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28100 Woodside Road
Shorewood, MN 55331 USA
(612) 374-2693

Aachen Gap: The Battle of Bardenberg

The 30th (Old Hickory) Infantry Division ruptured the Siegfried Line's first echelon defenses early in October of 1944. This penetration caught the German high command's attention for both strategic and political reasons. Old Hickory's bridgehead threatened Aachen. If Aachen fell, Germany's main line of resistance would be breached at a point where an entire corps could ride the *autobahn* in relative ease to the Rhine. Prestige was also at stake. Aachen was the first German city to face Allied ground forces; the Nazis guaranteed it would not fall. To make good this boast reinforcements were hastily assembled. One unit receiving marching orders was *Kampfgruppe von Fritschen*, bivouacked some 100 miles away in Luxembourg. The *kampfgruppe* was a regimental-sized force consisting of seven Mk IV tanks, twenty assault guns, and one motorized infantry battalion. It was a crack unit which earned its battle honors on the Russian Front.

THE DEFENDERS

Despite the Wehrmacht's desperate circumstances in late 1944, it did enjoy advantages in the upcoming battle. One was the West Wall, a.k.a. the Siegfried Line. Built to counter the Maginot Line, the Siegfried Line was a culmination of German defensive expertise gained in the Great War. It was not a line *per se*, but a series of defensive echelons laid out in great depth. Each echelon was studded with obstacles designed to funnel attackers into preplotted killing zones. Each village was a fortified hardpoint, where roving *kampfgruppen* could rally and counterattack. The Siegfried Line was no folly or myth; it was a meat grinder of the first order.

THE ATTACKERS

Although on the verge of a major battle, the battered 30th Division did not know it. In fact, with all its objectives achieved, the 30th was winding down operations. All that remained was to swing south and link-up with the 1st (Big Red One) Infantry Division. With its divisional boundary established, Old Hickory would hunker in for a well deserved breather. However, the Big Red One was having its hands full containing Aachen and was not moving to meet Old Hickory halfway as anticipated. Furthermore, as the 30th checked its eastward advance the Germans used the respite to withdraw the battered 246th *Volksgrenadier* Division and replace it with the 12th *Volksgrenadier* Division. The 12th VG was a rebuilt unit, formed around a cadre of Russian Front veterans. It was completely intact, carrying a full muster of 14,800 bayonets. The 4,000 yard swing south, thought at first a piece of cake, was going to be one tough slog.

Photographs appearing in Tac News are not necessarily to scale



G44 Panzerkampfwagen IV Ausf H

THE BATTLE

Old Hickory's three rifle regiments started south at dawn on October 8. On the right, the 119th Infantry crept cautiously through the undefended but heavily mined town of Herzogenrath. Beyond town, the regiment's lead elements took fire from a pillbox cluster. Centering the line, the 120th Infantry attacked across the Herzogenrath-Alsdorf road. Despite dug-in resistance on the high ground facing it, the regiment made good progress. The 117th Infantry on the left had previously cut one of the two main highways running northeast out of Aachen. It advanced two battalions to the southwest toward Mariadorf to intercede Aachen's other main supply route.

The morning's advance abruptly ceased when assault elements contacted 12th VG Division. The 117th's 1st and 3rd Battalions, supported by the 743rd Tank Battalion, advanced through Kol Kellerserg and cleared German emplacements along the railroad line. But, as the Americans crossed the tracks, they were hit by a hail of mortar and machine gun fire. I Company of the 3rd Battalion lost over two thirds of its rifle strength and was forced to retire. The Shermans, ignorant of the chaos to their rear, continued to clank forward. Soon the gap between them and infantry widened to 100 yards. Without infantry support the American armor became easy meat for roving *panzerjäger* teams armed with the dreaded *panzerfaust*. In rapid succession, two Shermans and an M-10 were knocked-out.

As the Americans faltered the Germans counterattacked, penetrating all the way to Alsdorf in company strength with four supporting panzers. Third Battalion's CP came under direct attack. Armed with weak-sister carbines and pistols, staff personnel organized a hasty defense. Luckily, the German infantry proved to be an assortment of old men and boys exhorted by a single NCO. When he was dropped, the *volksgrenadiers* took to the buildings. This turned



G104 SdKfz 251 C2 (Mortar Carrier)

the tables, for it left the panzers unsupported and hemmed into the tight streets of Alsdorf. Bazooka teams set upon them with relish and three of the four were soon knocked-out. The survivor, dubbed the "Reluctant Dragon," roamed the streets of Alsdorf for the rest of the day spraying the town with random machine gun and cannon fire. A dragnet of bazooka teams was ordered to get him, but the crafty panzer gave them the slip at sundown.

While headquarter personnel focused on this solitary panzer, the real battle was being waged in open ground east of Alsdorf and just north of Kol Kellersberg. A large German infantry force, again supported by tanks, emerged from behind a huge slag pile near Mariadorf. The surprise assault caught the 117th in the left flank. Disaster was averted by the 118th Field Artillery Battalion, which expertly dropped a timed barrage between the regiment's assault troops and their battalion CPs to the rear.

As the barrage of the 118th Field Artillery sealed its ruptured left flank, the 117th committed its reserve, the 2nd Battalion, to clear Alsdorf. Although poor assault troops, *volksgradiers* proved competent defensive fighters, especially when sheltered in stone buildings. Despite repeated assaults they remained rooted in place. Unable to clear its rear echelon, the 117th Infantry was forced to retire. First Battalion took up defensive positions in Kol Kellersberg, while 3rd Battalion hunkered in on an open rise of ground to the northeast.

The Alsdorf counterattack stopped Old Hickory cold. Instead of linking-up with 1st Division as planned, the 30th dug in that night with a right flank defined by a 3,000 yard rift of no man's land. This was an situation ripe for disaster if the Germans had mobile forces at hand. Which is exactly what they did have; the tank crews taken prisoner in Alsdorf belonged to *Kampfgruppe von Fritschen*.

October 9th, was a day of consolidation for the 117th Infantry. The regiment stabilized its front along the Mariadorf rail line and ejected the last *volksgradiers* out Alsdorf. Although its left flank was static Old Hickory still pushed towards the Big Red One. The 120th Infantry, advancing behind a fog bank, surprised the newly arrived German 7th Antitank Battalion. One self-propelled "88" and seven *pupchens* were captured. *Pupchens* were smooth-bore 88mm tubes mounted on a carriage and protected by a gun shield. Although they resembled miniature antitank guns, *pupchen* were in actuality heavy bazookas. The GIs moved on, with their newly acquired "toy" artillery in tow.

At 1:00PM, the Germans counterattacked the 120th. To achieve surprise, they hit without a preparatory artillery barrage. German infantry, supported by ten panzers, swung up from Euchen, catching 2d Battalion consolidating the high ground northwest of town. Although caught off balance and off guard, 2nd Battalion refused to yield. Frustrated, the Germans shifted their efforts west and by happenstance

caught 1st Battalion consolidating its gains on the high ground near Birk. The GIs were hard pressed simply to hold, further advance was out of the question. By day's end the Germans retired, having accomplished their dual objectives of stopping the 120th and severing its communications with the 119th Infantry.

Unaware of the commotion on their left, the 119th was moving rapidly south. The undefended town of Bardenberg was taken on the fly by a two prong thrust, with 3rd Battalion attacking from the northwest and 1st Battalion from the east. By day's end both battalions passed through Bardenberg and reached the high ground just outside of North Wurselen. North Wurselen was to have been a divisional boundary demarcation point, but patrols found no sign of the Big Red One. Soon, however, the 119th's attention turned rearward. The Germans had retaken Bardenberg.

For two days von Fritschen husbanded a reserve for just this opportunity. After stopping the 120th, he sucked the 119th forward by evacuating Bardenberg. His plan was now to launch a concerted armored counterattack at Bardenberg. This would not only shatter the 119th Infantry, it would also rupture the crease between the American 30th and 1st Divisions. With a regiment or two of *volksgradiers* securing his supply lines, von Fritschen's panzers would run wild in the American rear in classic *blitzkrieg* style.

First warning of the counter stroke came at dusk. The Germans, again attacking without artillery preparation, surprised a rifle company of the 120th as it crossed the Bardenberg-Birk road. Similar reports streamed into the 30th's Division Headquarters, first from the 120th, and then the 119th Infantry. Roadblocks on the east edge of Bardenberg reported incoming 37mm and 20mm cannon fire. More messages reporting enemy armored columns followed, then silence. In actuality, von Fritschen's force consisted of 300 half-track-mounted panzergrenadiers and five tanks. By deft maneuvering, he not only took Bardenberg, but managed to get his column spotted in several places along the front, which greatly confused the Americans as to the size and intent of his force.

The immediate American reserve, the 119th's 2nd Battalion, was a mile back at Herzogenrath. It could not be fully committed without proper authority, and at Division the picture remained confused throughout the night. Orders that were issued had the air of panic. As 2nd Battalion moved toward the sound of guns, all cooks, typists, and mechanics were alerted for possible line duty at dawn.

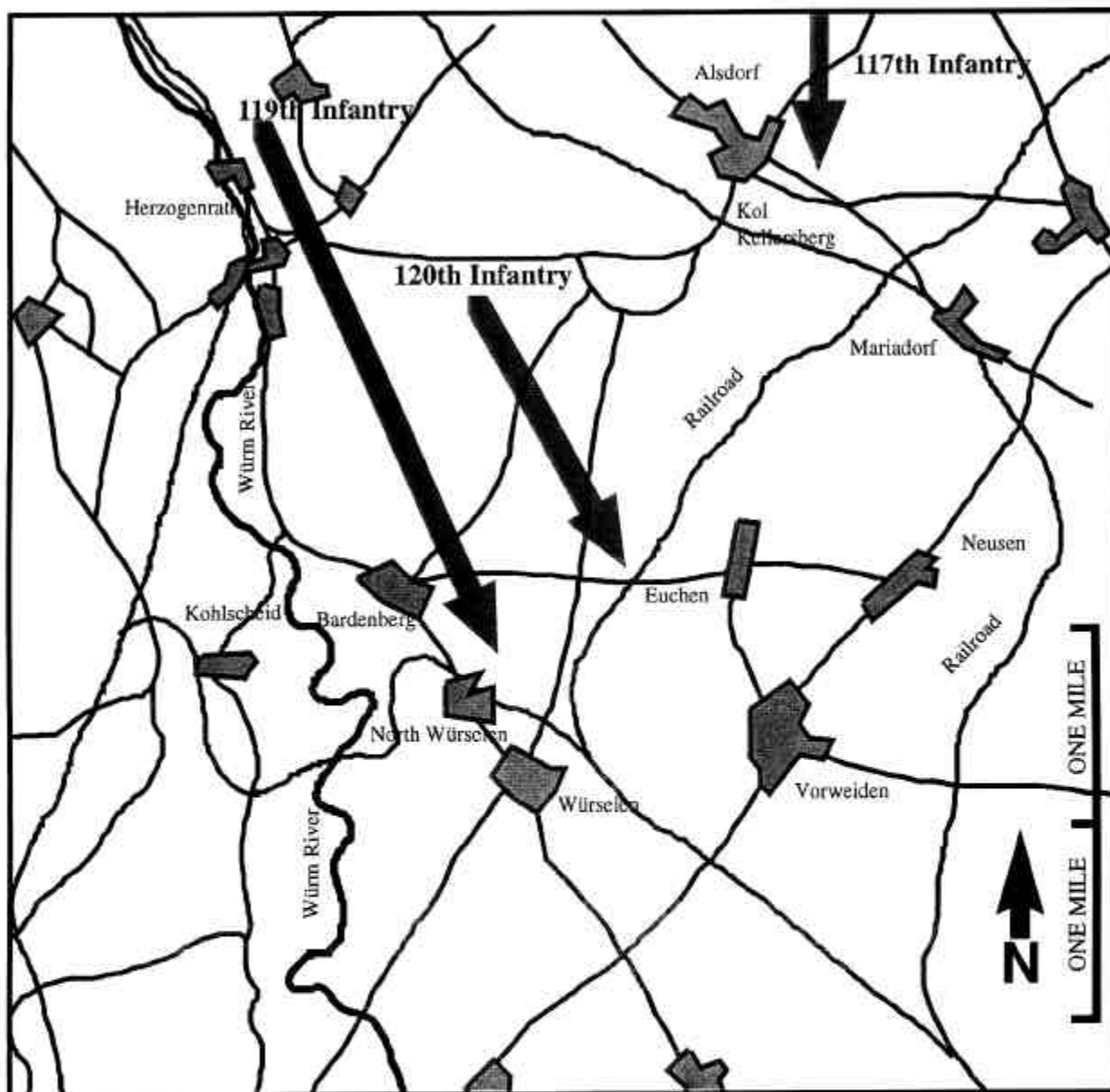
American despondency disappeared with dawn on October 10th. Von Fritschen's promised infantry support never arrived. The penetration was only a local effort, with no *volksgradiers* securing its flanks. Division ordered a counterattack towards Birk, and to that end the 120th's 1st Battalion jumped off at 5:30AM. The Americans, this time copying German tactics, attacked without artillery preparation. The results were startling; the objective fell with only one accidental



G94 37mm Flak SdKfz 7/2

Aachen Gap: The Battle of Bardenberg

Situation Map October 9th through the 11th, 1944



shot fired. Birk's capture severed von Fritschen's lines of communication and solidified the 120th's front which now ran along an axis of defender-friendly terrain from south to east.

Bardenberg proper was attacked by the 119th's 2nd Battalion. K Company advancing with three tanks in support, was soon pinned by mortar and 20mm cannon fire. I Company, attacking from the west near Pley, was also stopped. The volume and intensity of the 37mm and 20mm cannon fire was a nasty surprise. Its source was a mystery until prisoner interrogation revealed von Fritschen was reinforced by a tank and armored infantry battalion from the 108th Panzer Brigade. The 108th's antiaircraft element was particularly strong, consisting of some twenty self-propelled guns. Ten of these vehicles were Sdkfz 251/21s, which sported 20mm triple-mounts. Eventually, 2nd Battalion gained a toehold with the enemy clinging to the south end of the town. Towards dusk the Americans attempted to knock-out German vehicles covering key intersections with bazookas. Enemy firepower was simply overpowering and the bazooka teams were beaten off. The Americans rethought their tactics and decided to tackle

the relatively thin-skinned and open-topped halftracks with indirect fire. At nightfall the GIs withdrew, clearing the field for an artillery barrage that pounded Bardenberg throughout the night without let up.

To rescue their isolated armor in Bardenberg, the Germans attacked north of Birk with several hundred infantry supported by nine tanks. At the point of attack stood a handful of GIs and a single Sherman commanded by a Sergeant Kirksey. A call went out for help, but reinforcements would take fifteen minutes to arrive. This apparently didn't perturb Kirksey. He fired more than 60 rounds, killing one tank and a score of infantry. Captured *pupchen* and indirect fire from the 230th Field Artillery Battalion claimed another seven German armored vehicles.

While the GIs of Old Hickory bled and died containing the Bardenberg pocket, Allied brass grew increasingly impatient. The Big Red One prematurely delivered a surrender ultimatum to Aachen's garrison. The document was meaningless, Aachen was yet to be fully invested. But 1st Division was regular army and army prestige was now on the line. The High Command demanded an immediate link-up

SCHEMATIC COMBAT TEAM FORMATION

30TH INFANTRY DIVISION

Aachen Gap: Bardenberg Battle

Division Command Post Rear Echelon

730th Ordnance Company
30th Quartermaster Company
Headquarters 105th Medical Battalion
105th Medical Battalion, Company D

Division Command Post Forward Echelon

Battalion Command Posts For:	30th Headquarters Company	30th Forward Artillery Battalion
105th Engineer Battalion	Headquarters Battery, 30th Divisional Artillery	531st Antiaircraft Artillery Battalion,
823rd Tank Destroyer Battalion	30th Signal Company	Battery A
743rd Tank Battalion	Military Police Platoon	Attached Artillery

105th Medical Battalion,
Company A
531st Antiaircraft Artillery Battalion,
Battery C
230th Forward Observer Battalion
Elements, 743rd Tank Battalion
823rd Tank Destroyer Battalion,
Company A
105th Engineer Battalion,
Company B

119th Infantry Regiment

105th Medical Battalion,
Company C
531st Antiaircraft Artillery Battalion,
Battery D
230th Forward Observer Battalion
Elements, 743rd Tank Battalion
823rd Tank Destroyer Battalion,
Company B
105th Engineer Battalion,
Company C

120th Infantry Regiment

105th Medical Battalion,
Company B
531st Antiaircraft Artillery Battalion,
Battery B
118th Forward Observer Battalion
Elements, 743rd Tank Battalion
823rd Tank Destroyer Battalion,
Company C
105th Engineer Battalion,
Company A

117th Infantry Regiment

30th Reconnaissance Troop (securing front and flanks)

be made somewhere in the bullet-whipped 3,000 yards separating Old Hickory and the Big Red One. With the 30th now ordered to focus its attention south, the task of clearing Bardenberg fell solely on the 119th's 2nd Battalion and whatever forces could be scraped together by thinning the line elsewhere.

Second Battalion, supported by tanks and two rifle companies of the 120th's 3rd Battalion reentered Bardenberg at dawn on October 11. Little opposition was encountered until the GIs hit the southern part of town. There, and in the woods just south of the town, resistance was stubborn. German *panzergrenadiers* and tanks worked in perfect coordination, covering each other from mutually supporting positions. When his men faltered, Major Howard Greer, commander of the 120th's 3rd Battalion, grabbed a bazooka along with a couple of rockets and worked his way forward. He knocked-out a tank with his first shot. A near miss from a covering panzer blew off Greer's helmet, but he regained his composure and brewed that panzer with his final rocket. For this, Greer was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross.

Staff Sergeant Anthony Tempesta, B Company, 743rd Tank Battalion, was another key figure in the Bardenberg fight. He knocked-out a German assault gun covering a key intersection on the main street with three quick shots. Tempesta then moved along side the disabled assault gun, placing his Sherman in the center of the intersection. Supported by a bazooka team, which kept marauding panzerfaust teams at bay, Tempesta knocked out another assault gun and six halftracks. German counter fire was just as deadly, by 2:00PM all of B Company's officers had fallen. Tempesta assumed command. He directed single Shermans, supported by infantry squads and bazooka teams, to disassemble the German defensive matrix intersection by intersection. The work was slow and deadly, but it proved a winner. By day's end a desperate von Fritschen ordered a breakout. His men ran the gauntlet to Würselen, leaving behind six disabled panzers and sixteen wrecked halftracks.