

CLASSIC TAG NEWS

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DEFENSE OF TROIS-PONTS

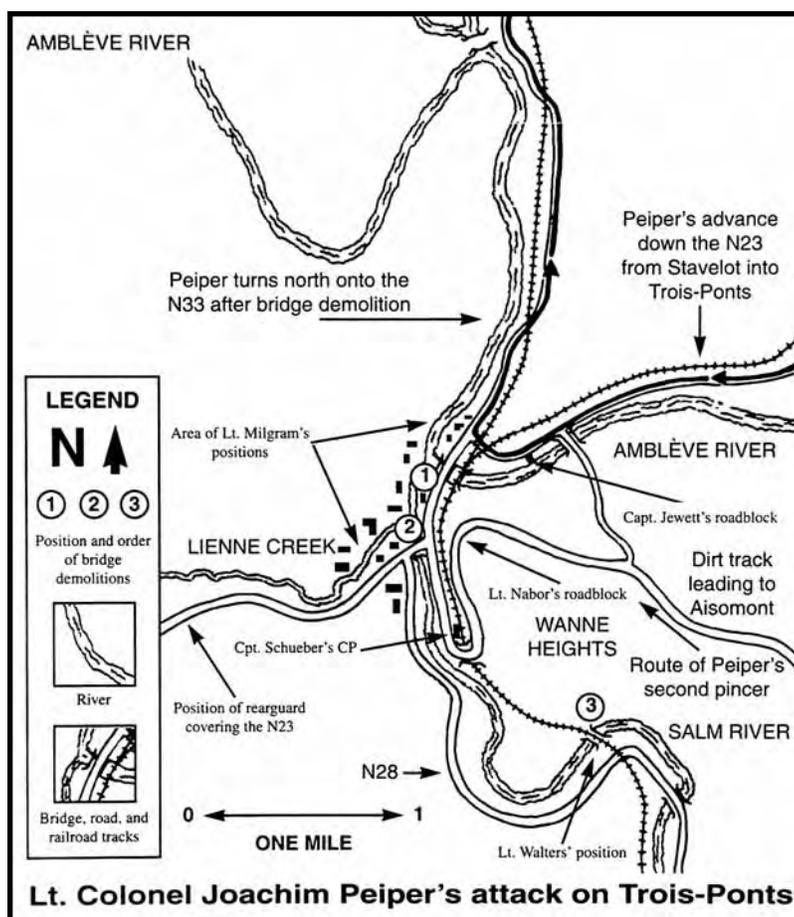
The opening stage of the Battle of the Bulge saw widespread confusion and panic among the Americans. To shore up the collapsing front, rear echelon and support personnel were ordered into the line. Engineer Combat Battalions (ECBs), engaged in road building and lumber milling, were hurriedly parceled into squad and platoon-sized roadblocks and thrown in front of onrushing panzers. One such blocking action was fought by Company C of the 51st ECB during Dec. 18th through the 21st, at the village of Trois-Ponts.

THE TERRAIN

Anyone having driven the Pennsylvania Turnpike is familiar with Ardennes' terrain. Both the Ardennes and Appalachian regions share characteristic low slung mountains flanked with steep and thickly forested slopes. Valleys in the Ardennes, however, are much narrower and cut by looping of rivers and streams. In places these rivers are mere ribbons of water measuring no more than thirty feet across and a few feet deep. Water, however, is not the principal tactical obstacle. Erosion over the eons has cut stream beds some twenty to thirty feet below the valley floor, thus forming a perfect system of natural antitank ditches.

THE DEFENSE

Heading the assault of 1st SS Panzer Division was a *kampfgruppe* commanded by Lt. Col. Joachim Peiper. Peiper's *kampfgruppe* was an *ad hoc* organization, specially organized and equipped to rip open the defenses in front of 1st SS Panzer Division. On December 17, Peiper successfully stormed the Amblève River at Stavelot and turned south towards the hamlet of Trois-Ponts. Trois-Ponts' strategic importance lay in its three namesake bridges crossing the junction of the Salm and Amblève rivers. Trois-Ponts also headquartered the 1111th



Engineer Combat Group, an operational grouping of three ECBs under the overall command of Col. W. Willis Anderson. With his headquarters now threatened with direct assault, Anderson started moving his staff to Modave. Company C of the 51st ECB, with an attached squad from the 291st ECB, was ordered to defend Trois-Ponts and wire the bridges for demolition.

Capt. Sam Scheuber, commander of Company C, had a difficult time gathering his men. Scattered about the sector in small lumberjacking details, the company

painfully assembled through a road network choked with retreating Americans and advancing Germans; several of Scheuber's engineers were captured en route to Trois-Ponts. By 11:30, on the night of the 17th, 75 Company C's 175 men had arrived. Stragglers trickled in throughout the night.

From his CP in the railroad station Scheuber rapidly formulated a battle plan. His defensive preparations were aided by his intimate knowledge of the local terrain. Company C had rebuilt several bridges in this sector including one at Trois-Ponts.

To defend the town, Scheuber had his company (minus 21 men), eight bazookas, plus six .50 caliber and four .30 caliber truck-mounted machine guns. On the Stavelot road, just beyond the railroad viaduct, stood a 57mm antitank gun of the 526th Armored Infantry Battalion. This gun, stranded when its M2 prime mover slipped a track, was dragooned into a roadblock detail commanded by the 1111th's S-4, Capt. Robert Jewett.

As the bridges were wired for demolition, trucks of the 7th Armored Division rumbled over them en route to St. Vith. As the final column passed, a trailing M7 slid down the embankment into the Salm River. As its crew abandoned the vehicle, they ignited it with a thermite grenade. This hulk, fully loaded with gasoline and ammunition, burned for the following day and night.



The final defensive dispositions were as follows:

1. Lt. Fred Nabor's 2nd Platoon (+ two 2.36 bazookas), positioned on the commanding Wanne Heights to the southeast, covered the narrow approach from Aisomont.

2. Capt. Jewett's roadblock was reinforced by a truck-mounted squad of engineers led by 3rd Platoon commander, Lt. Richard Green. Green, under Jewett's command, deployed his squad across the road from the 57mm antitank gun.

3. The southern bridge was wired for demolition and defended by the attached squad from the 291st, commanded by Lt. Albert Walters.

4. A rearguard with a bazooka and .50 caliber machine gun covered the N23 running to the southwest.



5. Lt. Joseph Milgram's 1st Platoon and the remainder of Green's 3rd Platoon, after preparing the northern two spans for demolition, occupied strong points in the town proper along the western bank of the Salm and Amblève Rivers.

THE ATTACK

Peiper organized a two-prong assault. The bulk of the *kampfgruppe* ran along the N23 out of Stavelot and hit the town from the northeast. The second pincer, consisting of 3 Kompanie of Panzer-Pionier Bataillon I, and 6 Kompanie of Panzer-Regiment I, was to capture the high ground to the southwest.



GHQ 1/285th scale M2 Halftrack (US52)

Captain Jewett made first contact. He had positioned two soldiers with a daisy chain 250 yards ahead of his roadblock. (A daisy chain is a number of mines roped together at two-foot intervals.) At the first sight of tanks, these soldiers were to drag the daisy chain across the road and return to the roadblock. At noon on the 18th, the first panzer clanked into view. The mine detail deployed the daisy chain and then buttoned up the Panther with rifle fire before returning to the roadblock. As the German tankers removed the mines, the antitank gunner, unsure if his target was friend or foe, hesitated for a critical instant. His hesitation allowed the Germans four quick shots before the 57mm fired back. While the Germans fired first, the American shot true; the round slewed into the lead Panther's running gear and disabled it. As the loader slammed the second shell into the breach, it was discovered there was only another five AT rounds in the M2's ammo bins, an

unfortunate oversight to say the least. Ammunition was run out to Green's squad which, now cut off from Jewett by a curtain of vehicular machine gun fire, rolled the AT shells across the road to the gun crew.

This one-sided gun duel continued until the 57mm and its crew were obliterated by a direct hit. Observing the roadblock's destruction through binoculars, Col. Anderson immediately ordered the two northern bridges blown-up; the time was 1:00 PM. Cut off from their comrades on the far bank, the roadblock survivors beat a hasty retreat. All eventually made the safety of American lines by circuitous routes.

During Jewett's battle with the Panthers, the second German pincer made contact with Lt. Nabors. While German engineers swarmed directly down the tree covered slopes, their armored support, consisting of three Mk IVs, remained confined to the road. Forced to snake their way down the Aisomont road, the Mk IVs looped south and lost contact with their infantry. Nabors was well positioned to exploit this opportunity. The road was laced with a daisy chain and the first panzer was allowed to pass into the mines. As the second Mk IV rolled by, the Americans fired a bazooka rocket into it without effect. All hell then broke loose. One bazooka malfunctioned, the other was shot out of its gunner's hands, and the daisy chain detonated under a hail of vehicular machine gun fire. Stripped of antitank weapons, Nabors retired into Trois-Ponts. The German armor, without direct infantry support, did not follow.

With Nabors safely across, Col. Anderson gave the order and the final span dropped into the Salm with a thunderclap. After personally witnessing the destruction of all three bridges (the Stavelot bridge demolition was

rumored sabotaged), Col. Anderson relinquished command to the 51st's executive officer, Major Robert Yates. Yates deployed Company C along a 500-yard front on the western bank of the Salm to repel an expected assault crossing.

The bridge demolition ended Peiper's interest in Trois-Ponts. As the northern bridges erupted before him, Peiper uttered his *kampfgruppe's* epithet, "Those damned engineers!" The assault crossing never materialized. Although Yates now faced just a holding force, gunfire exchanges across the river convinced him he was at a severe disadvantage. After repulsing several aggressive enemy patrols, Yates tightened his perimeter at dusk for an anticipated final stand. Fortunately, ammunition in the smoldering M7 was periodically cooking off, convincing the Germans Yates had some sort of artillery. To further deceive the enemy, Yates had his vehicles driven in a continuous loop with the truckers flashing their lights as they turned towards the German positions.



GHQ 1/285th scale Panzer IV H (G548)

It mattered not. Gen. Dwight Eisenhower had turned command of the Allied northern flank over to Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery. In characteristic fashion Monty set about "tidying up" the battlefield. He ordered a withdrawal back to a line anchored by the Meuse River. Ignoring the fact that, in the Trois-Ponts sector at least, the Germans were stopped and hard pressed to hold their gains. In actuality, Company C had been reinforced by a paratroop regiment and was counterattacking. Monty's order arrived amidst bitter fighting and compelled the hard pressed paratroopers to abandon their wounded on the east bank of the Salm. With bitter acrimony, Trois-Ponts was evacuated on December 21, 1944.



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