

Operations in Steinebrück, Germany, 18 December 1944

by 2LT George E. Moise

2nd Information & Historical Service, 1st US Army

Interview by 2nd Lt George E. MOISE

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Source:

1st Lieutenant Eugene Auerbach, CO, Troop "D" 89th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron.

1st Lieutenant Robert M Tiischlbin, CO Company "B" 9th Armored Engineer Bn.

1st Lieutenant Hugh B. Mott, Company "B" 9th Armored Engineer Bn.

1st Sergeant Lewis M. Miss, Company "B" 9th Armored Engineer Bn.

Troop "D" of the 89th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron of the 9th Armored Division was the reconnaissance unit of Combat Command "B" 9th Armored Division during the period 16 December to 23 December in which Combat Command "B" fought a delaying action against the German counterattack south of St Vith, Belgium.



Attached to the troop at the time were one platoon of light tanks from Company "F", 89th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, and one platoon of assault guns from Troop "E", 89th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron.

On the move south from Faymonville, starting at 0400 hours of the 17 December, "D" Troop, 89th Cavalry, had only its headquarters, the assault gun platoon and the tank platoon with the combat command column, all reconnaissance platoons being used to reconnoiter routes on either side of the main road of advance to the south. Thus the troop was not committed in the fight for Elcherath (coordinates 895938) 17 December, but assembled, less the reconnaissance platoons, in the vicinity of Breitfeld (873862) on the afternoon of the 17 December.

At 1815 hours the troop received orders to move south to Steinebrück (893862) and to organize the left flank of the combat command line from Steinebrück to Weppeler (906843). Orders were issued for them at the Breitfeld assembly area. Meanwhile, troop headquarters, the assault gun platoon and the light tank platoon moved to Steinebrück. The assault guns were set up on the high ground north of Steinebrück at (895834), while the tank platoon was placed at Weppeler, to hold the left flank of the line. Upon the arrival of the reconnaissance platoons at about 2100 hours, they were placed in the line, the 3rd Platoon on the left, next to the tanks, the 2nd Platoon in the center and the 1st Platoon and troop headquarters on the right, in Steinebrück. The line generally had the Our River on its front on the south and southeast.

During the night, which was moonlit, enemy infantry and at least four tanks were observed moving about the high ground south of the river, and continual harassing fire, apparently from 105 howitzers cited on the reverse slope of the hill across the river, fell in the vicinity of the crossroads at Steinebrück.

At 0100 hour, 18 December, an enemy patrol of about 30 men started across the bridge at Steinebrück and were met by fire from the .50 caliber machine gun of an armored car of the 1st Platoon placed on the east site of the St Vith road 10 yards north of the railroad crossing in Steinebrück. This fire was joined by fire from the .30 caliber gun on the 2nd Platoon armored car 200 yards to the east, and the patrol withdrew with apparent heavy casualties. At about 0430 hours another patrol attempted to cross the bridge and was repulsed by the same fire. The enemy movements across the river, on the high ground were subjected to approximately 300 rounds of harassing fire from the 16th Armored Field Artillery cited on the high ground (868868) near Breitfeld. A forward observer of the 16th Armored Field Artillery was with troop headquarters at Steinebrück and excellent observation was available to him and the platoon leaders of "D" Troop, 89th Cavalry, from their positions to the east. One enemy tank was set on fire by this artillery fire.

At daylight 18 December a 15 man patrol from "D" Troop, 89th Cavalry, was sent across the river and found a German medical enlisted man treating wounded in a house just south of the bridge. A total of 23 prisoners, including wounded were brought back by the patrol at 0730 hours. Approximately 15 enemy dead were observed on and around the bridge.

No contact could be made during the night or morning with the 423rd Infantry Regiment, which was supposed to be on the left, and a provisional company of stragglers from the 424th Infantry Regiment was never able to get into position on the right, immediately to the west of Steinebrück. **(It was discovered later that the 423rd Infantry Regiment, along with the 422 Infantry Regiment of the 106th Infantry Division were lost completely.)**

At 0800 hours a heavy artillery concentration was received by the entire "D" Troop, 89th Cavalry line from Steinebrück to Weppeler and at the same time sniper fire from the houses across the river was received. The artillery continued with harassing fire until 1000 hours.

The light tanks on the left at Weppeler were unable to get in position off the road because of terrain difficulties, and at 0830 hours a heavy artillery concentration on their position forced them to withdraw to the west through Steinebrück. They were placed with the assault guns just north of the village. At about 1015 hours three enemy tanks, one a captured American M-4, appeared on the hill south of the river (902826) and, despite harassing fire from the 16th Armored Field Artillery, put direct AT fire on the armored car of "D" Troop, 89th Cavalry. No direct hits were scored on the armored cars, but several ¼ ton trucks were destroyed. Also during the morning an estimated 100 rounds of "*Screaming Meemie*" fire from 120mm mortars shell fell on the "D" Troop, 89th position.

Harassing fire from the 16th Armored Field Artillery was kept on observed enemy activity all morning, and at 1100 an estimate of enemy strength, placing it at two battalions of infantry and ten tanks, was received from the S-2, Combat Command "B".

Smoke screens laid by enemy artillery were observed at about this time along the river on either side of Steinebrück, and just before noon a liaison messenger brought word that Troop "D", 89th Cavalry, had been ordered to withdraw to the north. The 2nd and 3rd Platoons were withdrawn from their positions to the east and placed along the road leading north while the 1st Platoon in Steinebrück covered the movement. Half an hour after the movement started the order was rescinded and the position ordered to be held.

Because of the lack of infantry support on the right the third Platoon was placed west of St Vith road and just north of the railroad. The 1st Platoon remained in place, reinforced by the tanks, and the 2nd Platoon returned dismounted and armed with .30 and .50 caliber machine guns and 60mm mortars to its position 200-300 yards east of Steinebrück, where it dug in.

Meanwhile the 2nd Platoon of Company "B", 9th Engineers under 1st Lieutenant Hugh B Mott and S/Sergeant John A Reynolds arrived at Steinebrück to blow the bridge across the Our River. Working under constant sniper and artillery fire, Sergeant Eugene Dorland and two other enlisted men waded the river to place 130 pound of TNT on the bridge abutment on the south side of the river. Primacord was attached to the charge and led back across the river to the railroad bridge (893832) which provided cover for the rest of the engineer platoon. The primacord was detonated from this position and demolition of the bridge was accomplished in such a manner. Then no artillery or tanks

were able to use it for more than 24 hours. The bridge was blown between 1230 and 1300 hours. Covering fire for the engineers was provided by the 1st Platoon, Troop "D", 89th Cavalry.

At 1330 hours members of the 3rd Platoon, Troop "D", 89th Cavalry observed three self-propelled enemy artillery pieces and 19 or 20 horse drawn pieces assembling on the high ground 800 yards to the southwest, 30 minutes later a heavy barrage was received on Steinebrück and the road leading north from this artillery and other enemy guns cited to the south and east. As this barrage lifted and estimated company of enemy infantry attacked frontally toward the river from the vicinity of Elcherath (894818), but was driven back by machine guns and high explosive fire from the armored cars and tanks and mortar fire directed by the dismounted troops of the 1st Platoon and troop headquarters. Observed artillery fire was received at the time on the left flank positions held by the 2nd Platoon, Troop "D", 89th Cavalry and at 1530 hours an estimated company of infantry succeeded in infiltrating the platoon's position and surrounding it. The platoon was lost except for five men who succeeded in escaping an working their way through the woods to the north.

The enemy also succeeded in crossing the river to the west and started further enveloping action. At 1600 hours the position of Troop "D", 89th Cavalry, became untenable because of the enemy movements and artillery from the south of the river. One light tank had been set on fire by this time.

Despite continual artillery and small arms fire from the south and from either flank, the withdrawal was effected with the men mounted on tanks, armored cars and the remaining ¼ ton trucks. The 3rd Platoon moved north first followed by troop headquarters, the 1st Platoon and the tanks, which covered the withdrawal.

The troop moved to Driehuten (??) where it started to dig in to dismounted positions when orders were received proceed through St Vith to crossroads 852841. At Driehuten (??) elements of Company "B", 27th Armored Infantry Battalion were met. The infantry company had been sent to relieve pressure on "D" Troop, 89th's left flank, but upon withdrawal of the troop took up position north of Driehuten (??).

Troop "D", 89th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron suffered 18 casualties of all types in the action and lost one tank and 13 ¼ ton trucks.

Signed: Lieutenant George Moise, 2nd Information and Historical Service (1st U.S. Army)

Other Action on this Day:

During the night of 17 December 1944, Lieutenant Colonel George Seely was stricken ill and was evacuated; Major Murray Deevers took command of the 27th Armored Infantry Battalion. He was later replaced by Lieutenant Colonel Fred Cummings.

"C" and "B" Companies were put in reserve positions mainly due to the severe fighting on the 17th December. "B" Company was left with two officers, 1st Lieutenant James Pero who took command of "B" Company and 2nd Lieutenant Robert Peterson. Lieutenant Peterson was asked to take charge of the three rifle platoons and to deploy them. All the vehicles were motor pooled in an assembly area off the highway north of Neubruck about 700 yards to the rear of the three rifle platoons.

Other Action on the 18 December 1944:

A company of the 811st Tank Destroyer Battalion and "A", "D" and "C" Companies of the 14th Tank Battalion and the Reconnaissance Platoon, plus two sections of "B" Battery 482nd AAA Battalion were sent North and East of St Vith, due to the threat of 1st SS Panzer Division moving to the west, as well as enemy action on the Schoenberg-St Vith road. "D" Company lost one tank; it overturned, turning to avoid AT fire from Schlierbach. This unit held the position knocking out at least six enemy tanks; until relieved at nightfall by 7th Armored Division troops.

At about 1200 hours, the 2nd Platoon of Company "B" 27th Armored Infantry Battalion was ordered into Steinebrück to assist in the withdrawal of "D" Troop 89th Reconnaissance. The 2nd Platoon left the 1st and 3rd Platoons in a perimeter defense, south of Driehuten. The platoon stopped at the town northwest edge while the platoon commander searched for Lieutenant Auerbach. He found him as he was leaving town was told that he could ride out in the CO's ¼ ton as that was the last one in the column, the rifle platoon had been told this previously; and they were on the way back up the hill. The rifle platoon leader met with Pfc Spodaryk on the hill overlooking Steinebrück told Spodaryk to continue back to the "B" Company's position and that he would join them after he observed the enemy movements in Steinebrück, and cover any stragglers that might be still coming. At about 1500 hours on the 18th December, Lieutenant Peterson of Company "B" 27th Armored Infantry Battalion, back in the "B" Company reserve position witnessed a fire fight on the road between Driehuten and Schlierbach, and saw a AAA quad .50 halftrack (M-16) firing toward the east while moving along the road. At that time he ordered T/Sergeant John Robitz 3rd Platoon leader to take up an alternate position to cover this possible threat.

Late in that evening, "B" Company marched into St Vith and then South to take up the new defensive line on the left flank of Neidingen Ridge. The battalion CP moved into Galhausen, "C" Company was the interior Company and held Neidingen and "A" Company on the right flank was in the vicinity of Masplet to their right was what was remained of the 424th Regimental Combat Team at about 40-50% combat efficiency. To their right was the 112th Regimental Combat Team, 28th Infantry Division. The team was also at about 50% combat efficiency. General Hoge thought that it was not that high. Combat Command "B" (that included most of the division plus additional Engineers and Artillery) 7th Armored Division under command of Bruce Clark defended a line south and east of St Vith on to the Salm River, plus some task forces near Beho.

The condition of Combat Command "B" 9th Armored Division Trains was not good news, they were located in Ligneuville and on the axis of advance of German 1SS Panzer,

Colonel Peiper's battle group. They took prisoners from Combat Command "B" Service Battery 16th Artillery Battalion and 9 men from Service Company, 27th Armored Infantry Battalion; Service Company of the 14th Tank was just about all clear of the town. However Lincoln Abraham in an M-4 of took Peiper's column under fire and destroyed two armored vehicles; Lincoln was killed under unknown circumstances. (Murdered by SS at Ligneuville)"A" Company, 27th Armored Infantry Battalion's kitchen and supply personnel were taken prisoner and they were murdered by SS Troops..

Source: The Gravel Agitator, Spring Edition 2005.

<http://www.battleofthebulgememories.be/stories26/us-army25/693-operations-in-steinbrueck-18-december-1944.html>

Henri ROGISTER, webmaster