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December 23, 1944 – It was long before daylight when we headed south. Supposedly we were the last Americans out of Commanster, Belgium and a heavy barrage hit the town shortly after we left. We fell in behind our battalions at Beho, Belgium. This time they were riding, clustered like flies on 7th and 9th Armored tanks and vehicles. The pace again was just a crawl. Along the dark road we passed a number of vehicles, abandoned for one reason or another. I was riding in the jeep which had a 30 cal MG on a pipe mount which I hoped we wouldn't have to use. We were all bundled up to our eyes against the biting cold. We finally dragged in to the outskirts of Salmchateau, Belgium sometime in the morning and there, we finally came to a complete stop with a fantastic jam of vehicles and men ahead of us.

Groups of civilians stood shivering outside their houses, talking and watching us and glancing to the east. Some gathered around the vehicles and tried to converse, but the language barrier was too difficult to understand much. Their main concern was the Germans, of course. These were Belgians and I along with others felt ashamed that we were pulling out leaving them under the yoke of the enemy again. When they were liberated a few months ago, I'm sure many of them took revenge on collaborators. Soon, German sympathizers would crawl out of the woodwork to point them out to the Germans. Many probably would die before this was over. As the frosty ground haze started to dissipate we could see it was going to be a clear morning. This first sun we had seen since England. Unbelievable! A cold one though, as the breath froze on our faces. To the northeast, east and southeast the sound of gunfire held the attention of both soldiers and civilians. I wondered what was holding us up and if the German Panzers would cut us off yet. At what point did we abandon the vehicles and head for the river? Somewhere behind us, men were buying time with their lives.

Unknown to us of course, our 3rd Battalion and a battalion of the 9th Armored tanks were fighting a desperate battle around Grufflingen, Belgium, attacking the enemy to the north and southeast in order to gain elbow room to extricate themselves and fall back toward the bridges. German tanks stopped the attack and then raked them with 88's and MG's as they fell back. Earlier, a fore of tanks and infantry came after our column as it cleared Beho, but ran into the 1st Battalion, 112th Infantry Regiment and four 90mm guns of the 811th Tank Destroyer (part of Task Force Jones). The 90mm guns stopped the tanks, but the desperate fight continued along the road behind us.

Sometime around 10:00 a.m. we heard a strange drone of engines in the west and soon we saw hundreds of black specks approaching, soon revealing themselves to be our Liberators (B-24's). They passed just a little to the south of us, streaking the frosty blue sky with their vapor trails. The column was endless, still coming as far as we could see. The Air Corps had finally entered the battle with this first break in the weather. A

mighty cheer arose from our stalled columns of vehicles. We could see them wheeling and dropping their bombs over some target 10 or 15 miles to the east. Assumed it was St Vith; then returning formations passed just to the north of us. We saw several planes drop out of formation and explode. Other planes, obviously damaged by German flak, struggled homeward at a slower pace; some trailing smoke. Except for short intervals, the show continued for over an hour and we could see a great pall of smoke over the target area. Above the sound of their engines though, the noise of artillery and tank firer continued. Some of it coming from due north and we wondered what was happening and why we were still sitting here.

It was afternoon before we finally crossed the high bridge over the Salm. German armor had penetrated to the river between Vielsalm and Salmchateau and self-propelled 76mm guns were firing down the road toward the bridge. Several vehicles were burning on the road north of the bridge. The mass of vehicles crawling along the escape road was unbelievable; half-tracks, tanks, ambulances, artillery, big engineering trucks hauling bulldozers, bridge equipment, tank retrieval vehicles and of course jeeps and QM trucks. As we passed into the countryside northwest of the bridge we had a false sense of security. Unknown to us, the 2nd SS Panzer Division was pounding north just a few miles west of us, while north of us the 9th and 1st SS Panzer Divisions were still advancing westward. If these two columns met, then our escape route would be slapped shut on us.

The nice clear day had given way to another storm bringing wind and snow. We were thankful for the brief break in the weather that allowed our air force to launch that splendid raid. Along the road we passed many disabled vehicles abandoned in the ditches, even one of the Long Toms (155mm long range gun). Also saw groups of refugees who fled their homes with they could carry. Forced off the road by military traffic, they huddled in open fields and woods without shelter to survive the terrible, bitter cold blizzard that would develop as the day wore on.

Fortunately, once we crossed the bridge, the convoys maintained a slow but steady pace northward. The day had darkened with the winter storm and the wind was piling the snow in drifts. I thought Napoleon's retreat from Moscow must have been like this, except they were horse-drawn or on foot. Numb with cold, we stoically watched the bleak landscape pass slowly by. Finally, we passed through part of the 82nd Airborne Division which was part of the new American line being formed on the north flank of the breakthrough. We had escaped the German pincers. Our convoy stopped at a windswept intersection near Werbomont until an officer from XVIII Corps assigned us a bivouac area. No shelter for the infantry; our area was an open field and the snow was now about two feet deep on the level. The whole regiment started building bonfires from fence posts, trees, old lumber. Soon, an officer from Corps HQ's drove up and ordered the fires extinguished as they would draw enemy artillery fire. Colonel Reid said: *"My men were cold, hungry and without shelter. They need the fires to survive the night so go back to your warm headquarters and we will take a chance on any artillery."*

Well, it was a miserable night huddled around the fires. All night long, we had to forage for fuel to keep the fires going until eventually there was no more wood to be found within walking distance. At least we had the comfort of knowing we had escaped the German trap. It had been a hectic eight days of fighting and falling back.

Now I will go back and cover the final collapse of the Salmchateau – Vielsalm bridgehead. I left the 112th Infantry Regiment, 1st Battalion, desperately engaged with panzer units at Beho. They were slowly pushed back and joined other units of Task Force Jones withdrawing from the south. Together, they continued to impede the Germans. Meanwhile 2nd Battalion of the 112th Regiment managed to disengage and withdrew across the river at Vielsalm about 4:30 p.m. Enemy panzers, however, had forced their way into Salmchateau shortly after we crossed the bridge, blocking that escape route and trapping a mass of vehicles on the road from Beho. So, 1st Battalion, 112th Regiment, found itself caught between the traffic jam on the north and the advancing enemy from the south. Enemy 88's were firing into the jammed columns and vehicles were starting to burn and explode. Panic was in the air. Colonel Nelson walked up the stalled column and found a light tank company, which he extricated and with the 1st Battalion they found a side road toward the river. The road ended at a marsh or swamp. With the tank helping the trucks and jeeps, they managed to cross both the frozen swamp and the river.

Having reached the west bank, they still had to move north past the Germans at the bridge. The 229th Field Artillery laid a protective barrage of fire between them and the enemy as they raced north to join the tail of our column. Out of more than a hundred vehicles, they only lost eighteen. Quite a feat and western Pennsylvania can be proud of their National Guard regiment. It didn't give up when things looked blackest.

Other units in that trapped column managed to escape. Many on foot managed to reach our lines the next day. The 440th Armored Field Artillery Battalion (part of Task Force Jones) found itself cut off at Salmchateau, charged up the road to Vielsalm in a running gunfight and crossed the bridge to safety. It lost one self-propelled howitzer in the melee.

Meanwhile, north of Houffalize at a crossroad named Baraque de Fraiture, the one gun battery of our 589th Field Artillery that had run the gauntlet of enemy tanks at Schoenberg (where the rest of the battalion had been destroyed) had dropped its trails and formed a roadblock. They were joined by survivors of 589th Service Company. As time passed, other groups joined them; 203rd Antiaircraft Artillery with three multiple 50 cal MG's, elements from 87th Reconnaissance, a tank destroyer platoon and miscellaneous infantry and paratroopers. Virtually surrounded, this motley crew held their position, blocking this key highway against enemy attacks starting on December 19th until they were overwhelmed on December 23 by the 2nd SS Panzer Division. Their action (unplanned) was one of the decisive delaying actions of the battle. Holding the Germans four days certainly was decisive in the escape of our forces from the Vielsalm – Salmchateau bridgehead and it gave time for the 82nd Airborne and 3rd Armored Division to establish themselves on the open north flank.

We learned the extent of the breakthrough this night. The 2nd Panzer Division (not to be confused with the 2nd SS Panzer facing us) had penetrated nearly 60 miles west into our rear area and was near the Meuse River. The 9th SS Panzer was a few miles east of us at a place called Trois-Ponts and the 1st SS Panzer was stalled at Stavelot to the northeast. The 2nd SS Panzer was coming up from the south on Highway 15 right at us. Meanwhile, the 116th Panzer (that had hit us the first day) was moving in from the

southwest. On top of all this, the 18th and 62nd Volksgrenadier Divisions and the Fuhrer Panzer Escort Brigade would be following up from Vielsalm – Salmchateau. We apparently jumped from the frying pan into the fire. The prize was National Highway 15 which ran from Bazel, Switzerland, right north through Werbomont, Liege and Antwerp. If these converging panzers could break through here, they could romp right up to the North Sea in the area of the Ninth Army, the British Second Army and the Canadian First Army.

To oppose them on Highway 15, we had the remnants of the 7th Armored Division and our 424th Infantry Regiment. To the west was the 3rd Armored Division and to the east was the 82nd Airborne Division.

Elements of the 7th Armored Division were sent south the evening of the 23rd December, to occupy the village of Grandmenil and Manhay thus closing the gap between 3rd Armored and 82nd Airborne Division. Again, it seems strange that a battered outfit down to 40% effective strength should be sent to hold crucial Highway 15, while two fresh divisions held the flank.

December 24 – We spent the day licking our wounds, so to speak, and preparing what shelter we could for comfort. No hot meal, but a supply of unit-sized rations was a welcome change from “K” rations. I learned that 7th Armored Division had been hit by 2nd Panzer before down and driven out of Grandmenil and Manhay, Belgium, falling back toward Werbomont, Belgium. Later that day, we were ordered to provide one battalion to help 7th Armored retake the village on Christmas day. Our 2nd Battalion was pegged for this, it being in the best shape. Meanwhile, we received several hundred replacements, mostly GI’s who had escaped the surrender on Schnee Eifel. It still left us about 50% effective strength. That afternoon, regimental headquarters moved south and established its CP in a building overlooking the broad valley wherein lay Grandmenil, Manhay and the 2nd SS Panzer. All during the night, heavy concentrations of our artillery fire screamed overhead on their way to targets in the valley.

December 25 – 7th Armored Division plan to retake the village, consisted to two battalions of infantry, supported by two tank companies. Our 2nd Battalion attacking down the west side of Highway 15 and the 48th Armored Infantry Battalion on the east side. After a preparatory shelling the attack was over fairly open ground, exposing our troops to a wicked cross fire from MG’s firing from basements in the two villages. The attack got within 50 yards of Man hay and then stalled. The supporting tanks never really got into the fight as they were held at bay by several well emplaced 88mm anti-tank guns.

Withdrawing at dusk, the 2nd Battalion tried to regroup on Hill 522, a barren hump on the valley floor. German 88’s and artillery caught them there in the open, causing heavy casualties. What had been the strongest battalion in the regiment, were now the weakest, suffering 35% casualties in the day’s fighting. The rest of Christmas night, the wounded and dead were dragged back through the deep snow on improved sleds and canvas shelter halves.

Meanwhile, the rest of the regiment received the Christmas dinner Corps had promised us. Turkey and most of the trimmings to go with it. It kind of stuck in our throats as we ate it that night, thinking of the misery and suffering out on that bleak snow covered hill. Some Christmas! We didn't sing any carols.

December 26 -- The enemy returned before dawn and charging with infantry and tanks drove our forces out of Manhay again. Preparations were made for another attack. In yesterday's attack, 2nd Battalion was attached to 7th Armored and our regiment was not otherwise involved. In today's fight, we would have a major role, with 2nd Battalion reinforced with "L" Company, 3rd Battalion, attacking Manhay astride Highway 15 while 1st Battalion would attack Grandmenil. Also participating in the attack would be the 38th Armored Infantry Battalion, a battalion from the 82nd Airborne Division would attack from the east and a battalion from the newly-arrived 75th Infantry Division would attack Grandmenil from the northwest. Tanks from 7th Armored would add muscle to the effort.

December 26 - Our Artillery put two TOT's on Manhay, just before the attack started around 9:00 a.m., TOT means Time on Target, in which each of the dispersed artillery battalions time their fire so that all the shells arrive and explode over the target at the same instant. This has a devastating effect as the enemy has no warning or time to seek shelter. Later inspection revealed about 350 Germans were killed and 80 vehicles destroyed by artillery fire in Manhay. Grandmenil was given the same treatment, but forewarned, the troops there sought shelter and the casualties were much less. Of course, the artillery continued to shell the two villages as the infantry worked their way close enough for the final assault.

"E" Company, 2nd Battalion, attacking down Highway 15 finally sought shelter in the roadside ditches from the punishing mortar, artillery and MG fire sweeping the road. Their attack stopped, mortar, fire was still exacting a toll in the ditches. Then one of those unexplainable thing happened: the battalion chaplain drove down that fire swept road, stopped and gave first aid to some of the wounded in the ditch. Then he carried a seriously wounded GI to his jeep and drove back up the road to the first aid station. Inspired by the chaplain's action, "E" Company got up from the ditches and charged into the outskirts of Manhay, closely followed by the rest of the battalion. About the same time, the battalion from 82nd Airborne entered the east end of the village. After several hours of house-to-house fighting and mop up, Manhay was again in our hands. Tanks were quickly moved in to solidify the position.

Meanwhile, the 1st Battalion attacked and entered Grandmenil and fought house-to-house until they met the battalion from the 75th Division moving in from the northeast. Now, both objectives were taken, not to be relinquished this time. The 2nd SS Panzer was stopped and now the buildup of our forces on the north flank would doom any further hopes of the German's to break out. We were proud to have had a major role in the Battle of Manhay: that stopped the momentum of a panzer attack dead in its tracks.

Yesterday, far to the west of us, our 2nd Armored Division fought a desperate battle with the 2nd Panzer Division and stopped their westward drive. From now on, we would do

the attacking as the Germans would be slowly pushed back to where they started. Hitler's big gamble had lost. The delaying actions by the units over run the first days caused the enemy to miss his time schedule and block his northern thrusts. He had made a penetration in our lines approximately 40 miles wide by 60 miles deep and all for nothing. Now, short on gasoline, many of his valuable tanks would have abandoned in the Ardennes.

December 27-30-- The roads and valley around Manhay and Grandmenil was littered with destroyed or burned vehicles and tanks (both theirs and ours). We had our first chance to see close up German equipment and tanks. The huge 60-ton Tiger tanks loomed over our 30-ton Sherman's. Yet, in many cases, the turrets had been completely blown off the hulls. One can imagine what this does to the occupants. Looking in one, all we saw was charred boots and bones. The front of the Tigers had 11" of Krupp armor plate, which shed our 3" shell like duck sheds water. Our tanks had a faster rate of fire and more speed but had to attack the big German tanks from the flank where the armor was thinner. A German 88 would just cave in the front of our Sherman, and we saw what a German panzerfaust (bazooka) did to one of our tanks. It burned a small one diameter hole in the 5" thick armor where it entered, but it blew out funnel-wise on the inside, scattering molten metal and shrapnel.

During the attacks on Manhay and Grandmenil, our infantry complained that our tanks gave them little close support until the objectives were taken. They referred to the 7th Armored as the mechanized road blocks. To be fair, one has to recognize that the 7th Armored had fought a desperate series of battles over a week, and in the process had lost heavily in tanks and tank crews. By the time of our action at Manhay and Grandmenil, they had to conserve what tanks they had left. At that point, infantry was expandable and could be replaced far quicker than tanks. Of course, this reasoning was of no consolidation to the infantry, huddled in the snow and being raked by 88's mortar and machine gun fire.

After the retaking of the two villages, they were eventually abandoned as we built up defensive positions on the North Slope of the valley. Behind us, a massive array of artillery was concentrated on a three mile front, straddling the highway. The Germans tried to concentrate a number of times in the succeeding days to resume their advance but the massed fire of 300 artillery pieces smothered them each time. The carnage inflicted must have been terrible. I was told the new proximity fuses were used here. Shrapnel shells have to detonate in the air, spraying their lethal splinters downward on the troops to be effective. This required calculating the time of flight for the shell to reach the target area and then setting the time fuse on it. Obviously, error would result in some shells exploding too high in the air, or hitting the ground before detonating. The proximity fuse detonated at a predetermined distance above the ground thus vastly reducing error and resulting in a much faster rate of fire; as calculations and setting of the old time fuses was eliminated.

In any event, the days following our taking the two villages were constantly shaken by artillery drumfire. An almost continuous ripping and tearing in the air above us hundreds of shells passed over us, to fall on one target after another in the valley. It was quite an experience and we were grateful they were our shells.

Finally on the night of December 30, we were relieved by the 75th Infantry Division. It was a windless cold night, snow lay heavy on the ground. As our men moved toward the rear, another shadowy line moved in the opposite direction. Any noise we made was drowned out by our artillery overhead. Looking back through the darkness we could see the twinkling of little lights, flashing on the dark hill across the valley. Like fireflies on a summer night. Except, they were our shells exploding along the German lines to make the enemy keep their heads down.

It hardly seemed possible only two weeks had passed since that first terrible barrage had hit us and the Germans came out of the eastern darkness. In that time, our division had lost over half of its men. Now we were headed for a rear area; that meant baths, clean clothes, hot meals and replacements to bring us back to combat strength. Now, we were the veterans, turning our position over to a green outfit fresh from England. Their time of testing was coming up, but their good fortune too, as they would be the first to meet the advancing Russian troops at the Elbe.

Source: Bulge Bugle - August 2002 - Battle of the Bulge Memories
<http://www.battleofthebulgememories.be/stories26/32-battle-of-the-bulge-us-army/649-424th-infantry-regiment-106th-infantry-division.html>
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Deceased 09/06/2013 Meadville PA