

force. Not until dusk on 21 December were Yates' men able to withdraw from the defensive positions they had held for five days and journey to their battalion headquarters at Marche, far to the west. Exhausted and numb from the bitter cold (the temperature had dropped to 20° F.), they had been "spurred to almost superhuman effort" by the "heroic example and leadership of Major Yates."²⁷

Combined elements of the 82d Airborne, 30th Infantry, and 3d Armored Divisions stopped Peiper on the Ambleve near Stoumont. The deepest penetration in the Battle of the Bulge was to be made not by the *Sixth Panzer Army* but by the *Fifth Panzer Army* to the south.

*Delaying Fifth Panzer Army
from the Our to the Meuse*

On the Skyline Drive in Luxembourg it had been snowing or raining off and on throughout the first two weeks in December. Clearing away accumulations of snow and icy slush was the principal task of Company B of the 103d Engineer Combat Battalion, quartered at Hosingen. The company was supporting the 28th Division's 110th Infantry, located in the center of the division's frontline positions. Other companies of the same engineer battalion were supporting the 112th Infantry on the north and the 109th Infantry on the south.

Because the 28th Division could not hope to defend every mile of its 23-mile-long front, the division commander had set up a series of strongpoints; Hosin-

gen was one. Garrisoned by Company K of the 3d Battalion, 110th Infantry, Hosingen overlooked two roads from Germany that crossed the Our River, wound over the Skyline Drive, descended to the Clerf River, and then continued west for fourteen miles to the important road center of Bastogne. One road, crossing the Skyline Drive about two miles north of Hosingen, was a paved highway, the best east-west route in the sector. About two miles west of the drive the road ran through the castle town of Clerf on the Clerf River, where the 110th Infantry had its headquarters. The other road, muddy and winding, crossed the Skyline Drive just south of the outskirts of Hosingen. The engineers knew this secondary road well. They had accompanied infantry over it on several small raids into Germany, using rubber boats to cross the Our, and on it they had emplaced an abatis and planted a minefield.

At 0530 on 16 December, a German barrage of massed guns and rockets reverberated over the Skyline Drive for about half an hour. As dawn broke, cloudy and cold with patches of ground fog, infantry of the *26th Volksgrenadier Division* came up the muddy road. Some troops bypassed Hosingen, but one battalion entered the town. Company K, 110th Infantry, and Company B, 103d Engineer Combat Battalion, put up a strong defense. House-to-house fighting continued all day, but no German tanks appeared until the morning of the seventeenth—German engineers had failed to erect heavy bridging at the nearest Our River crossing. When the tanks reached Hosingen they set the town afire, but the defenders held out until the evening of the seventeenth, after Clerf had surrendered.

²⁷ Hist 51st Engr C Bn, Oct, Nov, Dec 44, and Jnl entry, 20 Dec 44.

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THE ARDENNES: ENGINEERS AS INFANTRY

Communications had been out since the heavy opening barrage on the sixteenth, so the headquarters of the 103d Engineer Combat Battalion at Eschdorf, twelve miles to the southwest, had no word from this last bastion until 0050 on 18 December. Then an officer got through to report that the evening before, the troops at Hosingen had still been fighting. Out of ammunition and beyond the range of American artillery, they were withdrawing from house to house, using hand grenades. After that nothing more was heard.²⁸

During the night of 17 December the Germans, having secured two bridges over the Clerf River at Clerf and farther south at Drauffelt, moved swiftly west in several columns. One turned south toward the 28th Division command post at Wiltz, twelve miles east of Bastogne.

The defenders of Wiltz included 600 men of the 44th Engineer Combat Battalion. This unit, along with the 168th, the 159th, and the 35th Engineer Combat Battalions and Combat Command Reserve of the 9th Armored Division, made up General Middleton's VIII Corps reserve. Until noon of 17 December the 44th Battalion had been working in the corps area as part of the 1107th Engineer Combat Group, maintaining roads and operating two sawmills, a rock quarry, and a water point. Then General Middleton sent the battalion to Wiltz and attached it to the 29th Infantry Division, whose commander, Maj. Gen. Norman D. Cota, gave the engineers the mission of defending the town. Cota's plan called for securing Wiltz and covering all approaches to the town. Supporting the



PLACING CHARGES TO DROP TREES
across roadways.

engineers were remnants of the 707th Tank Battalion with six crippled tanks and five assault guns; four towed 3-inch guns from a tank destroyer battalion; a depleted battalion of 105-mm. divisional artillery; and a provisional battalion of infantry organized from headquarters troops. The 105-mm. howitzers went into battery along a road leading southeast from Wiltz, while the rest of the defense force manned a perimeter north and northeast of town, north of the Wiltz River.

About noon on 18 December tanks and assault guns of the *Panzer Lehr Division's Reconnaissance Battalion* struck the forward outposts, overrunning a section of tank destroyers. The engineers held their fire until the German infantry arrived behind the tanks and then cut it down. But the weight of armor

²⁸ Hist 103d Engr C Bn, Dec 44.

proved too strong, and the engineers had to withdraw to a second line of defense.

During the night activity on both sides was limited to intense patrolling and harassing fire. Next morning the defenders were able to dig in and generally improve their positions, but in the middle of the afternoon the Germans attacked strongly from the north, northeast, and east with tanks accompanied by infantry armed with machine pistols. The three-hour attack cut the engineers' Company B to pieces. At dusk the 44th Engineer Combat Battalion was forced to withdraw into Wiltz, having suffered heavy casualties.

The engineers still felt confident, believing that the attack had cost the Germans dearly and gained them little ground. They also felt safer after they blew the bridge over the Wiltz. But about 1800 a new German column was reported approaching from the southeast, on the same side of the river as the town. A few hours later the enemy had cut all roads to Wiltz, and ammunition was running low. At 2130 the defense force received orders to pull back toward American lines to the rear. It was a grueling and bloody withdrawal through German roadblocks and a gauntlet of fire. The 44th Engineer Combat Battalion suffered heavily during the evacuation, losing 18 officers and 160 enlisted men.²⁹

While the 44th Engineer Combat Battalion was defending Wiltz, two of the VIII Corps' reserve engineer battalions were engaged elsewhere. On the north the 168th, supporting the 106th Division, was astride the road from

Schoenberg to St.-Vith; on the south the 159th, attached to the 4th Division, was preparing to bar the way to Luxembourg City. Thus, by 1500 on 17 December, General Middleton had only one reserve engineer battalion, the 35th. Relieving the battalion of attachment to the 1102d Engineer Combat Group, he assigned it to the defense of Bastogne.³⁰

By then Bastogne was in great danger. In midafternoon the commander of Combat Command Reserve of the 9th Armored Division (spread out along the paved road leading into the city from Clerf) reported that the Germans were overrunning his most advanced roadblock. The enemy was then less than nine miles from Bastogne. General Middleton was expecting reinforcements—the 101st Airborne Division from SHAEF reserve and Combat Command B of the 10th Armored Division from Third Army—but these units could not arrive until 18 December. In the meantime, the engineers would have to guard the approaches to Bastogne. At the suggestion of the VIII Corps engineer, a second engineer combat battalion was committed. It was the 158th, not a part of Middleton's formal reserve but part of First Army's 1128th Engineer Combat Group, which was working in his area and could be called upon "in dire circumstances."³¹

The 158th Engineer Combat Battalion received orders at 1730 on 17 December to take over the 35th Engineer Combat Battalion's 3,900-yard left flank extending from Foy, a town on the main paved road (N-15) leading into Bastogne from the north to Neffe, a

²⁹ Hist 44th Engr C Bn, Oct, Nov, Dec 44.

³⁰ Hist 35th Engr C Bn, Oct 44–Apr 45.

³¹ Cole, *The Ardennes: The Battle of the Bulge*, p. 310.

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ROAD MAINTENANCE OUTSIDE WILTZ, BELGIUM

town just south of the main paved road (N-28) from the east—the most likely direction of the German advance. The VIII Corps engineer advised that a takeover in the blackness of the winter night would be too difficult, and the commander of the 158th, Lt. Col. Sam Tabet, postponed the arrival of his battalion at the perimeter until daybreak at 18 December. Company A began to dig in on the left near Foy, Company B near Neffe, and Company C near Luzery, just north of Bastogne. To help hold his line of defense astride the roads along which the Germans were advancing, Tabet obtained 4 tank destroyers mounting 105-mm. howitzers, 8 light tanks, and 2 Shermans, all taken from ordnance shops and manned by

ordnance mechanics. The battalion also managed to round up 950 antitank mines.³²

During the daylight hours of 18 December the engineers sent out reconnaissance parties and set up roadblocks, using chains of mines, bazookas, .50-caliber machine guns, and rifle grenades. Late that evening they were attached to the 10th Armored Division, whose Combat Command B was expected to arrive momentarily. Around midnight they heard rifle and automatic weapons fire to the east, and Germans overran one of the engineer roadblocks a

³² Hist 158th Engr C Bn, 17 Dec–20 Dec 44. Unless otherwise cited, this account of the 158th is taken from this source.