

Bleialf Is Overrun

by Steven B. Wheeler

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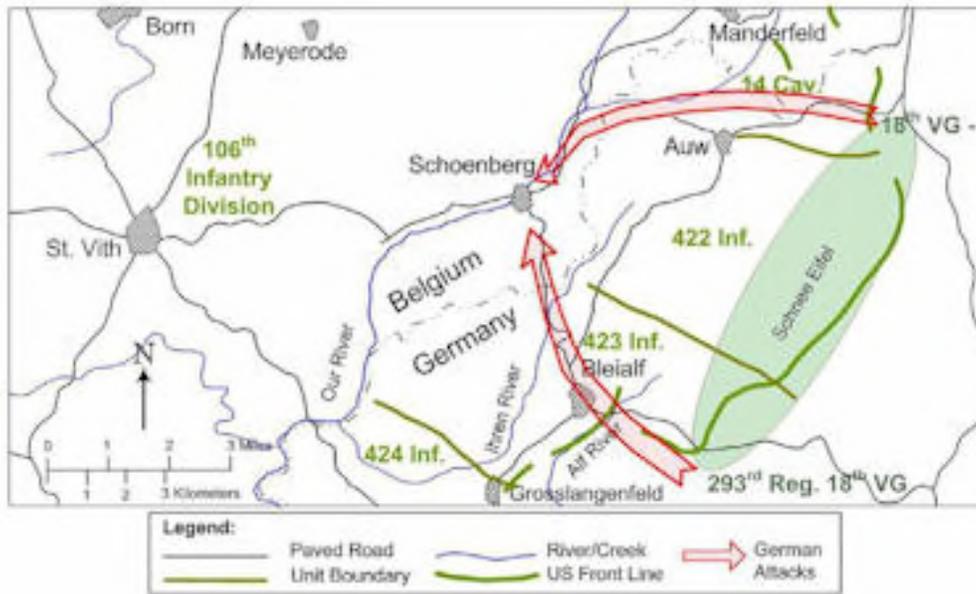
Bleialf is a German town just over the Belgian frontier. The Germans call the area northeast of Bleialf the Schnee Eifel: the Snow Mountains. The forested heights seem to be a continuation of the area west of Bleialf that the Belgians call the Ardennes. In mid-December, 1944, the men in the US 106th Infantry Division called the area the front line.

With Christmas just days away, and the German army pushed back behind their West Wall, the Americans stationed in Bleialf manned roadblocks, kept watch on the enemy, and waited for their mail to catch up. When they had taken over the defenses earlier that week from a veteran division, the men of the 106th were told that VIII Corps planned to use Bleialf as a jumping-off point for the lunge into Germany. While the humble farming town did not look like much, it afforded the men dry houses in which they could celebrate Christmas and New Year's.

The German high command also regarded Bleialf as an access point. Their plans called for restoring the crossroads to the Reich in the opening phase of a surprise offensive code-named Wacht Am Rhein. In the frigid pre-dawn hours of Saturday, December 16th, an entire regiment of the German 18th Volksgrenadier Division advanced on the town as silently as possible. Following a heavy barrage, they would attack.

The Terrain

Many of the town's homes and shops face the hard-surfaced road that climbs west out of the Alf valley, and turns northwest up and over a bald ridge. Beyond the crest, past a junction the GIs dubbed "88 Corner", the paved route turns more northerly. Eight miles further, it reaches Schoenberg. There, it intersects another paved road that loops around the northern end of the Schnee Eifel.



Once the Germans controlled the Bleialf-Schoenberg road, and the intersection at Schoenberg, they would trap the two US regiments holding the Schnee Eifel. Those were the instructions Field Marshal Hasso-Eccard von Manteuffel gave to General of Artillery Walter Lucht, commanding the Fifth Panzer Army. Lucht assigned the mission to Colonel Gunther Hoffmann-Schoenborn and his 18th Volksgrenadier Division ¹.

The Opposing Forces

The 18th Volksgrenadier had been manning the West Wall fortifications in the area since October. The volksgrenadiers had had time to become familiar with the sector, but many were recent replacements. The division cadre came from the 18th Luftwaffe Field Division² that had been ground up in battle near Mons in late summer. Replacements came from Luftwaffe and Kriegsmarine units, soldiers returned from hospital and convalescent leave, and recent drafts of civilians combed from factories and farms by tighter conscription laws. The division's six infantry battalions were reinforced by an assault gun battalion, plus mortar, and rocket artillery units. Further artillery support was available from LXVI Corps, and Fifth Panzer Army.



The US 106th Infantry Division, whose shoulder patch bore a lion's head, was a "green" outfit. Crossing the Atlantic in October, they had used what time they could of their seven weeks in England to train and integrate many new men. Despite the protests of the commander, Major General Allan W. Jones, over the summer the 106th had been raided for trained personnel³ to replace men fallen in the battle for France. Many 106th replacements came from the defunct Army Specialized Training Program, which had given qualified men the option of attending college after basic training. When that program was abruptly cancelled, the men went from carrying books to carrying rifles. Other replacements



came from coastal artillery, anti-aircraft, Service, and Army Air Forces units. Many volunteered to transfer, some were sent. These were the men who had to learn how to strip a .30 machine gun, throw a grenade, fire a BAR, or bazooka in the hectic weeks in England. Then, they were herded aboard transports and shipped to the bombed-out port of Le Havre, France. They landed on December 6th and after waiting in the rain all night, were loaded onto open trucks for the three-day drive to the German border⁴. With barely a break to get dry, they moved into the line December 11-12.

Men of the veteran 2nd Infantry Division, whom they replaced, had been amazed to see some of the "Golden Lions" arrive still wearing neckties⁵. The veterans cautioned the rookies to be extra quiet as they traded places. Changing units in the face of a watchful enemy is a risky business, and the hand-off from unit to unit was necessarily brief. The rookies inherited the 2nd Division's dispositions and defensive plans, like them or not. General Jones found there was nothing to be done about the fact that the newest division in the entire theatre had to cover a sector better than three times as long as the book said they should. With all three regiments in the line, the 106th was spread along a twenty-two mile sector⁶.

Their predicament was due to a calculated gamble on the part of Supreme Headquarters Allied Forces Europe (SHAFE). The brass regarded the Bleialf area, and the entire Ardennes as a comparatively safe part of the front. The rugged hills and few east-west roads made it an unlikely area for large-scale movements by either side. It seemed a good spot for a rookie outfit to cut their teeth with some combat patrolling before taking part in the conquest of Germany.

Two of the 106th regiments were actually manning the furthest penetration into Nazi Germany. In the fall, the Americans had carved out a salient in the West Wall by capturing the Schnee Eifel heights. But holding the ridge meant that the regiment on the northern half, the 422nd, had to bend back west to meet armored cavalry outfits in the Losheim Gap. On the southern half, the 423rd had to refuse its line to the west to include Bleialf. Up on the heights, the GIs actually used West Wall pillboxes and bunkers as company and platoon command posts. The heavily forested slope facing the enemy could only be scaled on foot. But the flanks were vulnerable, especially in the south. A three mile gap yawned between the Schnee Eifel and the northern-most positions of the 424th Regiment. In that gap stood Bleialf.

To hold the town and fill the gap between regiments, like their predecessors, the 106th had to employ a mix of support units. The 423rd Antitank Company and part of Cannon Company, acting as infantry, occupied most of the town and positions on the lower slopes immediately north and northeast. There they tied in with 1st Battalion of the 423rd. A platoon from King Company, 3rd Battalion, 423rd, and Charlie Company of the 820th Tank Destroyer (towed) Battalion occupied the rest of the town, except the train station. The station and the area around it, was held by Troop B, 18th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron. The cavalrymen occupied buildings and dugouts backed by their armored cars. To their left, they could see Bleialf a mile up the road. Their neighbors to the right rear, GIs from the 424th regiment, were out of view half a mile away through heavy forest. Patrols made contact with those neighbors who reported that they were also spread thin.

The Bleialf garrison was designated a provisional battalion and placed under Captain Charles B. Reid of the 423rd Anti-Tank Company⁷. Reid sent repeated requests to regimental supply for more mines, barbed wire, and ammunition of all types to strengthen the defenses. But the prevailing attitude that the Germans were licking their wounds behind their pillboxes did not lend urgency to fulfilling his requests. More ammunition, he was told, would become available by December 16th⁸.

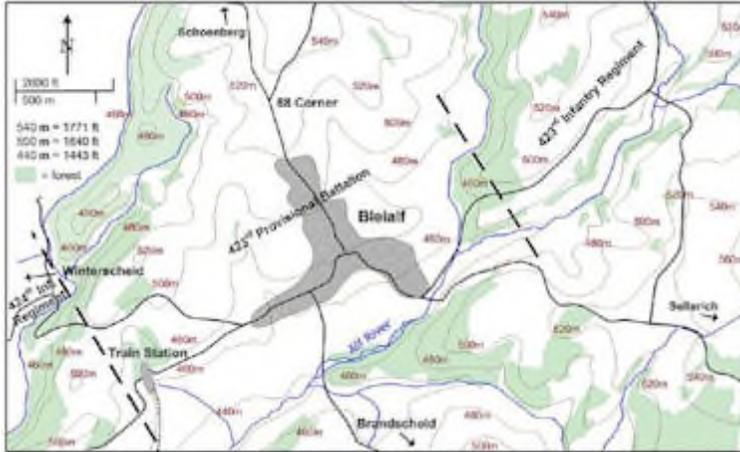
Initial Assault

The German attack on Bleialf would open with a forty-five minute barrage by artillery and rockets commencing at 05:30. As soon as the barrage lifted, both battalions of the 293rd Volksgrenadier Regiment would advance to seize the town. Knowledge of the American dispositions gained over weeks of observation bolstered Colonel Hoffmann-Schoenborn's confidence that the shelling would severely weaken the defenders. Wearing white camouflage, his grenadiers would advance aided by searchlights directed at low cloud cover to provide "artificial moonlight."⁹ The predawn assault and the winter weather would keep the dreaded American fighter-bombers away, and with any luck, Bleialf would be restored to the Reich by mid-day. Meanwhile, his other two regiments would storm the Losheim Gap to encircle the Americans on the Schnee Eifel. By nightfall, his regiments should reunite at Schoenberg, with their vital first mission accomplished.

When the morning of Saturday, December 16th arrived, at precisely 05:30, mortars, artillery, and nebelwerfer rockets smashed into the Bleialf defenses. The roadblocks on the eastern and southern roads got especially heavy pasting. Buildings crumpled and caught fire, roads and streets were cratered, men were killed and wounded in the heavy barrage. For many, their first shelling was their last.

A crippling effect of the barrage was immediately apparent. Trying to assess the extent of the damage being inflicted, Captain Reid found nearly all telephone lines were cut among his defending units. Worse by far, he could not contact Regiment, or their supporting artillery¹⁰. His radio operators reported primary and alternate frequencies jammed by German martial music, or heavy static. Any communication with Regiment or Division would have to be by courier over roads subject to exploding ordinance. Since the entire sector was getting pummeled, Reid had to assume that they would soon be fighting assault troops. He promptly assigned highest priority to repair of phone lines to the 590th Field Artillery. Other teams ventured into the shelling to restore lines to the 820th Anti-tank gun positions above town. His command was liable to need support in a hurry.

Shortly after 06:15, the enemy struck from three directions. Ghostly in their white overalls, German infantry swarmed out of the railroad tunnel near the train station and across snow fields to attack outposts along the Bleialf road. At the same time, hundreds more rushed from the wooded slopes of the Alferberg heights just east of Bleialf. They swamped the forward outposts as a third group charged from the Sellerich road. Those struck the foxholes of Baker Company of the 423rd northeast of town.



Near the train tunnel, Troop B's 3rd platoon was hit first (see note below), but the attack soon engaged the entire outfit in a desperate fight. Every trooper's rifle, carbine, grease gun, every armored car machine gun and cannon was loosed upon the Germans. Grenades flew in both directions. Captain Robert G. Fossland, troop commander, sent the HQ cars into the fight to bolster spots in the most danger. And while they were not overrun, the enemy seized the outposts on the Bleialf road and pushed the battered third platoon back into the rail yard and station. Troop B was cut off from Bleialf¹¹.

Note: Email received on December 22, 2012 from Lance Mezga: The author indicates that the Third Platoon of B Company 18th Cavalry Mech was on the north nearest the railroad tunnel. In fact, it was the First Platoon commanded by my father Lt. Joseph Mezga. They took heavy casualties as a result of the direct assault from the tint and the flanking action by way of the tunnel. The B Company After Action Report clearly describes the events.

In the town itself, Volksgrenadiers ran over and around the weakened outpost line. Reid's anti-tankers opened up on them from among the houses with everything they had. Flares shot into the sky to illuminate the enemy, weapons flashed in the gloom, grenades exploded in yards and alley ways. Potato mashers sailed through windows to blow flame and debris outward. Men died fighting in streets, parlors, and bedrooms.

Some were blown up, some shot, some stabbed, or clubbed. It was close-quarters savagery. Hard as the GIs fought, the attackers' weight of numbers forced them from one building to the next. The Germans pressed into town going uphill, but always attacking. Leaving their dead behind, GI carrying parties took the wounded to the aid station where doctors and medics labored to stabilize the casualties so that they could be evacuated.

Meanwhile, Captain Reid sent HQ clerks, supply personnel, MPs-every available man into the fight to hold on as his wire teams worked feverishly. The strain of waiting was only relieved around 08:30 when a line to Regiment was finally reestablished. Speaking with Colonel Charles C. Cavander, commander of the 423rd, Reid said he needed help now¹². They were being driven into the upper end of town and he had no reserves. From the latest HQ position, the fighting was just down the block.



Dawn itself did bring some aid. Daylight made it easier to sight targets and forced the enemy to move more deliberately. Better yet, the GIs of Able and Baker Companies of the 423rd in their ridge-top holes had a grandstand view of the battle. They could see Germans pushing up the Selerich and Brandscheid roads and as phone lines were repaired, they called in artillery. The 590th FA Battalion fired mission after mission blasting Germans trying to get into Bleialf. But it was the Anti-tankers, Cannon Company men, third platoon of King Company, HQ, and supply clerks who fought for every inch of ground.

Colonel Cavander got off the phone with Reid and told the regimental Service Company commander to get his truck drivers, armorers, and mechanics down to Bleialf on the double. But by 09:00, Troop B was calling with their own urgent need for help. Speaking over an artillery network, Cavander contacted Division and requested that his 2nd Battalion be released to him. Division refused, insisting it be retained in Divisional reserve. Cavander then asked for Baker Company of the 81st Combat Engineers. This was granted and he was told that about seventy men of Dog Company were also available: he'd get everyone they could round up. More immediate help was found by sending the rest of Cannon Company, minus their howitzers. Leading his cannoneers into Bleialf, Captain James L. Manning was killed¹³. Captain Reid took charge of the troops and directed them into the battle.

About thirty minutes later, the men of the 81st Combat Engineers detrucked in woods half a mile west of town. Captain Hynes sent Lieutenant Gordon's platoon into town to make contact with Reid and the defenders. As this was being arranged, Chief Warrant Officer John A. Carmichael arrived from battalion headquarters with a truckload of ammunition. Carmichael volunteered to go in with Gordon. Drawing heavy fire from a cluster of houses, Gordon sent two five-man patrols to work their way into town. The left-hand patrol, led by Carmichael, forced the enemy before them to take cover in houses. Telling the men "to keep the Krauts pinned down," Carmichael dodged heavy fire to scramble back up slope to a gun pit of Charlie Company, 820th TD Battalion. In short order, the cannon slammed high explosive shells into the enemy strong point. Lieutenant Gordon's platoon then secured the area allowing the rest of the engineers to move in¹⁴.



Counterattack

Thanks to the artillery strikes called in by the 423rd observers on the heights above town, the Germans could not reinforce their troops. They held the lower two thirds of Bleialf, but the arrival of the men from Service and Cannon Companies had stymied any further advance. The arrival of more than two hundred GI reinforcements, who also delivered ammunition, gave Captain Reid the strength to counterattack. Reduced platoons, half-squads, and individuals from the provisional battalion, along with the Service and Cannon Co. men, formed up with the newly arrived engineers. Volunteers from the garrison, resupplied with ammunition and grenades, showed the reinforcements where the Germans were. Then they methodically set about evicting them.

Aided by cannon fire from the heights and artillery support, the GIs turned the tables on the enemy. By midafternoon, they had taken seventy-five prisoners¹⁵ and reoccupied all but the houses down toward the train station. Lt. Colonel Frederick W. Nagle, the 423rd Regimental executive officer, had arrived in Bleialf around noon to assume overall command. As the counterattack reclaimed the town, Regiment informed Nagle that Troop B had been authorized to withdraw from the train station and fall back on the 424th Regiment near Winterscheid.



There was now a two mile gap between his right flank and his neighbor to the southwest. Moreover, there could be no further reinforcements. Cavender told him that 2nd Battalion had been released from Divisional reserve to fight German units advancing on Schoenberg and the division's artillery supports. Other than ammunition re-supply, the only hope of help was a combat command of the 9th Armored Division reported to be on its way¹⁶. Details of when it might arrive were unavailable. With orders to hold, Nagle realized his forces were in a tough spot. All they could do was reorganize, dig in, construct barricades, refill ammunition pouches, and eat what food was available. Prisoners and wounded were evacuated. American bodies were collected. Unless they were in the way, German bodies lay where they had fallen. NCOs arranged guard shifts to give the weary defenders a few hours to succumb to exhaustion.

Nagle was hardly alone in his assessment of the situation. As evening turned to night, everyone dreaded the next German attack. The continuously jammed radios, and the horizon lit by artillery could only mean one thing. Patrols were sent out to gain the defenders as much warning as possible.

Final Assault

While German shelling never completely ceased in the Bleialf area, it began picking up around 03:00 on the morning of Sunday, December 17th. The increasing tempo of explosions affirmed what Lt. Colonel Nagel had been hearing from patrols. To the east and south, his scouts had seen German armor moving up with companies of infantry¹⁷. As the shelling intensified, and the telephone lines were knocked out again, Nagel sent runners to alert all units. He was especially concerned that commanders had briefed their subordinates on the contingency evacuation plan. With German armor about to attack, it looked likely they might soon put it into action.



The defenders withstood heavy shelling until 06:00, then the Germans rolled forward. As expected, they came from the south and east, and they closed in fast. Assault guns and infantry waded into the attenuated defenses. The GIs along the train station road were quickly isolated, captured, or killed. The Bleialf defenders sent up flares and engaged the enemy with rifles, machine guns, and what few surprises the engineers had had time to construct. Bazooka teams tried to knock out assault guns, but swarming grenadiers made it deadly for anyone to expose himself to take a shot. Surviving 57mm antitank guns tried to stop the panzers and were repaid by fresh shelling. But the rapid demise of the outposts along the train station road enabled the enemy to strike from both front and flank. The Germans began rolling up the defenders, overwhelming successive positions using the weight of both battalions of the 293rd Volksgrenadier, and their panzer and artillery support.

The irresistible pressure forced Nagle to order his units to pivot back toward the 423rd's positions north and west of town. They withdrew using the end of the Schnee Eifel ridge as their anchor. Small teams and individuals fought as rear guards to give their buddies time to get clear. Some died, others were captured, some rejoined their outfits, or got away barely evading the enemy.

The weight of the concentric attack can be judged by the fact that the Volksgrenadiers cleared Bleialf in little more than an hour¹⁸. Well before the winter dawn, they were advancing over the ridge bound for Schoenberg. Speeding ahead of them went trucks and jeeps bearing wounded sent to the rear before the town was lost. Shouting to supply trucks trying to move south, and to supporting artillery units, the fleeing GIs spread the word. The Germans had broken through.

Consequences

Most of the defenders linked up with the 423rd Regiment to extend its line westward from the Schnee Eifel. Scattered handfuls managed to evade capture and either link up with the 424th, as did Troop B, 18th Cavalry, or march cross-country to St. Vith itself. But with Bleialf overrun, the southern route around the Schnee Eifel was wide open. Unfortunately for two thirds of the 106th Division, so was the northern route. The 14th Cavalry Group had been overwhelmed, driven back, or pushed aside in the Losheim Gap so that the converging regiments of the 18th Volksgrenadier met at Schoenberg sometime around 9AM on the second morning of the offensive. Over the

next four days, the men from Bleialf fought with the encircled 423rd and 422nd Regiments until, out of ammunition, out of food, burdened with increasing numbers of casualties, out of contact with Division, or any higher headquarters, they faced the choice of an overwhelming barrage and final assault, or surrender. No accurate figure exists, but an estimated 7-8,000 Americans went into captivity the morning of December 21st, 1944.¹⁹



There is no question that the 'green' GIs who defended Bleialf fought doggedly, with grim determination against their almost as green enemy. But the odds were against the Americans. At Bleialf, two full Volksgrenadier battalions reinforced with assault guns overcame the mixed force of anti-tankers, cannoners, service personnel, engineers, and cavalymen that were all that the 106th Division could muster. The SHAFÉ assessment that the Ardennes would remain a backwater, and the secret, sudden commitment of Germany's last reserves in a desperate winter offensive combined to doom the GIs in Bleialf. Victims of Allied overconfidence, and failures of intelligence to predict the German onslaught, the American defenders fought with courage. Their sacrifice delayed the German offensive by a few hours, but those hours provided time for reserves to reach St. Vith.

The remnants of the 106th Division and the 81st Combat Engineers were bolstered by an armored combat command, but it came from the 7th Armored Division that motored south and east as the Bleialf defenders hung on. In turn, St. Vith was held long enough to severely disrupt the German timetable and enable large scale shifting of allied forces to the Ardennes. The brave stand at Bleialf ultimately helped defeat the final German offensive on the western front.

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Footnotes

- 1) Col. Hoffmann-Schonborn Commander of 18th VG: Hugh M. Cole, Washington, DC, *The Ardennes: Battle Of The Bulge*, p. 142
- 2) 18th Vg make-up: Hugh M. Cole, Washington, DC, *The Ardennes: Battle Of The Bulge*, p. 143

- 3) 106th raided for personnel during summer: Charles B. MacDonald, New York, William Morrow & Co., Inc. *A Time For Trumpets* , p116
- 4) Open truck drive to the border: Charles Whiting, New York, Stein and Day, *Death of a Division*, p 26
- 5) 106th arriving in neckties, Charles B. MacDonald, New York, Bantam Books Company *Commander*, p. 104
- 6) Overextended 106th positions: Col. R. Ernest Dupuy, Nashville, The Battery Press, *St. Vith Lion In The Way*, p.15
- 7) Provisional Battalion make-up: Col. R. Ernest Dupuy, Nashville, The Battery Press, *St. Vith Lion In The Way*, p.47
- 8) Ammo availability: Dupuy, p. 49
- 9) Artificial moonlight: Gerald Astor, New York, Donald I. Fine, Jr., *A Blood- Dimmed Tide*, p.78, Dupuy, p. 49
- 10) Phone lines cut at Bleialf: Dupuy, p. 49
- 11) Troop B cut off: Dupuy, p. 49
- 12) Reid calls Cavender: Dupuy, p.49
- 13) Death of Capt. Manning: Dupuy, p. 50
- 14) Carmichael and Gordon: Dupuy, p. 50
- 15) 75 Kraut prisoners: Dupuy, p. 50
- 16) 9th Armored rumor: Dupuy, p. 50, Cole, p. 157
- 17) Patrols report Kraut armor moving up: Dupuy, p. 88
- 18) Bleialf cleared in an hour: Cole, p. 164, Dupuy, p.89

- 19) 422nd & 423rd surrender: Astor, p. 196, Dupuy, p. 144

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Steven B. Wheeler website: <http://www.stevenbwheeler.com/>

<http://www.battleofthebulgememories.be/stories26/us-army25/727-bleialf-is-overrun.html>

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