoned his immediate plan and waited for the situation to develop. The same situation had occurred in the 1st Battalion sector. The shock of the initial meeting caused both forces to recoil and neither pursued whatever initial advantage was offered. (43)

In order to get the 3rd Battalion out of Bastogne, and to a greater degree to cover his exposed right (south) flank, the Regimental Commander at 1330 on 19 December ordered 3rd Battalion to move from its assembly area and secure Mont, a small hamlet located on a plateau southeast of

(42) A-12 (43) A-5, p. 179-188

Bastogne, and thereat to await further orders. In the orders he further directed 3rd Battalion to dispatch one company on a reconnaissance mission to Wardin, with instructions to withdraw if the enemy were lodged there in force. Otherwise, if no enemy were present, the company was to secure and hold the town. The Regimental Commander had heard through a straggler's report of the existence of a friendly armored road block at Wardin, but he had received no positive information or its location or activities in that area. The reconnaissance mission fell to Company I, which moved out toward Wardin at 1245. (Please see Map B.) (44)

Mont fell to the 3rd Battalion, less Company I, at 1400 without opposition. However, further effort to advance eastward over the rolling plain which descended toward Neffe was met with strong resistance from tanks and infantry located south of Neffe. Consequently, the advance of the 3rd Battalion was halted along the high ground east of Mont where the Battalion took up a defensive position screening the Regimental right (south) flank.

The terrain ahead of the 3rd Battalion was cleared pasture land and was crisscrossed with numerous five-strand barbed wire fences which divided the area into many rectangular shaped compartments. These compartments had apparently been constructed as cattle feeding pens, but as for the purpose they were serving on 19 December, a more effective protective wire barrier could not have been constructed. On the next evening these strands of wire were to play a significant role in the defensive position of the 3rd Battalion, but for today they made further effort to advance toward Neffe from that direction extremely hazardous. (45)

At about the same time that the 3rd Battalion was stopped east of Mont, Company I of that Battalion, which had been dispatched upon what amounted to a deep envelopment in the direction of Wardin, was having its troubles at Wardin. When Company I moved out, it swung to the south

(44,45) A-10

and followed a route roughly parallel to the Bastogne-Wiltz highway. When it arrived at a point where the highway turns sharply south, Company I left the road and proceeded toward the woods approximately 2000 yards west of Wardin. At the trail junction in the vicinity of the woods the Company contacted a road block from a task force of 10th Armored Division. The personnel at the road block seemed to know as little about the situation as the Company Commander of Company I, so without wasting much time the Company proceeded on toward Wardin. When the head of the column arrived at the outskirts of the town, it came under small arms fire from scattered points on the perimeter. The Company deployed and pushed on into the town without much difficulty. Upon entering the town the third platoon was dispatched around to the northeast to establish a road block on the outskirts while the other two platoons worked the streets, methodically clearing out scattered enemy groups from the houses as they went. German soldiers who were routed from the houses by the advance of the two platoons of Company I through the town were forced into the ambush established by the 3rd Platoon on the outskirts, and they were either killed or captured. Those who chose to run rather than be captured were cut down along the streets by the well directed bands of fire from the men of the 3rd Platoon. During the "mop up" operation seven Germans were killed and eleven captured. By 1430 19 December the town was under the complete control of Company I. However, Company I was not to control Wardin very long. As the 1st and 2nd Platoons were reorganizing in the town and principally discussing their recent success in battle, a din of firing broke out from the 1st Platoon road block on the eastern extremities of Wardin. Simultaneously with the firing from this sector eleven Panther tanks loaded with German infantry emerged from the woods approximately 300 yards southeast of Wardin headed in the direction of the town. Observing the counterattack develop, the Company Commander gathered what force he could immediately scramble together and beckoned

them to follow him to the southern outskirts where with their machine guns, rifles, and bazookas they engaged the German formation as it advanced. Undaunted, and apparently unconcerned, with the display of weapons such as this scratch force could bring on the column, the tanks proceeded to within 100 yards of the town with the infantry still mounted on the tanks, firing as they came. The Company Commander ordered his force to fall back upon the town, but by this time the fate of the Company was sealed. Four Panther tanks which had broken through the 3rd Platoon road block were already running amuck in the town firing at individuals and groups of individuals as they were running to the west for the sole remaining escape route from the town. The Company Commander gave the order for his force to withdraw by two's and three's and to escape as best they could to the north of the town, himself staying behind with five others to establish a road block covering the retreat of the remainder of his force. Such men of Company I as were lucky dodged in among the buildings to escape the murderous fire, swam the creek, and escaped to the north. The last that was ever seen of the Company Commander and the five men left behind they were standing their ground at the road block. (46)

The engagement had lost a company. Out of the 94 men of Company I who had proceeded to Wardin, 33 escaped to Bastogne - not enough, in fit condition for combat, to form even an understrength platoon. Lost to the company was every officer and the bulk of its noncommissioned officers. That night in Bastogne the 1st Sergeant took command of and reorganized the remainder of Company I. Although the exact number of casualties the enemy suffered is undetermined, it is known that two Panther tanks were knocked out by bazooka fire at close range and that many Germans were shot from their perch on the tanks as they advanced in Wardin.

Word of the disaster of Company I had not reached the Regimental

(46) A-16

Commander when at 1530 he made his decision to abandon further effort to advance to the east on 19 December. His initial mission had been to develop the situation - the road junction two miles east of Allersborn had been requested by himself as a march objective for the Regiment. With his 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Battalions engaged with the enemy on a broad front and with indications that the enemy was attacking toward Bastogne at the same time, it was clear that the best course of action which could be adopted for the 501st Parachute Infantry would be to hold along the high ground in the vicinity of his present front lines. This decision, though made solely upon the Regimental Commander's appreciation and appraisal of the terrain, and without the benefit of either adequate intelligence or a sound orientation on the overall situation, was the initial step which paved the way for the successful defensive of Bastogne - a key communication center which was destined to become a thorn in the side of the German winter offensive. (47)

At darkness, 19 December, all three battalions of the 501st Parachute Infantry were disposed in the line and in contact with the enemy. The units of the Regiment had adjusted the lines in each sector to take advantage of the dominating terrain and were digging in for the night. (See Map C.) With the exception of Company A, which was the reserve company of 1st Battalion, and the remnants of Company I, the Regiment was entirely committed to the line. On the north flank, Company D was refusing the flank of the Regiment along a woods northeast of Hill 530. In the center of the Regiment a gap of some 200 yards existed between the 1st and 3rd Battalions along the bottom of the valley at the creek line. However, inasmuch as the valley in this area was denude of vegetation the gap was easily covered by fire. In addition, though considerably in advance of the line, a strong point of 1st Platoon of Company B sat squarely astride this route of approach along the creek line. The 1st Battalion refused its flank along the high ground overlooking the

(47) A-11

Bastogne-Longvilly road. The 3rd Battalion refused the Regimental right (south) flank along the Bastogne-Wiltz highway. The Regimental Command Post was established in a monastery on the eastern edge of Bastogne. The 907th Glider Field Artillery Battalion took up positions in rear of Hill 530, northwest of Bastogne, and was registered to fire in support of the front line. (48)

The positions which the 501st Parachute Infantry occupied the evening of 19 December were so well chosen that except in minor detail the line remained the same until 1 January when the Regiment was ordered to another sector of the Bastogne perimeter. (For defensive positions of the 501st Regiment the night 19-20 December, please see Map C.)

Throughout the night 19-20 December stragglers and fragments of units of VIII Corps which had been isolated in the onslaught of the German advance drifted into the lines of the 501st Parachute Infantry. The night was dark and a thick cloud of fog blanketed the ground. Visibility was less than 50 yards. So unstable the situation and so insecure the hastily organized line that soldiers called out to one another from adjacent foxholes to determine if his comrades were still there. Sounds of moving armor could be heard off in the direction of the enemy and the soldiers waited expecting an attack to roll over their position. Some of these sounds originated from American armor and some from German armor, both moving around in the same locality together. Much American armor moved right through the German positions and infiltrated into the positions of the 501st Parachute Infantry. The Germans, equally confused in the inky blackness, must have thought the armor was their own for the movement drew no fire except scattered rifle shots. (49)

The sole significant action that happened during the night 19-20 December was from a 40-man German patrol which came down the railroad track, flanking the 2nd Battalion position and penetrated, without being noticed, all the way to the reserve area of the 1st Battalion.

(48,49) A-10

There they aroused Company A, which fired into the German force almost at body contact range. A profusion of hand grenades were thrown and after much wild firing the German patrol slipped away into the night and became lost. A prisoner of war captured from the patrol stated that the mission of the patrol had been to break through and cut the Bastogne-Longvilly highway at Bastogne. (50)

During the night 19-20 December the roads leading west from Bastogne were cut by the Germans. The axis of communications and line of supply for the 101st Airborne Division from the south and west was severed. During the night the entire hospital installation of the 101st Airborne Division was captured. All patients and all transportation disappeared.

The 101st Airborne Division with its reinforcements of armor would stand alone at Bastogne.

To complete the picture for 19 December, the 101st Airborne Division was disposed with its four regiments, the 501st, 502nd, 506th, and 327th Regiments, holding a close in perimeter defense of Bastogne. The dispositions had been hastily made throughout the afternoon after the 501st Parachute Infantry had contacted the enemy at Neffe and Bizory. Consequently, the sector was loosely organized and there was no physical contact between regiments. (Please see Map C.)

THE DEFENSE OF BASTOGNE 20 DECEMBER 1944

On 20 December the Germans made three separate and determined efforts to dislodge the 501st Parachute Infantry from its position astride the principal road leading into Bastogne from the east. Each of these efforts, though determined and vigorously pursued, offered little chance for success since they were piecemeal attacks, and each was localized and executed separate from the other. Between each attack the 501st Parachute Infantry was able to regroup, to call down the mass of all the Division Artillery, and to concentrate its undivided attention to the particular area threatened. In addition, substantial reinforcements

(50) A-10

to the defensive position of the 501st Parachute Infantry in the way of armor had been received during the night 19-20 December. The 2nd Platoon, Company B, 705th Tank Destroyer Battalion, arrived and became attached to the 2nd Battalion. This platoon went into position in the 2nd Battalion line at 0200 20 December. At the same time the 3rd Platoon of Company B, 705th Tank Destroyer Battalion, became attached to the 3rd Battalion and went into position along a sunken road facing the barren plain toward Neffe. Moreover, during the night seven tanks from the 9th Armored Division had infiltrated into lines of the 2nd Battalion and had attached themselves to that unit. (51)

In front of the 2nd Battalion position was a broad expanse of cleared farm land which gradually sloped down toward the Neffe-Bizory unimproved road and gradually rose again to the crest of Hill 510. The distance from the 2nd Battalion position to the crest of Hill 510 was about 3000 yards. Shortly after dawn the 2nd Battalion line was alerted by the sound of tanks forming up in the vicinity of Hill 510. Because of the fog which hovered close to the ground in the intervening valley, it was impossible to observe beyond 600 yards to the front. However, the men of the 2nd Battalion knew that an attack was coming so they held their fire and waited. In the meantime all of Division artillery was called down to fire unobserved fire upon the crest and slopes of Hill 510. The platoon of tank destroyers trained their guns in the direction of the sound of armor and the seven tanks from the 9th Armored Division which had attached themselves to the 2nd Battalion during the night moved up into position in the line where they could fire directly across the valley. Approximately one hour had elapsed before the German column came into sight. Heading straight across the valley toward Bizory were six Mark IV tanks and two self-propelled guns followed by what appeared to be a battalion of infantry in battle formation. At once a din of firing broke out all along the 2nd Battalion

(51) A-10; A-12

front. The tanks and tank destroyers of the 2nd Battalion fired upon the German tanks at 700 yards range. Direct hits were made by the initial volley on two of the German tanks, stopping them on the spot. In the exchange one of the tank destroyers of the 2nd Battalion was knocked out. Another tank destroyer, either in trying to move to position from which he could get a better line of fire or else to remove himself from his somewhat exposed position, ran into a barn and jammed the muzzle of his gun. This accident fouled the turret traversing mechanism and the services of the tank destroyer were lost to the action. The loss of the two tank destroyers, however, was inconsequential because the remaining tanks and tank destroyers each had a suitable target and was firing upon it at close range. Within 300 yards of the 2nd Battalion line the advancing infantry wave broke under the devastating fire from the infantry weapons of 2nd Battalion, the reinforcing tanks, tank destroyers, and every gun of Division artillery, which was firing shells at the maximum rate of fire onto the German column advancing across the valley. The German infantry broke toward the line of woods that Company F had held the day before, and the German tanks soon followed suit, veering off to the north. When the smoke cleared, nothing remained of the German attack except charred or burning hulks of five tanks on the barren slopes of Hill 510. (Please see Map C.) (52)

Around noon 20 December it started to snow. The snow fell so fast that within one hour the entire countryside was blanketed in white. The men of the 501st Parachute Infantry lined their foxholes with straw and gathered in every garment that they could find to keep themselves warm.

Throughout the day the Germans shelled Bastogne. Hardest hit of all was the Regimental Command Post. The monastery in which the Command Post was established, a large three-story building on the eastern edge

(52) A-12

of Bastogne, was situated in plain view of the enemy from Hill 510. The belfry of the monastery, silhouetted against the sky line, made an excellent artillery registration check point from the enemy side, and the enemy fired his artillery at that point all day. Furthermore, enemy tanks from Hill 510 shelled the Command Post with direct fire all during the day. The Command Post moved underground to a cellar of the monastery.

The second German attack on 20 December came just prior to darkness. Although the second attack was not as decisive as the other two engagements, it had every possibility of having more critical results than either.

Around noon on 20 December the Regimental Commander, 501st Parachute Infantry, attached Company A, the reserve company of 1st Battalion, to 2nd Battalion. The mission assigned to Company A was to move through three patches of woods south of the railroad tracks running along the regimental north flank, clear any enemy which might be in the woods, and close the regimental left (north) flank to the line of the railroad tracks. This maneuver was in accordance with a division plan for consolidating the lines in front of Bastogne. The 501st and 506th Parachute Infantry Regiments were to make contact at the railroad station. (Please see Map C.) (53)

At 1500 it was still snowing. As twilight closed in, Company A was moving through the last woods south of the railroad station. A patrol which had been sent out to scout ahead for the company sighted a German force estimated to be two companies, one moving north of the railroad embankment, and one south of the embankment at a point about 500 yards from the leading elements of Company A. The patrol returned to the Company, without being noticed by the enemy, and relayed the information to the Company Commander. To dispose for the attack, the Company Commander ordered the 3rd Platoon to move north of the tracks

(53) A-10

and establish an ambush in a point of woods 150 yards to the north. (Please see Map C.) The 1st and 2nd Platoons were ordered to deploy on line 100 yards south of and facing north toward the tracks. The railroad track in this locality ran along the top of an embankment rising approximately 15 feet high from the level surface and dividing the zone of action, in effect, into two separate compartments which were totally isolated from one another. A force north of the tracks had no visual contact with a force south of the tracks except from the top of the embankment. Neither could a force in either compartment, so formed, influence the action in the other without first crossing over the top of the embankment. The 3rd Platoon of Company A fired upon the German column moving north of the tracks at 150 yards range. The unexpected fire falling suddenly upon the flanks of the enemy broke up the formation. Some "hit the dirt" and sought shelter in the folds of the ground. Others ran for the cover of the woods. Carefully aimed machine gun and rifle fire cut down many of the German infantrymen as they fled across the open field between 3rd Platoon position and the next woods. On the south side of the tracks things were not going as well for the 1st and 2nd Platoons of Company A. At about the same time that firing broke out over in the 3rd Platoon area, the remainder of the Company, under relatively unfavorable circumstances, met the full force of the German column moving south of the tracks. The 2nd Platoon in moving up on line was caught out in the open, and the 1st Platoon, disposed on low ground, was in little better predicament. The exchange of fire which was from small arms alone cut deeply into the ranks of both the attacker and the defender. Both were fighting at close range and under about equal circumstances of terrain. As darkness closed, the Company Commander of Company A, feeling that he was opposed by a force far superior in numbers to his own, and fearing that he was being outflanked, ordered a general withdrawal of the Company to the line of the next woods to the south. He instructed

the 3rd Platoon to break contact with the enemy north of the tracks and fall back upon the remainder of the Company in the designated woods south of the tracks. (Please see Map C.) (54)

The withdrawal was executed in an orderly manner and upon reaching the new position the Company established a line along the forward edge of the woods facing northeast. Evidently the Germans called a halt to their attack at about the same time for Company A was troubled no more during the night. In the engagement Company A had suffered fifteen casualties, three of which were killed. The battle was strictly an infantry action and had lasted only slightly more than one hour.

The next morning, 21 December, Company A renewed its attack from the woods. Under supporting fire from the 907th Glider Field Artillery Battalion, the Company pushed back over the same ground from which it had retreated the night before. In conjunction with Company A's attack north toward the railroad station 21 December, the 2nd Battalion of the 506th Parachute Infantry attacked through Le Bois Jacques south toward the station. The enemy, finding himself caught between a pincer movement simultaneously from the north and the south, withdrew from the objective and firm contact was established between the 501st and 506th Parachute Infantry Regiments at the railroad station on 21 December. It had required more than twenty-four hours to accomplish ^{the} contact between the 501st and 506th Parachute Infantry Regiments. (Please see Map C.) (55)

This was not the last difficulty to arise concerning the matter of contact along the railroad. Because of the peculiar conformation of the terrain along the railroad line, physical or even visual contact was difficult to maintain. During the succeeding days this railroad line became a well trodden thoroughfare for German armored and infantry attacks. First a boundary between regiments, later Division and Corps, the railroad always remained a source of wrangling between units forced

(54) A-15 (55) A-5, p. 85

to make contact along this line. (56)

While Company A was engaged with the German force moving down the railroad tracks on the north on the evening 20 December, the third and most determined attack of 20 December struck the 501st Parachute Infantry to the south. Beginning at 1900 a heavy artillery concentration, lasting for approximately 20 minutes, fell all along the lines of the 501st Parachute Infantry from Bizory south to Mont. The ground trembled with the saturation of bursting artillery shells. The wire lines between battalion and regiment went out almost immediately, placing the full burden of communication upon radio. As the artillery lifted from the front lines and began to fall deeper into Bastogne, a two-pronged attack struck the 1st and 3rd Battalion positions almost simultaneously. Illuminating flares from 60-mm mortars were sent up along the lines of the 501st Parachute Infantry revealing a column of German infantry charging straight down the Bastogne-Longvilly road from Neffe toward the 1st Battalion position and across the open fields from Mont toward the 3rd Battalion position. (Please see Map C.) The final protective fires of the 1st and 3rd Battalions as well as the mass of Division artillery were brought down along the slopes in front of the 1st and 3rd Battalions and on the road into Neffe. In the 1st Battalion sector the honors for the evening fell to the 1st Platoon of Company B, which was occupying a strong point in a house 200 yards in advance of the 1st Battalion line and which commanded from the flank the exits from Neffe. The strong point of 1st Platoon held its fire until the column was exposed almost broadside to their position at 150 yards range. The 1st Platoon took the German infantry under fire from the flanks with machine guns and rifles, and together with the defensive fires of the remainder of the 3rd Battalion, the German advance in this sector was stopped along the road. (57)

Meanwhile, the 3rd Battalion front was ablaze with streaks of red

(56) A-10 (57) A-13

tracers and exploding shells. An estimated five German tanks had placed themselves in line and were shelling the 3rd Battalion from a wooded knoll south of Neffe. Two battalions of infantry, attacking in column, advanced across the open fields from Neffe toward Mont. All of Division artillery fired in support of the 3rd Battalion. In some sectors artillery was brought down to within 100 yards of the front line. The tanks and tank destroyers from 3rd Battalion position fired continuous counter volleys at the enemy tanks in the woods south of Neffe.

Along the line of the creek the 3rd Battalion flank was forced back and in this sector fighting continued at close quarters in Mont. However, in the center and on the southern flank the 3rd Battalion line held. Luck rode with the 501st Parachute Infantry in this sector. A peculiar terrain obstacle doomed the German attack to failure. Approximately 100 yards in front of the 3rd Battalion position five-strand barbed wire fences crisscrossed the field in rectangular pattern. These fences were mentioned earlier in the discussion as "cattle feeding pens." At the moment, however, these fences were providing an excellent network of protective wire in front of the 3rd Battalion. In this sector the German attack broke at the line of the fences. The defensive fires from all infantry, armored and artillery weapons that could be trained into that sector beat down upon the German infantry as they slowed to cross the fences. The attack failed and the Germans withdrew back from whence they had come. (Please see Map C.) (58)

By 2300 the line on the left flank of the 3rd Battalion had been restored, and except for the occasional crack of a lone rifle fired at single retreating Germans the front of the 501st Parachute Infantry was quiet. Silhouetted against the new fallen snow, huddled forms dotted the field and bore silent testimony to the weight of the fanatical attack which had spent itself at the fence line. In some places

(58) A-10; A-14

the foremost German bodies were twenty yards from the 3rd Battalion line. (59)

With that action on the night 20 December the situation along the 501st Parachute Infantry front became stabilized. The German Commander of 47th Panzer Corps had tried from the northeast, east and southeast, and finding himself faced at every quarter with a force determined to stand its ground, he abandoned his efforts to force Bastogne through the positions held by the 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

The circumstances under which the 501st Parachute Infantry was committed to combat 19 December 1944 were peculiarly unique. The action described took place at a very critical time, and under exceedingly critical circumstances. It came at a time when the Western Front was dangerously close to a collapse under the heels of an advancing enemy taking advantage of surprise and employing mass and movement. It came at a time when disrupted communications had separated leaders from their units, and had interrupted the flow of information from front line units to the rear; when hasty decision was necessary, often resulting in incomplete, incorrect, or fragmentary instructions; when time was not available for detailed or even adequate planning. All of these things which can be the expected attendant circumstances of a war of movement affected the actions of the 501st Parachute Infantry. It is impossible to set the inherent disadvantages that the Allies suffered in the initial stages of the German offensive apart from the disadvantages which the 501st Parachute Infantry faced in being committed to action in an unfamiliar sector under the circumstances existing at the time. Lack of information upon which to base the details of adequate plans and orders, general unpreparedness, and hasty movement to combat; inadequacies, which, through the dictates of the existing situation, had their origin at higher headquarters,

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reflected themselves in the positioning of the 501st Parachute Infantry for combat.

From the time the first alert was received ordering the 501st Parachute Infantry from its station at Mourmelon le Grande, barely fifteen hours elapsed before the Regiment was on the road headed in the direction of Bastogne. Barely fifteen hours were available to transform the station of the 501st Parachute Infantry from the lethargy of a rest area, in which no thought had been given to the possibility of immediate combat, to an assembly area for movement to combat. What tactical doctrine is illustrated by this fact? There is one - preparedness! Units that have been withdrawn from the line for temporary periods of rest in a theater of operations, regardless of their reserve status, must be prepared at all times to be committed quite suddenly to combat. It is felt that if the 101st Airborne Division had been under an alert status as S.H.A.E.F. reserve, the hopelessly unprepared state for movement to combat in which the alert on 17 December found the Division could have been prevented. The units of the 101st would certainly have maintained at least a minimum acceptable standard supply of essential items for combat. Lack of adequate winter clothing, combat equipment, and weapons materially reduced the combat effectiveness of the 501st Parachute Infantry in the attack 19 December. When the 1st Battalion encountered the enemy at Neffe, those in the regimental column who were without weapons, steel helmets, and adequate combat equipment were sent to the rear and remained with the rear command post until such time as weapons and helmets could be confiscated from retreating stragglers. In the initial engagement this represented a loss to the Regiment of approximately 125 men - more than the strength of one normal rifle company of the Regiment at the time.

Warning orders should be clear and should give sufficient information to permit early planning and should provide adequate information to facilitate the accomplishment of the mission. Vague, incomplete, and

fragmentary instructions impair efficiency and jeopardize the chances for success. The orders designating the 101st Airborne Division's movement gave the incorrect destination. Fortunately, this error was corrected before any material harm was done. However, through this error the Division lost the services of its advance party during the initial stages of the quartering at Bastogne. Even more detrimental to sound tactical planning - no information on the existing situation in the area of employment was available to the 501st Regiment for the move to Bastogne or for the "movement to contact" on 19 December. When the 501st left its base camp at Mourmelon, France, 18 December, nothing was known of the tactical situation except that the Germans had launched an offensive somewhere on the Western Front. When the Regiment moved out in the attack the next day, 19 December, no additional information had been provided in a manner so as to permit anyone to get a clear impression of just what was happening.

A thorough understanding of the situation is vital information to an organization moving in to operate in an unfamiliar area. Staff sections of higher headquarters must take an active interest to insure that all available information is passed down to the staff sections of the unit for whose initial commitment their headquarters is responsible. For three reasons VIII Corps Headquarters on the evening 18 December was in such a state of confusion that it was not possible to function effectively as a Corps Headquarters. Consequently, the 101st Airborne Division did not get a clear impression of the situation at Bastogne and it was necessary to employ the Division forces into a thoroughly obscure situation. These difficulties were not inherent deficiencies in the operation of the Headquarters nor were they normal. These deficiencies existed as a direct result of the critical situation on the Corps front.

1. The enemy advance had been so swift and the deterioration of the Corps front so complete that lines of communication

were shattered, making it impossible for Corps Headquarters to get a clear impression of their own or the enemy situation. Consequently, little or no information could be provided the 101st Airborne Division upon which to base a sound plan of employment.

2. When the 101st Airborne Division arrived at Bastogne, VIII Corps Headquarters was in the process of evacuating its Command Post from Bastogne. Many of the staff sections that should have been able to provide information had already closed out of Bastogne and were on the road moving to the rear.
3. The Corps Commander of VIII Corps had not been notified that the 101st Airborne Division was moving to Bastogne to operate under his control until just shortly before the Division arrived. Consequently, the Corps Commander did not immediately have a plan for employment of the Division.

Adequate provisions for traffic control must be made in the tactical plan if battlefield mobility is to be achieved. An effective plan for traffic control to coordinate the column of trucks moving the 101st Airborne Division into Bastogne and vehicles moving VIII Corps Headquarters, Corps troops, and fragments of units out of Bastogne would have prevented the traffic congestion on the highway leading into Bastogne on 18 December. Military Police or some other traffic regulating agency placed at critical points on the road between Herbrumont and Bastogne could have kept the traffic moving along the narrow highway and would have prevented the long columns of trucks, armor and heavy maintenance vehicles from becoming jammed on the highway. This traffic jam delayed the arrival of the 101st Airborne Division at Bastogne from two to five hours and at a very critical time.

The first demand in war is decisive action. To the Commander of the 101st Airborne Division the situation at Bastogne was obscure. The

employment of the 501st Parachute Infantry, the first regiment to arrive at Bastogne, on a mission to find and fix the enemy was sound in tactical concept. However, the objective assigned the Regiment, if secured, would have placed the Regiment too far from the bulk of the forces of the remainder of the Division. It is in controversy with sound tactical doctrine for a commander to assign a unit an objective, the accomplishment of which would place the unit out of supporting range of the bulk of his forces. In view of the fact that the underlying motive for the movement of the 501st out the Bastogne-Longvilly highway was to develop the situation, with no particular tactical importance attached to the selected objective, it is felt that the mission could have been accomplished with far less risk involved by assigning the Regiment a series of limited march objectives to the east. The Principle of War demonstrated by the commitment of the 501st is the Offensive. It is difficult to predict the course of action a particular engagement might have taken under other circumstances. At first it might appear that the best course of action for the 101st Airborne Division would have been immediately defensive, with consideration for the potential of the enemy that had so recently overrun VIII Corps front. However, in this instance we have an excellent example of the effect of the offensive over and above the seizure of any particular objective. Lieutenant General Bayerlein, commanding Panzer Lehr Division, the lead elements of which struck the 501st Regiment 19 December on the move at Neffe said,*"The movement of the Infantry Regiment which came out of Bastogne to attack me reacted decisively on my thinking." Panzer Lehr Division recoiled and hesitated and did not launch an attack, actually to seize Bastogne, until the next day. The offensive nature of the mission of the 501st delayed the spearhead of the 47th Panzer Corps, at a point only four miles from Bastogne, for an entire day.

In a movement to contact the movement must be covered by a strong reconnaissance screen to the front and flanks to avoid surprise, to

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permit flexibility of plans, and to avoid a meeting engagement with the enemy with the main body often situated on unfavorable terrain. In the attack of the 501st Regiment 19 December the reconnaissance force designated to move ahead of the regimental column was lost in the traffic jam within Bastogne. Consequently, the Regiment proceeded blindly into the enemy, and was forced to deploy from column formation in the face of the enemy, without the benefit of any warning, or any prior planning to dispose for combat. Fortunately the Advance Guard Battalion was moving far enough ahead of the main body that sufficient maneuver room was available for the Regimental Commander to commit the 2nd Battalion from the column without this unit being pinned by the same fire that had stopped the 1st Battalion.

For a meeting engagement the initial advantage accrues to the commander who is disposed upon the most favorable terrain, and who is first able to initiate plans for rapid entry into combat. Plans will have to be made on the spot and orders summarily issued. Often the issue is decided by the selection of the key terrain and attention to the security of the flanks. Upon meeting the enemy 19 December, the Regimental Commander of the 501st Parachute Infantry exercised good judgment and followed sound tactical principles in the commitment of his forces. When contact with the enemy was made, barely four miles from Bastogne, the march objective of the Regiment lost its significance. Sensing that he was opposed by a force larger than a mere road block and feeling keenly the hazard involved in advancing into a German force which was known also to be advancing, the Regimental Commander selected the best terrain in the area from which to defend. Without losing time he committed his forces to seize this terrain and proceeded to develop the enemy in his zone of advance. This decision was the initial step in the formulation to the successful plan for the defense of Bastogne.

The advisability of sending Company I on what was in effect a deep development around the right (south) flank to Warden is a

questionable maneuver. However, admittedly in conflict with sound tactical doctrine, the maneuver of Company I achieved the most decisive results of any other action of the 501st on 19 December, regardless of the unsuccessful nature of its mission. (This will be discussed at greater length under a separate heading to follow.) Company I was committed to move to Wardin for the dual purpose of performing a reconnaissance of the regimental right (south) flank, about which the Regimental Commander was vitally concerned, and as a secondary mission to seize that town if the Company could do so without becoming too heavily engaged. With Company I securing the right flank at Wardin the Regimental Commander felt that he could be more bold with his maneuver at Neffe. The plan to envelop from the flank, meanwhile keeping the enemy forces pinned to position from the front, follows along sound principles of the attack. The tactical error was committed in the size of the force made available for this envelopment. It is felt that the entire 3rd Battalion should have been committed to this mission if the Regimental Commander desired to place a force at Wardin of sufficient strength to hold and to defend in that vicinity. On the other hand, if the Regimental Commander desired principally a reconnaissance of Wardin, an entire company was an excessively large force to be committed to this task. A strong reconnaissance patrol could have accomplished this mission and with much less hazard involved.

Company I launched a successful attack and captured Wardin. Failure to exercise sound tactical principles of reorganization on the objective caused disaster to the Company. A German counterattack struck Company I at the most critical time of the attack - at the time of reorganization upon the objective. The Company was disorganized and improperly disposed for defense of the newly won objective and consequently was overrun by the weight of the German attack. With consideration for the size of the German force, it is doubtful that Company I would have been able to hold Wardin even under the best of circumstances. Notwithstanding,

had the Company been organized, and under firm control, it probably would have been able, to delay and retreat in reasonably good order.

In an attack in which little or nothing is known of the enemy dispositions, maneuver must be conducted aggressively but with a methodical caution. Enemy units must not be bypassed until their positions are fixed. Had the 501st bypassed the enemy at Neffe, which through maneuver it probably could have done, the Regiment might have secured its objective without much difficulty but by so doing the road to Bastogne would have been open to the German columns moving in from the southeast and east.

Reserves add depth to a defensive position and provide a means whereby the commander through decisive employment can influence the action once it has started. Wherever possible a sound defensive position should contemplate use of reserves. Through the course of the attack 19 December, the 501st became engaged with the enemy on a 6000 yard front. When night defensive positions were assumed 19 December, the forces of the Regiment were totally committed to the line to occupy the extended frontage. Companies had no support platoons and battalions had no reserve companies, except for the 1st Battalion. The Regimental reserve consisted of the remnants of Company I which was a scrapped together platoon under the command of the 1st Sergeant. By this type of defensive alinement two important principles of the defense were overlooked. Flexibility and depth to the defensive position. The works was in the line. If the enemy came and the line could not hold, then there was little help elsewhere.

Defensive strength of terrain, and judicious employment of weapons can offset offensive weakness in numbers. In strength the 501st Parachute Infantry was opposed by an overwhelmingly superior force. Through careful selection of key terrain and through effective employment of infantry and armored fire power the Germans were unsuccessful in each attempt to dislodge the 501st Parachute Infantry from its positions.

In their attacks 20 December, the Germans violated the principle of Mass in the employment of their forces. Three separate probing attacks were launched on the 20th, each on a separate sector of the front and at separate times. The size of the forces involved ranged from battalion to regiment. By choosing this method of attack the Germans at no time were able to bring a superior force to bear at any one point on the regimental perimeter. Sufficient time elapsed between their attacks to enable the 501st Parachute Infantry to redispense its forces and to devote its undivided attention to the sector threatened. The attack against the 3rd Battalion during the night 20 December was most unwisely executed. When the initial attack failed, another attack was pushed across the same zone to fail on the heels of the first by the same barrier and by the same fire. Concentrated in the Neff-Mageret-Noville area the Germans had two divisions, Panzer Lehr Division and the 26th Volksgrenadier Division, with supporting Corps troops - sufficient force, if properly employed, to overwhelm at any point the thinly held perimeter to the east of Bastogne.

An analysis of the action of the 501st Parachute Infantry would not be complete unless mention were made of the significant role played by the armored units which infiltrated into Bastogne during the night 19-20 December. It can be stated, without reservation, that the joint infantry-tank and tank destroyer team welded together in common effort, defense of the line east of Bastogne, was the issue which decided the fate of the German attacks 20 December. Without reinforcements in armor it is unlikely that the 501st Parachute Infantry could have held its ground against the German armored attacks.

In summary, often seemingly unimportant and relatively isolated engagements can achieve decisive results by the reaction they cause in the estimate of the situation of the opposing commander. On 19 December, the 501st Parachute Infantry moved from Bastogne into an unknown situation. The principal mission of the Regiment was to make contact with

the enemy and develop the situation. To accomplish this end a march objective was selected for the Regiment some 11 miles east of Bastogne. The Regiment did not secure its objective but its movement out the Bastogne-Longvilly road achieved the desired purpose. The location of the enemy was found, his zone of advance fixed, and the first intelligence was provided on which to base a plan for employment of the 101st Airborne Division. The meeting with the enemy, which were the leading elements of two divisions proceeding toward Bastogne, was unexpectedly close to that town. Upon contact the Regimental Commander of the 501st proceeded to develop the situation by seizing the key terrain on a broad front with the principal intent of establishing himself on terrain favorable for the defense and securing his flanks. The enemy commander, mistaking the action of a single rifle company, Company I, for a much larger force, imagined himself faced with a superior force to his front and at the same time being outflanked by a large force from Wardin. He accordingly called a halt to his advance on 19 December and, like his opponent, reached a decision to develop the situation to his front. This delay doomed the German advance on Bastogne from the east to failure. It provided valuable time for the 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment to get its defensive position consolidated on the dominant terrain east of Bastogne where, with the aid of substantial reinforcements in the way of armor, it repelled each German attack 20 December. By defending the terrain in front of Bastogne the hub of a vital road net leading into the Eastern Ardennes was denied to the advancing German columns.

LESSONS

Some lessons emphasized by this operation are:

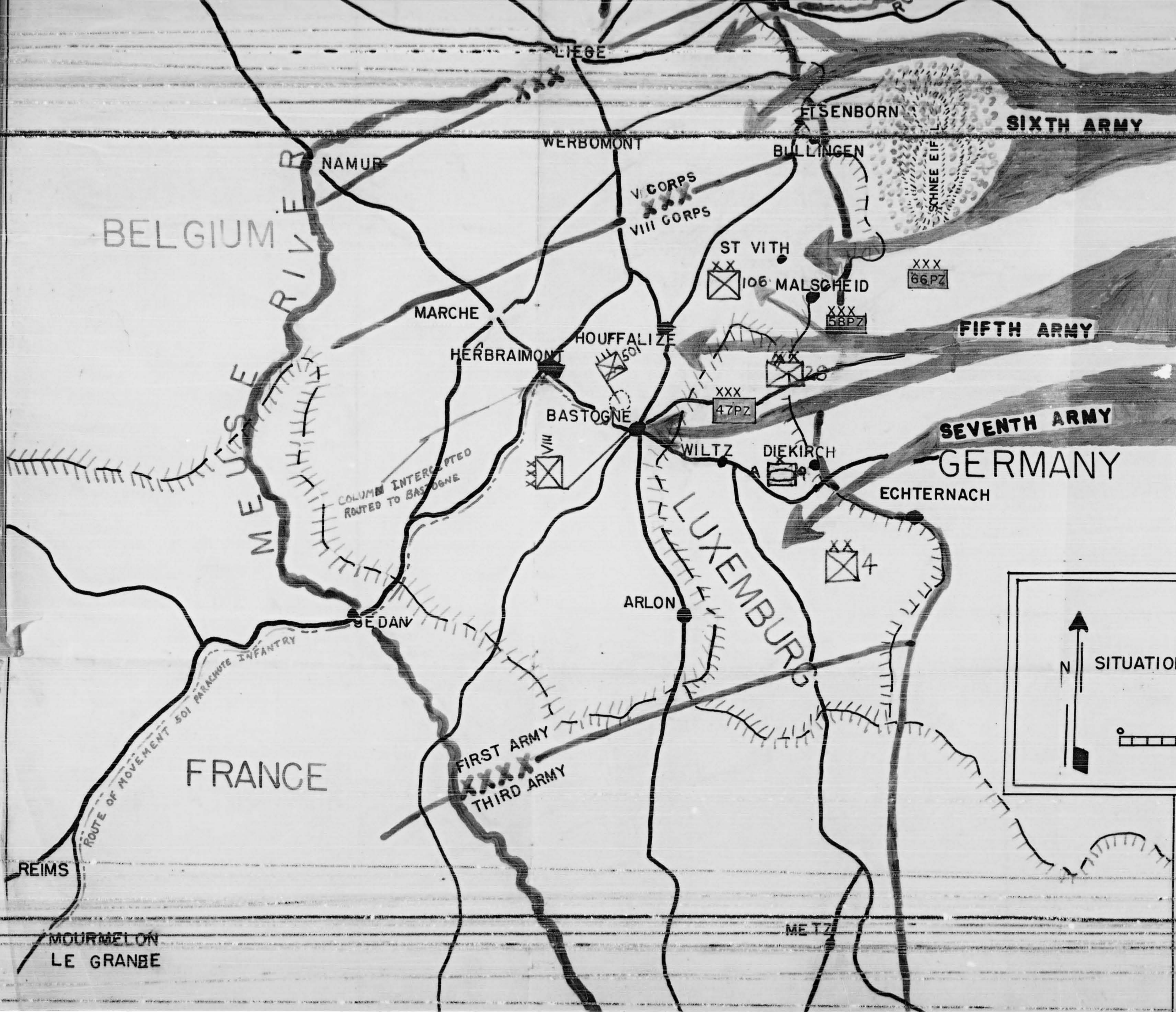
1. Units that have been withdrawn from the line for temporary periods of rest, regardless of their reserve status, must be prepared at all times to be committed quite suddenly to action.
2. In planning and in executing an attack, a thorough understanding of the mission and of the attendant circumstances in the area of

operation is vital to the success of the mission. Lack of adequate intelligence, lack of a clearly defined mission, and incomplete instructions impair efficiency and jeopardize the chances for success.

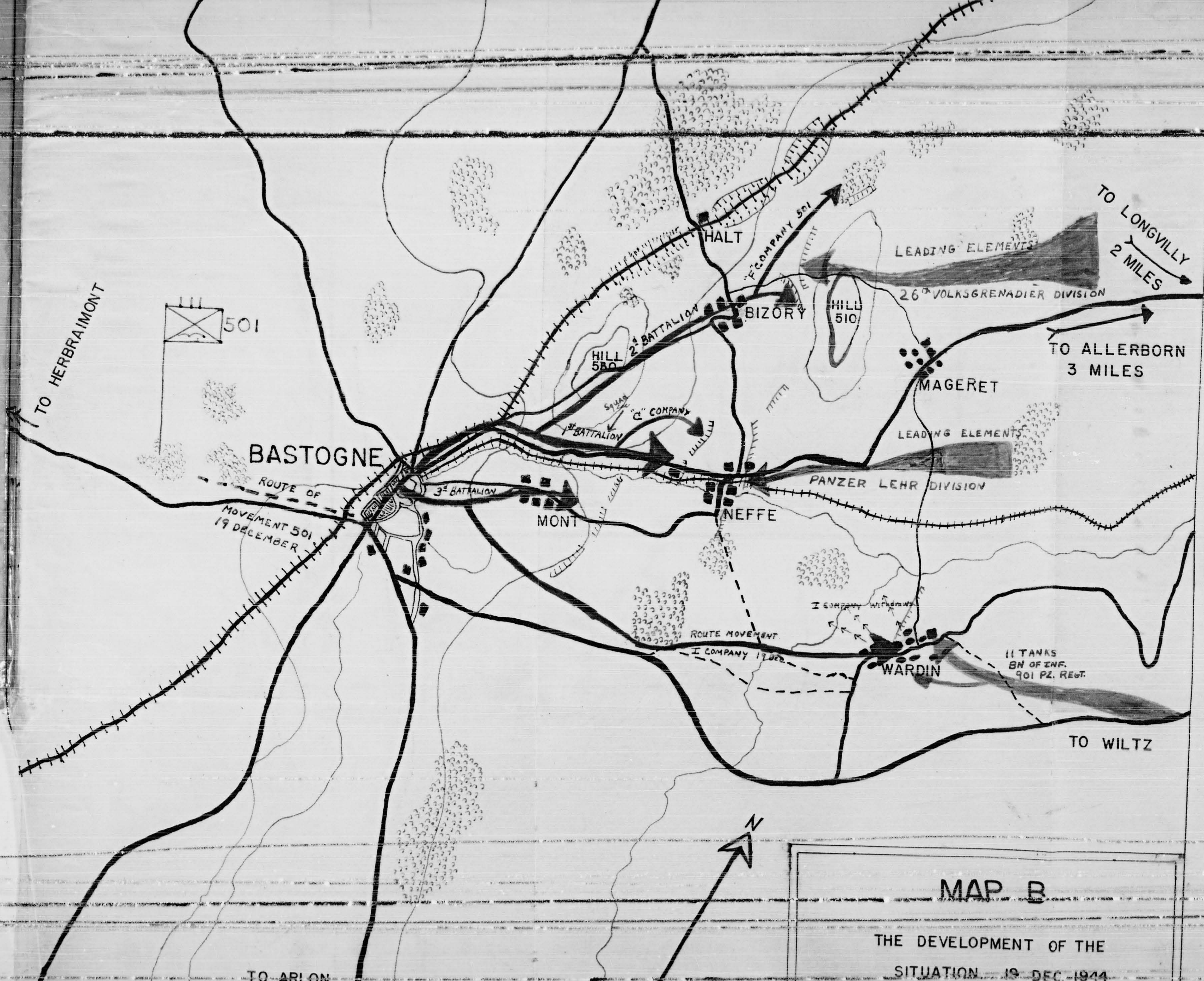
3. In a movement to contact, particularly under conditions of reduced visibility, provisions must be made for a reconnaissance screen to move well in advance of the column, and to reconnoiter the front and flanks along the axis of advance in order to avoid surprise, and to permit flexibility of plans.
4. The advance guard of a regiment moving in the attack in regimental column should be far enough in advance so that the main body will not become involved in the same engagement as the advance guard unless specifically committed to that engagement.
5. Proper evaluation, selection, and utilization of terrain can reduce the disadvantage caused by incomplete information of the enemy and inferiority in numbers.
6. In a meeting engagement immediate consideration must be given first to securing your own flanks and, second, to developing the flanks of the enemy and fixing his zone of advance.
7. In a meeting engagement contact with the enemy must be maintained. Maneuver should be methodically aggressive and should be directed toward seizing critical terrain features. Until the situation is resolved and adequate intelligence gained, enemy units should not be bypassed, else the bypassing unit may allow the unit bypassed to proceed free and uninterrupted to its objective.
8. An objective should be selected so as to favor the mission to be accomplished.
9. A regiment should not be assigned an objective beyond the supporting range of the bulk of the division forces.
10. A rifle company should not be employed upon an isolated mission that a patrol could accomplish more effectively. Conversely, a

company should not be employed upon a mission that a battalion could accomplish more effectively.

11. Once the objective is secured, troops must not be allowed to loiter and discuss their recent achievements. Reorganization must be rapid and provisions made for immediate defense of the objective.
12. Piecemeal attacks against a strongly organized position are ineffective, uneconomical and offer little chance of achieving decisive results.
13. The fires of tanks and tank destroyers when integrated into the infantry fire plan can be effectively used to provide artillery support as well as to provide antimechanized defense.
14. Failure to make provisions for the control of traffic can often adversely effect the tactical plan.
15. Boundaries should not be selected along a terrain feature which is a critical avenue of approach into the defensive position.
16. Small scale and relatively isolated engagements, despite the fact that they may seem unimportant at the time, often may achieve decisive results by the reaction they cause in the estimate of the situation of the opposing commander.
17. Often a secure defense has more strategic advantage than a tactically successful offense. It becomes a matter of selecting the relative importance of objectives. To this end we may apply the paraphrased Biblical expression - of what advantage is it to a man to gain the whole world if by so doing he loses his own soul? This expression applied to tactical principles would follow - of what advantage is it for a unit to gain its objective if by so doing it has left its route to the rear open to the uninterrupted exploitation by enemy columns?



MAP A
 SITUATION VIII CORPS FRONT
 18 DECEMBER 1944
 SCALE 0 10 20 30 40
 MILES



TO HERBRAIMONT



BASTOGNE

ROUTE OF
MOVEMENT 501
19 DECEMBER

HILL 580

2nd BATTALION

HALT

BIZORY

HILL 510

LEADING ELEMENTS

26th VOLKSGRENADIER DIVISION

TO LONGVILLY
2 MILES

TO ALLERBORN
3 MILES

MAGERET

LEADING ELEMENTS

PANZER LEHR DIVISION

MONT

NEFFE

I COMPANY Withdrawn

ROUTE MOVEMENT
I COMPANY 19 DEC.

11 TANKS
BN OF INF.
901 PZ. REGT.

WARDIN

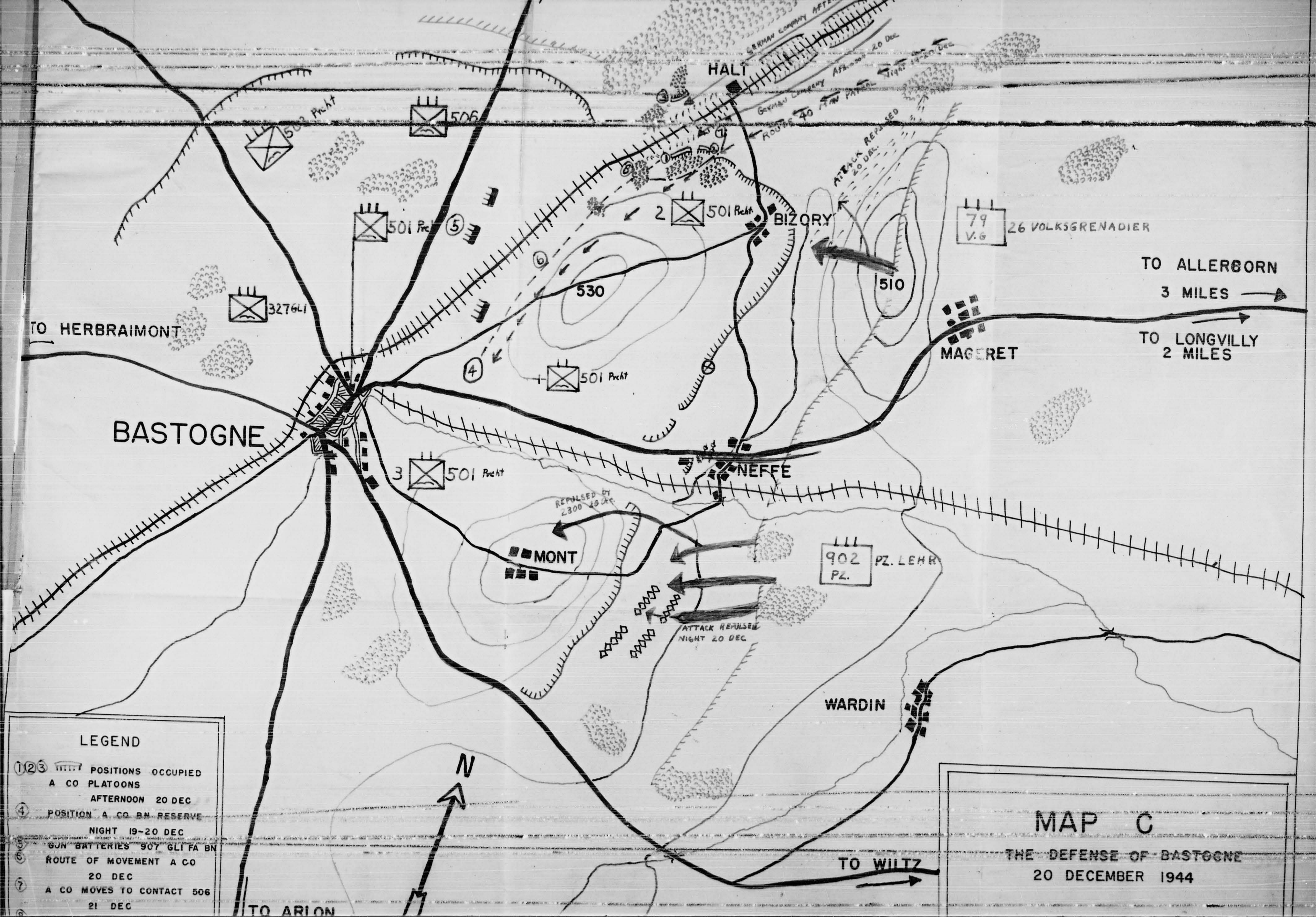
TO WILTZ

TO ARLON



MAP B

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE
SITUATION 19 DEC. 1944



TO HERBRAIMONT

BASTOGNE

HALT

BIZORY

MAGERET

NEFFE

MONT

WARDIN

79 V.G. 26 VOLKSGRENADIER

902 PZ. LEHR PZ.

TO ALLERBORN

3 MILES

TO LONGVILLY

2 MILES

TO WILTZ

TO ARLON

LEGEND

- ①②③ POSITIONS OCCUPIED
A CO PLATOONS
AFTERNOON 20 DEC
- ④ POSITION A CO BN RESERVE
NIGHT 19-20 DEC
- ⑤ GUN BATTERIES 907 GLI FA BN
- ⑥ ROUTE OF MOVEMENT A CO
20 DEC
- ⑦ A CO MOVES TO CONTACT 506
21 DEC

MAP C

THE DEFENSE OF BASTOGNE
20 DECEMBER 1944