

2ND PLT Recon Co

Battle at St. Vith - December 1944*

The last week in November, Second Platoon, Reconnaissance Company, 814th Tank Destroyer Battalion, attached to the 7th Armored Division, took on the mission of serving as local security for a platoon of M-36 tank destroyers as they moved into dug in direct firing positions between Pommern and Suggareth in the Julich-Duren area near the Roer River.

Being gunner in Second Platoon's First Section, I removed my 30 cal. machine gun and carried it forward from our parking area to the rear and set it up in one of the trenches outside a captured German pillbox. Except for the time on guard, which occurred sometimes at intervals of two hours on and two hours off, our platoon stayed inside the pillbox. Rain fell intermittently; and though it was cold, the temperature remained above freezing.

German shells fell occasionally in our vicinity, particularly during the night; and we were cautioned to be on the lookout for German patrols. Flares burst overhead and to our front during the night, and scattered bursts of small arms fire passed overhead occasionally. During the day, light American reconnaissance planes flew over the German positions in the high ground to the east of us.

Following the breakout from the Normandy hedgerows, our Division had been a part of the 3rd Army's rush through France.

Morale had been high during this time, though our platoon suffered some anxious moments while at the point of an advancing armored column. The rumor that Gen. Patton was predicting a German surrender by September accounted for

*Notes prepared by Calvin C. Boykin, Jr., U.S. Army Serial No. 38342098. Born March 1, 1924. Entered the Army from Big Spring, Texas, in February 1943. Honorable discharge December 1945.

some of our optimism, but this was gradually dispelled during the action near Metz.

After suffering heavy casualties in the fighting around the Moselle River, the 7th Armored Division was transferred to the British Second Army in Holland, where we took part in the action around Asten, Weert, Overloon, and Nederweert. Following this September and November action, the Division retired for rest and maintenance outside of Maastricht, Holland. We sampled the hospitality of Maastricht's fine citizens, including the dances held by English-speaking girls for the American soldiers.

Going back into action after getting a taste of civilization, and realizing that the war was progressing rather slowly, had depressed me as I alternated at guard from a pillbox along the Roer River. After a short time our platoon was relieved for a few days. I had taken the flu while in the cramped quarters of the pillbox, but the brief respite gave me a chance to recover. Then we returned to the same position. My spirits dropped to a new low. I hoped for a quick relief and a return to Maastricht, where a girl whom I had met would be celebrating her birthday on December 8. However, we stayed in the line with little change in our situation until the night of December 16, when we were ordered out. I felt a tremendous relief at leaving our dreary, though apparently not too dangerous, position. Also, I hoped we would be moving to Maastricht.

Our column passed through Heerlen and the coal mines where we had been trucked in for showers during the fighting while attached to the British. To my disappointment, we missed going through Maastricht; and we continued south into Belgium. Belgium, as we understood it, was clear of Germans. Therefore, we felt we must be going back for an extended rest. We joked with one another, speculating about the good time we were going to have.

During the day, a rather cold and rainy day, we entered Verviers, finding large crowds of civilians lining the streets. I interpreted their waving and cheering as being a monumental "thanks" for a job well done.

Shortly after passing through Verviers, we began to sense that something was wrong. Perhaps, we thought, some Germans still remained in Belgium. I tried to put this possibility out of my mind as we continued our move south.

As darkness fell, our column stopped for longer and longer periods. Sometimes we kept the motors running, and our crew alternated sleeping on the back of the armored car, where the heat from the motor warmed us. About this time rumors began working their way up and down the column that the Germans had broken through. My disappointment at not going to either Maastricht or to a rest area gave way to new fears generated by the uncertainty that lay ahead.

When it seemed we couldn't move any farther, we pulled into the woods. Snow lay beneath the trees where we unrolled our bedrolls. Being tired, and having missed guard duty, I slept the rest of the night.

Early next morning, the 18th, while standing on my armored car, tying on my bedroll, I heard an incoming artillery shell. I jumped to the ground, lying flat, as the shell plunged to the ground nearby. It didn't explode. This isolated event added credence to the rumor about Germans being in the vicinity. Receiving no further fire, we loaded up and moved onto the road.

As the column moved forward, my crew talked very little. No official word had been received concerning our mission, and we were left to our individual speculations. It seemed impossible, though perhaps it was wishful thinking, that the Germans were in a position to attack. We played the usual game of wait and see.

Late in the day, we began to split up. My platoon was shuttled back and forth several times before being allowed to settle in for the night in a small

village. As night came, I crawled into a bayloft to get a few hours sleep. Late in the night I was awakened by Rcn. company's executive officer and told to carry a message to command headquarters.¹ I took a jeep and a driver and delivered the message to a major. While waiting outside the commander's make-shift office, I checked a map on the wall. Red grease pencil marks, for the most part question marks, surrounded our location. It was then that I realized the seriousness of our situation. I accepted a reply to the message and left.

On the way back to our billets, we were stopped by MP's. I gave a password different from theirs and did some quick explaining to convince them we were who I said we were. They let us proceed back to our platoon, where I delivered the reply to my message.

On the 19th, the fog and drizzling rain continued. Rumors persisted about German paratroops being dropped into our area during the night. Some said that used parachutes had been found. Second Platoon Rcn. went out on patrols during the day and into the night. The fog was so bad at night we were afraid to travel, so we parked alongside the road and remained in our vehicles.

During the 20th and 21st, Second Platoon, Rcn. continued its patrols. On the night of the 20th, we set up a roadblock outside a small village, as scattered groups of civilians passed our position. We surmised that the Germans were nearby and perhaps advancing down the road to us. Though we waited, they did not come.

About this time word reached us, how I do not know, that the Germans had slaughtered American prisoners at Malmedy. At first, I found this hard to

¹CCA, CCB, CCR?

believe, for the German prisoners I had had any dealings with always gave the appearance of fully expecting to be treated in accordance with the Geneva Convention. Their detailed knowledge of handling prisoners of war had given me the feeling that, if captured, we would be treated well. For the first time, I reviewed in my mind the procedures to follow if captured. Giving my name, rank, and serial number was all I could remember. Then I began thinking it best not to be captured at all.

We talked very little about the Malmedy incident, though I know it was on everyone's mind. No official pronouncement was made, nor did we receive any precautionary instructions. Perhaps our keeping busy, running patrols day and night, and setting up roadblocks, kept us from dwelling on the subject too long.

Soon we received word that we had been assigned to Task Force Jones-- named for our battalion commander--Lt. Col. Robert B. Jones. Though we respected Col. Jones, we joked among ourselves about Col. Bobby's Task Force.

On the night of the 22nd, Second Platoon Rcn. set up a roadblock.² Snow fell in large flakes, covering my bedroll. The temperature seemed colder as we alternated at our gun positions. Late in the night I sat monitoring the radio. As I began listening to the sounds of what I thought to be a tank column to our right, I received a message over the radio reporting an enemy tank column in the vicinity of coordinates pinpointing our position. After waking our platoon leader and rechecking the location reported, it seemed that the column would miss us, which it did.

On the morning of the 23rd, the ground was crusted with snow and the overcast had cleared. Second Platoon Rcn. was ordered into another road block position. This time we fashioned a daisy chain of mines and made

²Our position was south and west of St. Vith. As best I can determine, we must have been patrolling south flank of the horseshoe defense at St. Vith.

preparations for pulling it in front of us in the event our 37mm guns didn't stop an enemy advance. A few civilians came back and forth through our position--some riding bicycles. We gave little thought to them. We heard that our Third Platoon had been ambushed, with several of its men, including the platoon leader, being killed or captured. This unnerved me more than the talk about the Malmedy incident, for I had several friends in the Third Platoon.

Late in the morning we learned that Task Force Jones, of which we were a part, was scheduled to fight a rear-guard action as the 7th Armored Division withdrew from the St. Vith area to a position behind the lines of the 82nd Airborne Division.

Around noon, Second Platoon Rcn. pulled back into a small village on a hill to the west of a main road leading to Salmchateau. A steady stream of tanks and other vehicles filed past on the road for several hours. Impatiently, I awaited the word that would send us onto the road and out of our predicament. I inspected the 37mm on my armored car. The turret had frozen to the body, and I used my trench knife to free it up, though it still traversed sluggishly.

Orders came finally, and we moved into the column. As we moved forward, light tanks with assault guns covered our withdrawal. The column moved slowly and stopped frequently. Over the 608 radio in my armored car, I heard messages in the clear concerning an enemy attack that was taking place at the rear of our column. An excited voice that I thought to be that of a major from Headquarters Company, 814th TD Bu., frantically urged the column to move on. He said with a nervous laugh that he needed a new pair of drawers.

The column inched forward, and I found myself looking north, down the front of the column, from a position on a slight rise in the road. Then I saw a burning tank in the column that had just been hit. A wave of panic seemed to envelop those around me in the column. Vehicles started backing--others tried to turn around. It seemed as though our fears were being

realized--we were trapped.³ A voice I recognized as being Col. Jones' came through on our 608 radio, urging us to burn our vehicles if necessary and get out on foot.

While stalled in the mass of vehicles on the road, I noticed a large number of soldiers approaching the railroad bridge parallel to the road from across a wide expanse of lowlands to the east. Thinking these were Germans, preparations were made to bring fire upon these troops. Only quick action on the part of several officers, who ran up and down the column yelling for us to hold our fire, kept us from shooting into some of our own troops.

Moments later, one of our light reconnaissance planes flew over our position at low altitude. Whitish tracers, coming from German machine guns located in the wooded hills about 200 yards to the east, closed around the small plane, causing it to dodge and fly under the railroad bridge. The plane disappeared behind the hills to the south.

As darkness fell, we moved into a sparsely wooded area west of the road. A few members of Second Platoon, plus others, gathered into a small barn up the hillside to discuss our plans. We were told that a foot patrol had been formed and that it was looking for a way out through the woods. Feeling helpless and somewhat nauseated, I returned to my armored car. Then I walked into the brush and relieved myself.

Returning to my armored car, I filled my overcoat pockets with carbine ammunition, a chocolate bar, and placed my folder of photographs from home in my shirt pocket. I included the small New Testament that the Red Cross

³According to a combat interview with Col. Robert B. Jones, the record of which is in the Federal Records Center, the tank was hit by an anti-tank gun of the 82nd Airborne's. The 82nd, he said, occupied a part of Salmchateau at the same time that a German unit occupied another part. Only quick action on Jones' part kept the 82nd Division's artillery from firing on us as we escaped into the woods.

Checked this site in 1970 -- Red bridge was too low for a plane to fly under. OCB MAY 21, 1985

had given me on boarding the Ile de France at Halifax to leave for overseas. I gave an incendiary grenade to the driver of my armored car that I had removed from the vehicle's side compartment.

Remembering the incident at Malmedy and the fate of our Third Platoon, I resolved not to be captured. However, we said little about this to each other, or for that matter, about anything else. Again, we waited to see what was going to happen.

A little while later, while reaching into the turret of my armored car to get a map, I accidentally touched the button of my flashlight. For an instant, a flicker of light shone upward. Instinctively, I moved away and fell on the ground. A tracer beamed across our way and fell into our position. It exploded about like I imagined a 20mm would.

Shortly thereafter, we were told to mount up and move along a trail or fire guard that the foot patrol had located. We moved along for some distance, picking up a few stragglers as we went. As we came to a Y in the road, an officer, whom I didn't recognize, ordered us to take the right fork. This we did, but after hearing machine gun fire to our front, we turned around and headed back, where we took the left fork.⁴

Our column continued on until we reached a marshy area, parts of which were iced-over ponds of water. Our vehicles spread out, crossing over at different locations. My armored car broke through the ice, miring down into water and mud. The driver spun the wheels, and we sunk deeper. I jumped down to flag a passing light tank, but it sped on. The radio operator and I opened the armored car's side pocket and, by using an ax, were able to free the chains from their frozen position. After trying for a few moments to

⁴According to what we heard a few days later, those who continued on the right fork were among those listed as missing.

hook the chains on the tires, we gave it up as hopeless. I called to a lone straggler coming down behind us to lend a hand. He replied that he had passed a German tank and that he was moving on. The straggler we had picked up did likewise.

Our platoon leader returned in his jeep to check on the difficulty we were having, then told us to burn our vehicle and come on.

I crawled back into the turret, removed the firing pin housing from the breech block of the 37mm and it fell to the floor. I stuck the retainer cap in my pocket. Our driver couldn't find the incendiary grenade that I had given him earlier, so I jumped to the ground and ran about 100 yards to catch up with the platoon leader's jeep. The driver gave me an incendiary grenade, and I raced back to our armored car to set it on fire.

On arriving back at the armored car, I found that two crew members had soaked a rag with gasoline, lighted it, and were stuffing it into the gas tank. Thinking the armored car would burn, we all turned and ran to catch up with the column. As I reached the lieutenant's jeep, I returned the grenade. The driver laughed about getting the grenade back.

There was little room on any of the vehicles in the column for us. For a brief while, I rode a jeep loaded with passengers, some wounded. One soldier, lying on the hood, had been shot through the chest. I stepped off and continued walking. I kept my carbine at portarms, fully expecting to be ambushed. After awhile, I took the retainer cap I had removed from my 37mm breech block and threw it into a snowbank.

At last we caught up with some light tanks in the column. I pulled up on the rear of one crowded with riders. I stood up, holding on to the radio antenna. The soldier in the radio operator's seat had been hit and blood was caked on a hand and an arm. The driver checked on other stragglers as we drove

along. I had never before seen such concern about others being left in the lurch.

The stars were out, as was the moon, and though we may have presented an easy target, I began to feel relieved and heartened about escaping our trap. A buzz bomb churned through the sky, but it seemed practically insignificant as it continued on its course.

We passed on to a wider road and over a small bridge held by members of the 82nd Airborne. My feeling of security became complete. We drove on through the night, finally reaching Harze. There we were given a blanket apiece, and we bedded down inside the houses.

A count the next morning, the 24th, revealed that Second Platoon had two or three men missing. Our armored car was the only vehicle missing.

We watched our Flying Fortresses fly their bombing missions, thinking that these bombers would solve our problems. We ate three meals of pancakes and syrup from our field kitchen that day and swapped stories about our experiences. Late that day, those missing from Second Platoon returned, telling of being cut off and seeing the German helmets shining in the moonlight as they tried to get through to us.

Second Platoon was issued a new armored car on the 25th and by the 26th we were doing routine patrol duty and participating in training exercises involving the setting up of an ambush through use of our bazookas.

As a result of the overall losses, in Reconnaissance Company estimated eighteen, Second Platoon's First Section Sergeant was elevated to Platoon Sergeant. I was moved up to First Section Sergeant.

A later check of the area revealed that our armored car had not burned, but that an armor piercing shell had passed through its rear. The firing pin housing still lay in the vehicle's floor.