HOLDING THE LINE

THE 51st ENGINEER COMBAT BATTALION AND THE BATTLE OF THE BULGE DECEMBER 1944 - JANUARY 1945

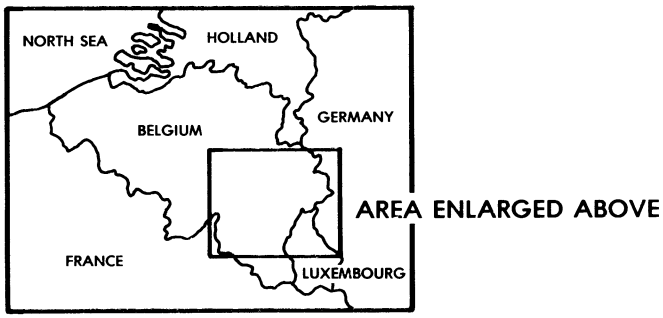
Map 1

The Benelux Countries and the Ardennes Area

LIEGE
EUPEN
VERVIERS
VESDRE RIVER
MEUSE RIVER
HUY
AMBLEVE RIVER
SPA
AYWAILE
MALMEDY
NAMUR
MODAVE
HAMOIR
N33
STAVELOT
STOUMONT
TROIS-PONTS
WERBOMONT
CHEVRON
BASSE
BODEUX
DURBUY
BARVAUX
SALM RIVER
VIELSALM
ST VITH
CINEY
BAILLONVILLE
MELREUX
SOY
EREZEE
HOTTON
HAMPTEAU
PESSOUX
HOGNE
DINANT
AYE
MARCHE
MARCOURT
HUMAIN
LA ROCHE
HARGIMONT
HARSIN
OURTHE RIVER
ROCHEFORT
JEMELLE
MEUSE RIVER
GIVET
FORRIERES
NASSOGNE
GERMANY
ST HUBERT
BASTOGNE
BELGIUM
FRANCE
LUXEMBOURG

SCALE

0 5 10 15 20 STATUTE MILES



Prologue

by
Barry W. Fowle

The invasion of Nazi-held Europe at Normandy in June 1944 started a highly successful Allied offensive against the Germans. After the breakout from the beachhead and the pursuit across northern France sent the foe reeling back into the Reich, the Allies thought that the enemy was incapable of mounting a heavy counteroffensive. After all, the Germans had suffered heavy losses on both fronts, and several of their allies had deserted the Axis cause. In the face of the deteriorating military situation, Hitler decided on a desperate gamble: a massive counterattack that would send 25 divisions against the western allies in the Ardennes region of Belgium and Luxembourg. (Map 1) He designated the scheme WACHT AM RHEIN or "watch on the Rhine" to give the impression that it was to defend the Rhine River.

The plan's real purpose was to surround and destroy the British and American forces north of the Bastogne-Brussels-Antwerp line. The drive would cross the Meuse River and culminate in the capture of Antwerp, with German forces moving northwestward along a narrow front on an axis of advance through Butgenbach, Trois-Ponts, Werbomont, and the Ourthe River, to a Meuse River crossing north of the Huy-Antwerp line.

On 16 December 1944, the Germans attacked the northern flank of the American line, hitting the 106th Infantry Division, an inexperienced unit fresh from the United States that had been on the front line only a week. The

Germans tore huge holes in the defenses, and their troops raced through, heading for the Meuse River. American troops reeled under the surprise onslaught; some frontline units were virtually destroyed and others fled to the rear. In places, small American units, such as the 51st Engineer Combat Battalion, held firm, but there appeared to be no stopping the Germans.

The 51st was not supposed to be on the front line. For two months before the surprise counterattack, the battalion had been operating **30** sawmills throughout the Ardennes area, producing lumber to construct winter quarters for First united States Army troops. When the Germans poured into the forest, the 51st became engulfed in the battle that swirled all around it. Quickly, the unit's mission changed, and it hurriedly established roadblocks, mined and destroyed bridges, and did whatever else it could along a 25-mile front to stall the German armor and infantry thrusts until superior forces relieved it.

When the Germans struck, the 51st Engineer Combat Battalion was about **30** months old and had no experience in countermobility operations. The unit had been activated at Camp Bowie, Texas, on **13** June 1942, as the first battalion of the 51st Engineer Combat Regiment. On **18** March 1943, the 51st Engineer Combat Regiment was reorganized as the 1111th Engineer Combat Group under the command of Colonel H. Wallis Anderson. The first battalion of the group became the 51st Engineer Combat Battalion, with Captain Robert B. Yates in command.

At least winter was no stranger to the 51st. The battalion spent March of 1943 at Macomb Reservation, a cold barren post near Plattsburg, New York. There the 51st learned to build and dismantle tactical bridges. They put a combination wooden trestle and H-10 steel bridge over the Salmon River at night, then recovered the bridge the next day. They also conducted a ponton bridge

exercise on frozen Lake Champlain and built a 30-foot-high timber trestle bridge.

The 51st stayed in New York through April, living in pup tents and putting ponton bridges across newly thawed lakes. In addition to bridge construction, the battalion conducted combined training exercises at platoon, company, and battalion levels, practicing combat firing, attack of a fortified area, combat in cities, mine laying and removal, and road construction.

In September 1943, the battalion started the long trek that eventually led to the Ardennes. A train ride ended at the XIII Corps maneuver area near Elkins, West Virginia, where the 51st participated in a 10-day exercise, with activities including construction of a road, a landing strip, and a Bailey bridge. In October, the battalion moved to Fort Dix, New Jersey, to prepare to go overseas. From there, the battalion's organizational equipment went to the Los Angeles Port of Embarkation, and the troops went to Hampton Roads, Virginia, and shipped out. While on the high seas, the battalion received orders to proceed to the Mediterranean Base Section, Oran, Algeria, for transshipment to India. The 51st debarked on 5 December at Oran but, with its equipment still headed from Los Angeles to Asia, received an unscheduled break in its training.

While the 51st waited in North Africa, the plans of the Allies changed. The 51st, along with four other engineer battalions awaiting movement to India, were ordered to England for the invasion of Europe. On 12 January 1944, the battalion left Casablanca on an eight-day voyage to Liverpool.

The 51st spent five months in England. The unit was assigned to the First Army under the command of General Omar N. Bradley.. Training resumed, with combined and specialist activities, including night operations and related bridge construction, Bailey and fixed bridge

construction, road construction, mines and minefields, and explosives and demolitions.

On 19 June 1944, the 51st loaded onto three Liberty ships, cooled their heels aboard ship for a week, then crossed the English Channel to Normandy on 26 June. For the next four months the battalion provided combat engineer support to the First Army. Most of the work consisted of road repair and maintenance, engineer reconnaissance, mine clearing, and water supply. During this time, the battalion suffered casualties that included six wounded from the explosion of stray artillery shells and the strafing of a German plane.

On 4 September 1944, the battalion moved 152 miles from the vicinity of Chartres, west of Paris, to an area near Soissons, northeast of Paris. The Germans had been retreating rapidly, destroying bridges and culverts and cratering roads. As a result, the major activity of the 51st changed from road repair and maintenance to bridge and culvert construction, replacing Bailey bridges and other temporary bridges for reuse in forward areas.

On 17 September, the 51st moved to Germany, 110 miles east of Soissons, almost to the Luxembourg border. Here it built bridges for two weeks, then moved to Malmedy, Belgium, where for three weeks the battalion kept busy training as infantry. Then it began the job it would keep until the German surprise, cutting wood for First Army billets.

Just before the German Ardennes offensive, two men arrived who would exert significant influence on the battalion. On 14 December, Major Robert Yates, now the battalion executive officer, returned from several months in the hospital. A day later, Lieutenant Colonel Harvey R. Fraser assumed command of the battalion. Less than six years out of the Military Academy, the peripatetic Fraser soon became known as "Hurry Up Harvey." He and the easy-going Yates played key roles in the unit's efforts to hold

off the Germans.

This publication tells the story of Fraser, Yates, and the 51st during the Ardennes counteroffensive. Written even before V-E Day, the narrative is a fine example of combat history. Based on interviews and after-action reports, it is an important and little-known primary source for the Engineer role in the battle. Its author, combat historian Ken Hechler, was a captain in the Armored Force and held a Ph.D. from Columbia University. He later served nine terms in the United States House of Representatives and is. secretary of state for West Virginia. His narrative provides a detailed description of the battalion's actions to delay the German offensive. The accompanying maps and coordinates allow the reader to locate precisely the Engineers* defensive positions and make it possible to follow the tactics of the 51st's officers. Of the six maps provided with this history, Maps 3-5 were reproduced from the original manuscript. Hechler's clear and comprehensive record of the battalion's actions is a worthwhile instructional tool for the study of countermobility operations.

A Note on the Maps

The source for Maps 2, 4, and 6 is a 1:100,000-scale map of Belgium and Northeast France, encompassing the Marche area (sheet no. 13). These maps follow the Military Grid Coordinate System. It is a system of rectangular coordinates, with the vertical (Y) grid line running true north and south and the horizontal (X) grid line running at right angles to the Y grid line. To plot a six-digit coordinate, read the first and second numbers as the X-coordinate and the fourth and fifth numbers as the Y-coordinate. This will direct you to a grid block, which you then mentally divide into ten parts on each axis. To locate a point within the block, read the third number to

the ***riqht*** and then the sixth number ***up.*** The phrase to remember is ***read right-up.***

The 5lst Engineer Combat Battalion and the Battle of the Bulge December 1944 - January 1945

by

Ken Hechler

During the German breakthrough in the Ardennes, the 51st Engineer Combat Battalion held and delayed the enemy at a number of vital points along the lines of penetration. For four days--18 to 21 December--Companies A and B held a barrier line from Barvaux to Hotton, south of Marche to Rochefort, blowing up and defending three footbridges, two highway bridges, and one railway bridge, while holding a 25-mile front against enemy armored and infantry thrusts. At the same time, Company C was holding Trois-Ponts, denying the enemy the use of the vital east-west Highway N23 to Werbomont. Company C stood its ground in Trois-Ponts, tricked the enemy into believing it had superior forces and armor, and, after being relieved by a regiment of the 82d Airborne Division, covered the withdrawal of that regiment from the town after its abortive attack east of the Salm River.1

There was nothing in the background of the battalion that was related to these achievements. Since activation as the 1st Battalion of the 51st Engineer Combat Regiment on 13 June 1942, this unit had passed a rather uninteresting career. They trained at Camp Bowie [Texas]; shivered through a hard winter at Plattsburg Barracks, New

York; did the dirty work on target ranges and road construction at XIII Corps' West Virginia maneuvers of 1943; and acted as demonstration troops for the Engineer School at Fort Belvoir [Virginia].

The battalion landed at Normandy on D-Day plus 21, but life degenerated into dumping crushed rock on Carentan's roads, maintaining a few water points, and sweeping some mines. Two incidents stood out during the routine months on the Continent: quick thinking and heroic action saved many lives and equipment during a Normandy ammunition-dump fire, and eight men of the battalion quelled and captured 60 German paratroopers after a brief, sharp firefight in mid-September.2 The battalion did have one common bond that assisted it during the December fight against overwhelming odds: nearly all of the officers and men were veterans of some two years of service in the battalion; the companies had worked together as units; and teamwork was clicking smoothly.3

On the eve of the breakthrough, the battalion was operating about 30 sawmills in the vicinity of Marche, Dinant, Rochefort, Ciney, Hotton, and Erezee, thereby contributing materially to the First Army winterization and timber-cutting program. The battalion had cut 2,600,000 board feet since the inauguration of the program in October. The average for the first 17 days of December was 58,717 board feet per day, with a maximum of 80,600 board feet in one day.[4]

At that time, the 158th Engineer Combat Battalion had been charged with the defense of the Marche area.[5] Routine activities in the running of the sawmills were conducted by the 51st on the first day of the German breakthrough, but on 17 December at 1730 the battalion was alerted for ground activity.[6] The alert came from the CO [commanding officer1 of the 158th Engineer Combat Battalion. The line companies were immediately alerted and a staff meeting was called to make plans for action.[7]

Lieutenant Colonel Harvey R. Fraser, CO, 51st Engineer Combat Battalion (foreground), and Captain William R. Mueller, Adjutant, during February 1945 awards ceremony at Huertgen Forest, Germany.

Commanding Officers

The performance of the 51st Engineer Combat Battalion during the following days can better be appreciated by knowing the commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Harvey R. Fraser, and his executive officer, Major Robert B. Yates. They were two different personalities who complemented each other in directing the battalion.* During the breakthrough, Colonel Fraser was with that portion of his battalion along the Barvaux-Hotton-Rochefort front; Major Yates was at Trois-Ponts.

The peculiar angle to the performance of these officers is that they both arrived at the battalion within two days of the start of the breakthrough. Major Yates, a veteran member of the battalion, had been hospitalized in August and returned to his post on 15 December. Colonel Fraser was a newcomer to the battalion, having assumed command on 14 December. Both officers were almost imme-

Captain (later Major) Robert B. Yates (left) and First Lieutenant (later Captain) Preston C. Hodges at Macomb Reservation, Plattsburg, NY, 1943.

diately called on to command units and slow the German advance.[9]

When Colonel Fraser arrived, the first thing he did was call the battalion officers together, introduce himself, and outline his policies. He sketched his own past and had an opportunity to talk with each of the officers long enough to find out their background and size them up personally.[10]

Prior to coming to the battalion, Colonel Fraser had a brilliant background, but it was almost entirely confined to staff work. After graduating from the U.S. Military Academy in 1939, he spent a period of close to three years on Oahu (Hawaii) at Schofield Barracks. He was due to return 8 December 1941, but remained by request for nine more months. The remainder of his pre-breakthrough career was spent as an Engineer battalion commander working on routine road and airstrip construction, plus doing a few shifts with Communications

Zone base sections checking training and allocating troops. At St. Malo, with sniper fire still chattering on the day the citadel fell, Colonel Fraser led a reconnaissance party that obtained timely information on harbor, beach, and railroad facilities. But this was as close as this 28-year-old, nervously active, and sharp-minded officer was allowed to come to combat operations.[11]

Irked by this inactivity, Colonel Fraser went to see the First Army Engineer on 12 December to ask for a combat assignment. He was so sure he would not return to Brittany Base Section that he took all his equipment to Spa; two days later he was commanding the 51st. "When I saw what they were doing at the sawmills and along the roads," said Colonel Fraser, "I asked whether it really was a combat outfit. I was soon to find out."[12]

When the 158th Engineer Combat Battalion departed to assist in the defense of the Bastogne area, the 51st was left with the responsibility of defending the [Marche] area. Captain John W. Barnes, battalion S-3, states, "Colonel Fraser sat down with a map and decided that the Ourthe River was a natural defense line, and he prepared plans to erect roadblocks and prepare key bridges for demolition. Several days later group sent down an overlay directing that defenses be established at precisely the same points which Colonel Fraser had selected."[13]

It was not only his organizing ability but also his leadership that made Colonel Fraser a factor in the success of the battalion. Throughout the defense of the 25-mile front, he was ubiquitous. At times it is impossible to trace his trail because so many men claim that he was with them at widely separated points. During the severest test of the battalion--at Hotton on 21 December--Colonel Fraser was on the enemy side of the river for a period. He kept the widely separated forces unified.[14]

Major Yates had a different task at Trois-Points. His forces were concentrated in a small area, and his problem

was more one of deceiving the enemy into thinking that there was a superior force defending Trois-Ponts. He also had the job of inspiring confidence in 150 men who after the first day of action had no tank destroyers or antitank guns and were opposed by German armor.[15]

Before the breakthrough, Major Yates had held various staff positions within the battalion for the preceding two years, having been its CO for several months in 1943. His 6-foot, 3-inch, 200-pound figure towered over the scene at Trois-Ponts. An affable Texan, easy-going in nature but determined in spirit, Major Yates held together his little company by prodding, cajoling, and encouraging them to resist long after they had reached reasonable limits of human endurance. "I would find them asleep standing up after 94 hours on the job," said Major Yates, "but they were standing up."[16]

Colonel William E. Ekman, CO of the 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment, which entered Trois-Ponts on 20 December, paid high tribute to the spirit and courage of Company C of the 51st and singled out Major Yates for his leadership. "He had everything under control," said Colonel Ekman, "and appeared ready and able to hold the town indefinitely. When the 82d Airborne Division came in, we expected to find this unit decimated and discouraged. Instead, Major Yates approached me and uttered a classic phrase, 'Say, I'll bet you fellows are glad we're here.'"[17]

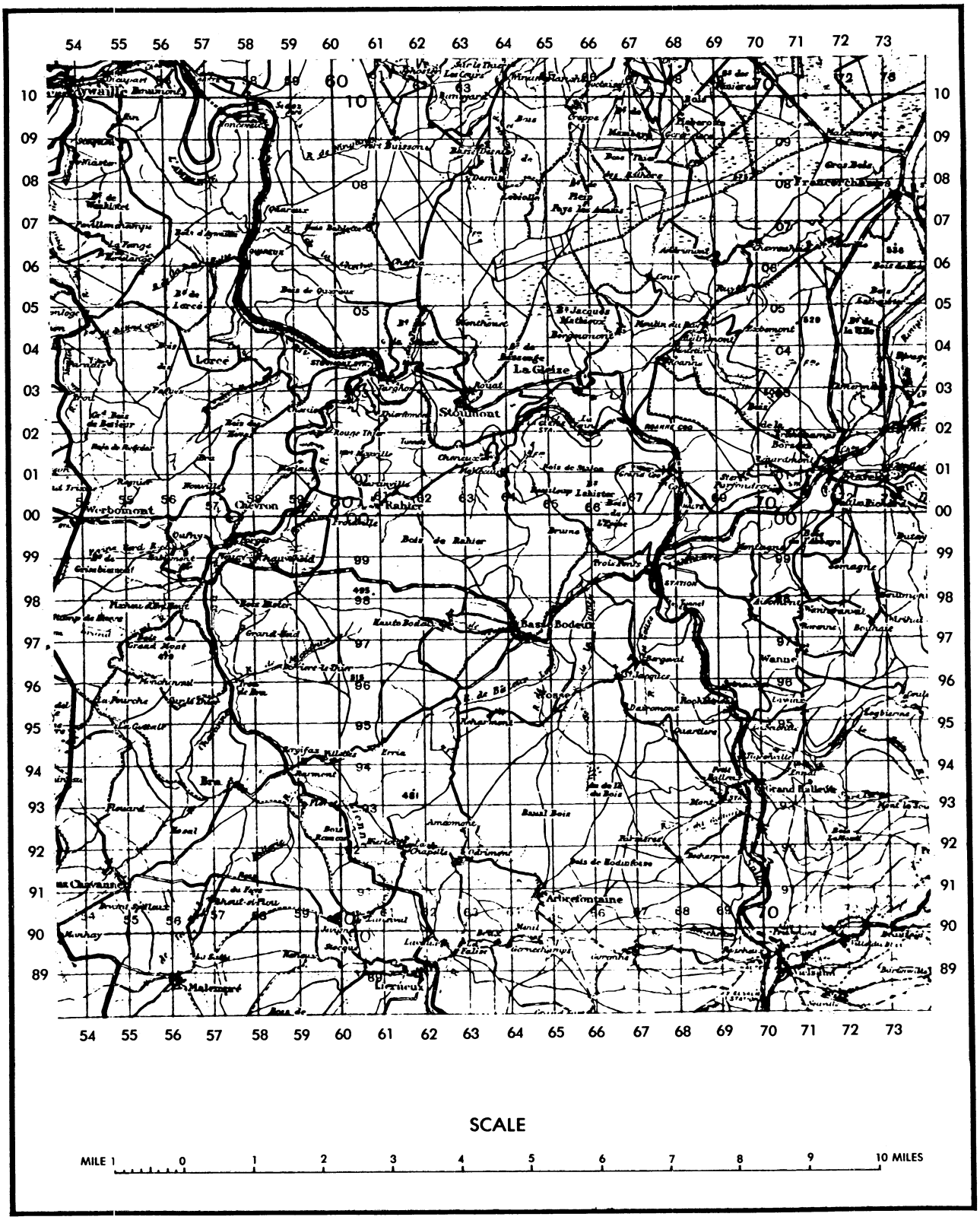
Adding a note of commendation to the many other tributes for Major Yates, Colonel Fraser observed, "I do not know another officer who could have handled such a difficult situation as admirably as you did."[18]

Defense at Trois-Ponts

Company C left Melreux at 2200 on 17 December and arrived at Trois-Ponts at 2330 the same day.[19] (Map 2) The company, commanded by Captain Sam Scheuber, immediately

Map 2

Trois-Ponts Area, December 1944



started to establish defensive positions on the west bank of the Ambleve River, which skirts the east edge of town. Company C's strength at this time was approximately 140 men, about 20 still being absent at the sawmills.[20] The company had eight bazookas, six .50-caliber machine guns, and four .30-caliber machine guns. A 57-mm. antitank [At] gun from the 526th Armored Infantry Battalion also became available. In personnel, the company was reinforced by a squad each from the 526th Armored Infantry Battalion and Company A of the 291st Engineer Combat Battalion, as well as several stragglers who were picked up coming through Trois-Points.[21]

Trois-Ponts is studded with bridges, underpasses, railroads, rivers, cliffs, and road junctions.[22] The Ambleve and Salm rivers join there, as do railroad lines running south to Vielsalm, northwest to Avwaille, and northeast to Stavelot. Highway N23 enters Trois-Ponts from Stavelot by underpassing the railroad at two points just before it joins north-south Highway N33, merges with N33 south for a few hundred yards, crosses the Ambleve River, and then turns west across another bridge over the Salm River and proceeds toward Werbomont. The enemy approached Trois-Ponts by this road and was thwarted in its attempts to go west to Werbomont because the 51st had blown up two bridges over the rivers. The enemy then turned its columns north after clearing the railroad underpasses and proceeded toward Stoumont.[23]

The 1111th Engineer Combat Group had its CP [command post1 in Trois-Ponts at the start of the action, and its small staff hurried the preparations for defense before the arrival of Company C of the 51st. Somebody asked Colonel Harry Anderson, CO of the group (and former battalion commander of the 51st), whether he intended to withdraw. His reply was characteristic, "We have come several thousand miles to fight these Nazis-not to withdraw from them."[24]

On the morning of 18 December, the columns of the 7th Armored Division were passing through Trois-Ponts on their way to stem the enemy attack in the Vielslm-St. Vith area. The 7th Armored had two accidents in twisting through Trois-Ponts, which rebounded to the benefit of the defenders of the town. A half-track with a personnel complement of 12 men, towing a 57-mm. antitank gun, broke down in Trois-Ponts. This half-track belonged to Company B of the 526th Armored Infantry Battalion. (The 526th Armored Infantry Battalion was not a part of 7th Armored Division; it was a separate battalion. Company B was on its way to Malmedy.) Colonel Anderson directed his S-4, Captain Robert N. Jewett, to take command of the squad and supervise the placing of the gun. Captain Jewett put the gun and crew in position on Highway N23 on the road to Stavelot, about a mile toward Stavelot from the two railroad underpasses.[25]

The second accident benefited the defenders of Trois-Ponts a little less directly. A tracked vehicle (observers do not agree on whether it was an M5 light tank or an M7 105-mm. self-propelled armored field artillery "Priest") slipped off the road while making a sharp turn at the bridge (674988). The vehicle went over on its side into the river and was abandoned. Later in the day, when the 51st was forced to blow the bridge, the ensuing fire set off the ammunition in the tank. However, it did not go off all at once but exploded at intervals all afternoon and into the evening of the 18th. Enough time elapsed between explosions to allow for loading an artillery piece, possibly tricking the enemy into thinking that artillery was available to the group defending Trois-Ponts.[26]

Little by little, the 51st company picked up a few more reinforcements. Three men from the 341st Engineer Battalion who had originally been in Trois-Ponts guarding the bridge at (676989) were attached to Company C. A

soldier in a British uniform drove his truck through town several times before being apprehended and attached to Company C. He had a carbine, a second lieutenant's insignia, and a captain's map case, but the news of Operation GREIF had not yet caused suspicion toward such characters. A GI who said he was from a nearby artillery unit walked up and down the town with a girl on his arm until he too was called in and attached to Company C.[27]

A somewhat larger group was attached during the morning of the 18th. At 0800, Lieutenant Albert J. Walters, a platoon leader in Company A, 291st Engineer Combat Battalion, left his battalion CP at Basse-Bodeux to assist in preparing for demolition of the bridge at (683977), one mile southeast of Trois-Ponts. En route, he was intercepted by Lieutenant Colonel James A. Kirkland, executive officer of the 1111th Engineer Combat Group. Colonel Kirkland attached Lieutenant Walters and his squad to Company C, and they continued to defend the bridge on the south flank of the defenders of Trois-ponts.[28]

The defense of the town initially consisted of one platoon with two bazookas on high ground covering the approach from Aisomont; Captain Jewett's group with the lone antitank gun covering the road from Stavelot; a rear guard covering the N23 approach from Werbomont; and the remainder of the company deployed with bazookas, machine guns, and M1s in the buildings of the town that fronted the Salm and Ambleve rivers.[29]

Captain Jewett sent two of the 526th Armored Infantry men, Corporal Bruce W. Frazier and Private First Class Ralph J. Bieker, 250 yards up the road toward Stavelot with a daisy chain of ten mines and instructions to jerk them across the road when a tank approached and then run back to where the 57-mm. antitank gun was placed. Four 526th Armored Infantry men (McCollum, Hollenback, Buchanan, and Alonzo B. Higgins) were manning the anti-tank gun. Lieutenant Richard Green, platoon leader of 3d

Platoon, Company C, 51st Engineer Combat Battalion, along with Private First Class Andrew Salazar of the same unit, was immediately behind the gun. The half-track, with its driver from the 526th and with Captain Jewett, was backed into N23 on the opposite side of the road from the antitank gun, ready to pull out in the event of a tank attack that might overrun the position.[30]

Several more men from Company C and the 526th were in a ditch along the road back of the antitank gun. Just beyond the underpass on the Stavelot side Staff Sergeant Fred Salatino was manning the .50-caliber antiaircraft gun in a 2 1/2-ton truck, along with Technician Fifth Class Jacob Young. A wire was strung from this truck back to the company CP in the Trois-Ponts railroad station.[31]

About 200 yards up the Stavelot road beyond the antitank gun, Lieutenant Green posted a combination outpost and getaway consisting of Technicians Fifth Class Robert Logan and Elmer Helton and Private First Class Milbert Brown of Company C.Brown as driver had his jeep; up until that time Helton had been an air compressor operator and Logan a truck driver, but they were pressed into service for reconnaissance. The plan was to have the three watch the men with the daisy chain and then alert the gunners and the rest of the squad if a tank approached.[32]

Firing was heard in the vicinity of Stavelot during the early part of the morning. Shortly before noon, a Tiger Royal tank nosed around the bend toward the AT gun. Frazier and Bieker strung their mines, but could not resist the temptation to take a few shots with their rifles at the heads of enemy tankers that protruded from the lead tank. Several other tanks soon followed the lead tank, which stopped at the daisy chain. Brown, Logan, and Helton say that the tank started firing its machine gun, so they returned with their jeep to Lieutenant Green's position with the simple report, "they're comming!"

Lieutenant Green replied, "OK, notify them at the CP in case I can't get them on the telephone, and then come back here with the jeep."[33]

By this time, the squad on and near the gun could see the lead tanks and hear others through the trees. "Now let's be damn sure they're Jerries let's not mess this thing up," somebody said. Others echoed this thought. Perhaps as a result of this, the enemy tank in third place fired four rounds before the 57-mm. gun could get off a round. One shell, an AP [antipersonnel] tracer, skipped on the river to their backs. Another zipped no more than six inches over their heads. Another hit a tree behind the gun, tipping over the tree and showering fragments in the area. Then the gun crew opened up, and one of their early rounds started the leading'enemy tank smoking.[34]

There was some difficulty at first with ammunition for the antitank gun. There were seven rounds for the gun, and the crew said that if they couldn't repulse the attack with seven rounds that would be all they would ever get a chance to use. It soon became apparent from the strength of the enemy armored attack that more rounds would be needed. Captain Jewett said that he could observe eight tanks coming around the bend toward his position. There were no dismounted infantry accompanying along the road, but about a dozen infantrymen were working their way along the south side of the road.[35] Colonel Anderson, observing from across the river through field glasses, counted a total of 19 tanks that came through the position and later turned right on the road to Stoumont.[36] The little crew of defenders started an ammunition bucket brigade, with Captain Jewett tossing the shells across the road to Lieutenant Green, who forwarded them to Private Salazar, who handed them up to the gun crew.

The morale of the defenders was not raised any when a resounding roar from the town told them that the northern two bridges had been blown, cutting them off from Trois-

Ponts. The 880mm. shells hit closer and closer until one hit at the base of the gun, killing all four of the crew and stunning Private Salazar. Realizing the futility of further resistance, the remainder of the crew piled into the half-track and proceeded by their only escape route--toward Stoumont. The 2 1/2-ton truck followed. Lieutenant Green and his survivors from Company C made a wide circle at Petit Coo and returned to Trois-Ponts at 1500 by coming in from the west on Highway N23, while Captain Jewett and the survivors of the 526th Armored Infantry Battalion found their way back to the new group CP at Modave.[37]

Almost simultaneous with the battle along the Stavelot road, the 2d Platoon of Company C, commanded by Lieutenant Fred L. Nabors, was also attacked by enemy armor. Lieutenant Nabors' platoon was deployed along the hill on the Aisomont road. One bazooka was firing south-east from the road below at (677988), from which it had a perfect field of fire. Another bazooka had a good flanking firing position slightly to the east.

During the morning of 18 December, three enemy tanks approached the 2d Platoon's position, and they were detected approximately 1/2 mile away. The first tank had reinforced armor plate on the front and was allowed to pass by toward a string of daisy-chain mines across the road. The bazooka then engaged the second tank, but did not knock it out. The third tank started to fire its machine guns and forced the 2d Platoon out of position by the intensity of the fire. Thereafter, the 2d Platoon retired to the town side of the river and took up protection of the right (south) flank of the Company C line. The defense collapsed because one of the bazookas failed to fire, another was knocked out of the loader's hands with machine gun fire, and the daisy chain was exploded by machine guns. None of the three enemy tanks, however, attempted to follow the 2d Platoon, Company C,

into Trois-Ponts. (See Appendix A.)

The bridge over the railroad at the junction of N33 with the Aisomont road was blown on 18 December, but foot troops could still cross the structure. Lieutenant Nabors' platoon blew it up again the following day. A footbridge across the Salm River at (674982) was also blown on the first day of action.38 At 1300, the bridge over the Salm River on Highway N23 was demolished. Shortly thereafter, Major Yates arrived in Trois-Ponts, unaware of the situation and merely bound for the daily liaison meeting at the 1111th Engineer Combat Group. Colonel Anderson charged him with the defense of the city, and under FUSA [First U.S. Army] orders, the group left Trois-Ponts for Modave.

Major Yates deployed his men in houses along the river, providing flank and rear guards and good fields of fire for machine guns and bazookas. One enemy tank, which turned left on N33 instead of taking the Stoumont road when it reached the junction of N23 and N33, was surprised with .50-caliber machine gun fire. The crew had dismounted, and five of them were hit by a gun manned by Sergeant Evers Gossard. A sixth member of the crew remounted the tank and started to turn its gun toward the .50-caliber machine gun, whereupon Sergeant Gossard and his crew discreetly retired. The enemy tank hovered around for the remainder of the day, firing sporadically. It withdrew on the night of the 18th.

"We kept sniping at them across the river for the next few days," said Major Yates, "but every shot of ours seemed to draw about a thousand in return. So we decided to deceive them as to how great a force we had available."

The company had about six 2 1/2-ton trucks available, and they were kept running in and out of town. After dark, they were run out of Trois-Ponts on Highway N23 toward Werbomont without lights and then run back on the same road with their lights on, simulating the arrival of

reinforcements. Major Yates hit on the idea of simulating the presence and arrival of armor in Trois-Ponts. This was done by putting chains on a single four-ton truck, and it was clanked back and forth repeatedly during the next few days. The closest facsimile to artillery or antitank guns that the company had were the bazookas, and as Major Yates said, "They made a pretty loud noise, so we used to shift them around from place to place after dark and it may have deceived the enemy into thinking we had a couple of light artillery pieces." In addition, he moved small groups of riflemen from place to place and had them fire in such a way as to create the impression of considerable strength in small arms.[39]

On the afternoon of the 18th, P-47s were observed to take a toll of four or five enemy tanks that were circling north and northwest along N33 toward Stoumont. Enemy armored columns passing along this road were strafed and dive-bombed quite effectively. "But lots of us in Trois-Ponts felt pretty helpless with rifles and carbines on our shoulders," said Lieutenant Green.[40]

After the return of Lieutenant Green's group and the withdrawal of Lieutenant Nabors' platoon, the three platoons of the company were consolidated into two-one group being placed on the river south of town, with its line swinging back to the west on the edge of town. Most of Lieutenant Green's 3d Platoon was on the north side of Trois-Ponts, also swinging its line to the west on the outskirts. Listening posts were established 500 to 600 yards out from the MLR [main line of resistance], and pulled into a tight perimeter defense after dark. (This was done because the small number of men available for listening posts were widely separated and would have given the enemy opportunity to infiltrate patrols between them had they not been pulled in about 300 yards from their daytime positions.)[41]

At 0900 on 19 December, Lieutenant Green and Techni-

cal Sergeant Matthew R. Carlyle crossed the river, covered by Major Yates and three others, and went up the Stavelot road toward the knocked-out 57-mm. gun. (Map 3) They found nothing in the railroad underpasses but noticed four men in American uniforms around the gun. A little farther up the road was an M8 armored car and a jeep with freshly painted white stars. "Hey, Joe," yelled Sergeant Carlyle, and the men excitedly cried, "Amerikans!" and started to fire. The motors of the M8 and jeep turned over, but Lieutenant Green and Sergeant Carlyle did not wait to see if they were being followed.[42] "After that," said Major Yates, "we did not need any patrols; we could see everything that was happening across the river."[43]

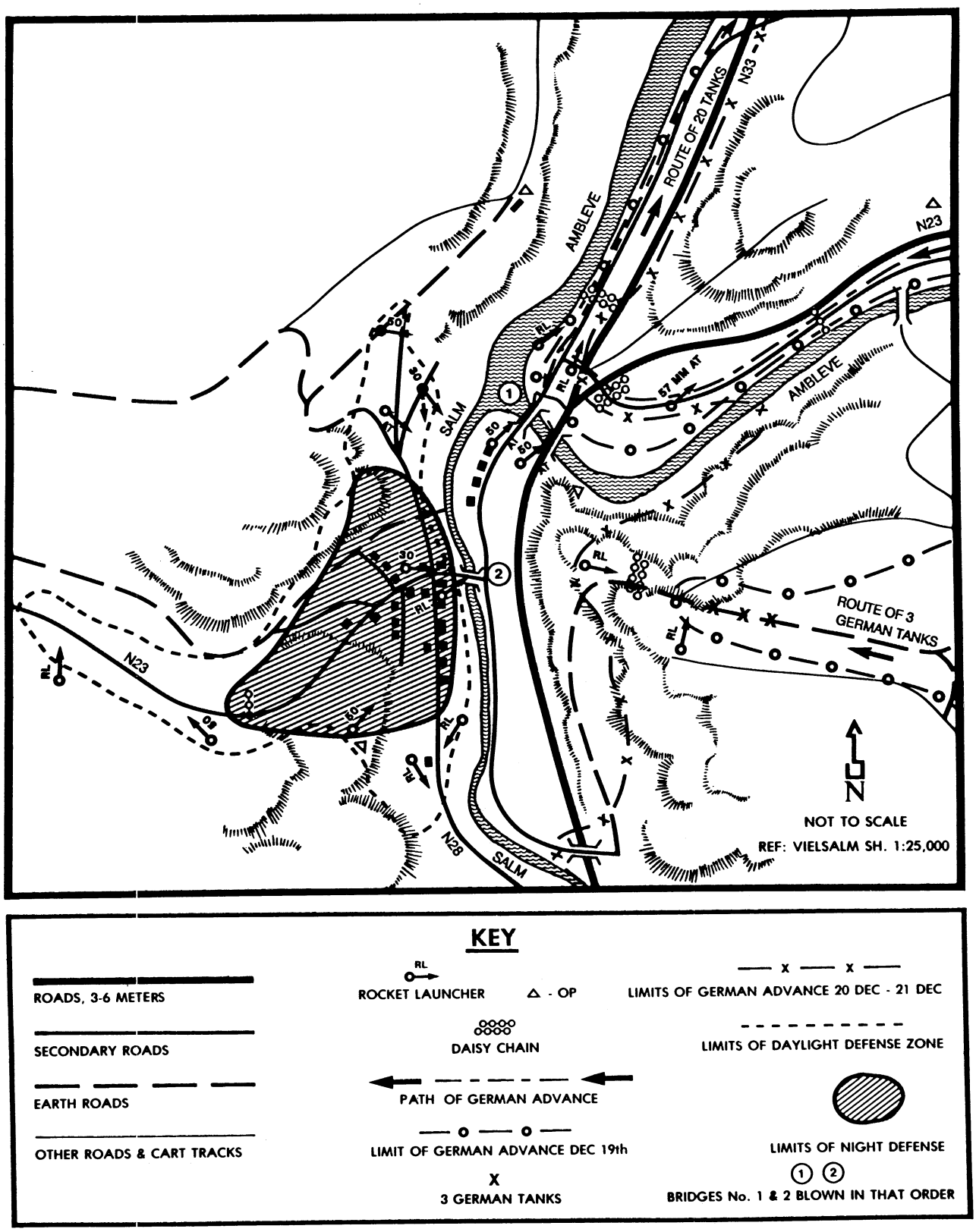
A brief firefight occurred on 19 December when men in Lieutenant Nabors' platoon engaged enemy on the hill just south of the Aisomont road at (680985). When rifle fire was directed at this infantry group, the enemy replied with both small arms and artillery on Trois-Ponts No casualties resulted from this brief scuffle, but it taught Company C to keep better hidden and change positions frequently in order to avoid artillery concentrations.[44]

After the bridges had been blown, Colonels Anderson and Kirkland observed several enemy tanks approach one of the blown bridges. An elderly couple ran out in front of their house and motioned with their arms; it was difficult to tell at first whether they were waving at the tanks or trying to tell them that the bridge was blown. One of the dismounted tank men was observed shooting the woman with his pistol; the man caught her when she fell and then he was, also shot. Additional shots were fired into the motionless figures on the ground.[45]

During the engagement, Major Yates observed a Belgian boy of about 12 running toward the river chased by a German rifleman, who was firing after him. Four or five other German soldiers were standing across the river, laughingly watching the performance. Enraged, Major Yates

Map 3

51st Engineer Combat Battalion, Company C, Defenses Set on 19 December 1944, Trois-Ponts Area



fired several shots at these spectators and dropped one of them before they dispersed, while the boy and his tormentor disappeared behind the buildings.

Enemy patrols attempted to probe across the river throughout the period, but were all repulsed by rifle and machine gun fire and grenades. The enemy had no way to bring armor across to Company C's positions without building a bridge. They did not give signs of desiring to build a bridge or make an assault crossing of the river.[46]

On the night of 19 December, Lieutenant Walters' squad from the 291st Engineer Combat Battalion blew the bridge that they were defending at (683977). Just as enemy infantry coming up from the south started to cross the bridge, Sergeant Jean B. Miller touched off the charge, and the squad worked its way back to join Company C in the defense of Trois-Ponts.[47]

Another welcome addition to the small force at Trois-Ponts arrived at 2000 on 19 December, when a patrol from the 85th Reconnaissance Squadron, consisting of fifteen men and three M8 assault guns, arrived on Highway N23 from Basse-Bodeux. Not realizing that they were friendly troops, Company C's rear guard fired on them, but identification was quickly made. The next day the three guns were set up on the outskirts of town on high ground where the patrol could observe and still keep its guns in defiladed positions. Although the assault guns remained in position outside of Trois-Ponts, the patrol never actually engaged the enemy.[48]

On 20 December, elements of the 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment of the 82d Airborne Division learned of the presence of the force defending Trois-Ponts, and the regimental commander, Colonel William E. Ekman, ordered his 2d and 3d Battalions to send three bazooka teams each to the beleaguered town. The rest of the regiment then started to move into Trois-Ponts and the 505th's CP was established at 1300 on 20 December.[49]

Company C had its greatest casualties on 20 December, although this was by no means the day of greatest fighting. From 1930 to 2100, enemy artillery intensified in the entire waterfront area. Private Carl Strawser was killed when a shell hit his .50-caliber machine gun position, and Sergeant Joseph Gyure was seriously wounded at the same time. Staff Sergeant William W. Rankin was killed by a 20-mm. shell while stationed at an OP [observation post].[50]

A platoon of Engineers from the attachments of the 505th Parachute Regiment (307th Airborne Engineer Battalion), assisted by Company C, then repaired the bridges at (677982) and (674986) for a company of the 505th to cross. Later in the night a second company crossed on the repaired bridge, while the defenders of Trois-Ponts held their positions in the face of sporadic enemy artillery fire.

At 1100 on 21 December, reports began coming in that the two companies of the 505th were having difficulty across the river. The enemy launched a strong counterattack and started to surround elements that were defending on the hill overlooking Trois-Ponts from the east. At 1500, Major Yates received a message from the 1111th Engineer Combat Group ordering Company C to withdraw. He brushed it aside and characteristically replied that it was impossible to disengage from the enemy, inasmuch as Company C was covering the withdrawal of the 82d Airborne Division.[51]

Captain Scheuber, Company C's commander, at 1500 ordered that the bridge at (674986) over the Salm River and the bridge at (677982) over the Ambleve River be prepared again for imminent demolition.[52] Of these, the timber trestle bridge over the Salm was the most difficult to blow. The task was assigned to Lieutenant Joseph B. Milgram, Jr., and six [enlisted] men--Sergeant Elvin Goldsmith, Corporal Odis C. Faust, Technician Fifth Class

Paul H. Keck, Private Jessie R. Mock, Private Maurice S. Walker, and Private Jose E. Marquez. Knowing that the bridge posts had previously been blown, Lieutenant Milgram decided to use necklace charges for the stringers and to use time fuzes and primacord to set off the charges. He ordered his men to make nine necklace charges.

When these were ready, the group proceeded toward the bridge on both sides of the road and were subjected to machine gun and small arms fire along the route. Lieutenant Milgram's plan had been to prepare the stringers on the friendly side of the bridge first by working from the top side of the bridge and placing the charges on the sides of the stringers. However, the removal of the decking would have entailed too much work under fire, so the group crossed the bridge to the enemy side and climbed underneath in order to get the maximum amount of cover from enemy fire.

Their movement was observed, and the fire increased, so Lieutenant Milgram ordered all but Technician Fifth Class Keck to crawl along the enemy side of the river and wade across at a point lower downstream that would give a little more cover. The next job was to secure the primacord on the friendly side of the river at a point where it might be reached to blow up the bridge. After this was completed, the entire group waded the river and reported to Captain Scheuber that the bridge was ready for demolition. At 1650, the order was given to blow the bridges.

The Ambleve bridge presented no unusual problems, but the Salm bridge was more difficult. Lieutenant Milgram and Technician Fifth Class Keck proceeded to within 60 yards from where the primacord lay. From there Lieutenant Milgram crawled the remainder of the distance, checked the cord, pulled the fuze lighter, and then ran about 50 yards in the fading light but in full view of the enemy until he reached the cover of a building.[53]

Having accomplished his aim and mission of covering the withdrawal of the 505th Regiment% elements from the east of Trois-Ponts, Major Yates ordered Company C to begin withdrawing from the town at 1930 on 21 December. The withdrawal was completed by 2000, and the company rejoined the battalion at 2330 at Marche.[54]

The Battle of Hotton

The most bitter and tactically important battle fought by the remainder of the 51st Engineer Combat Battalion was in defense of the vital Ourthe River bridge at Hotton on 21 December.[55]

In the days preceding the battle of Hotton, the two companies in the Marche area feverishly prepared bridges, roadblocks, minefields, demolitions, and abatis along the Ourthe River line from Durbuy to La Roche [Laroche]. They had numerous minor brushes with enemy forces during the period. With the departure of the 158th Engineer Combat Battalion for the Bastogne area, Colonel Fraser was formally charged with the defense of the area at 1930 on 19 December. He had already prepared and started to execute plans; at 0500 that morning Companies A and B were combat loaded and poised for action near Hargimont and Hogne, respectively.[56]

Confusion reigned in the towns and along the roads. The local gendarmerie unsuccessfully attempted to check evacuations and then tried to keep the roads clear. Parachutists and rumors of parachutists kept everyone in turmoil. Colonel Fraser finally instituted a rigid civilian check system that resulted in the capture and execution of many enemy spies and agents in civilian clothes. The largest such group was apprehended by Company B in Hotton; it consisted of 21 men in civilian clothes whose baggage contained considerable supplies of American cigarettes, rations, and uniforms. The next largest bag was made the following day when eight

The vital Ourthe River bridge at Hotton

civilians were picked up by Headquarters and Service Company at Humain after they refused to surrender their arms.[57]

The next problem that faced Colonel Fraser was the stream of stragglers pouring through the area. Some came with units evacuating in an orderly manner, albeit a bit hurriedly, to the rear. Others rushed through in batches, with clothes ripped, feet soaked, and morale thoroughly beaten men from overrun units. All of them asked the same questions: "Where is my unit? How far have the Germans broken through?" The next most favorite question concerned traffic and road information--almost invariably regarding the area toward the west. To create a semblance of order out of this Grand Central Station bedlam, Colonel Fraser directed that a clearing point be established where the name and unit of all these birds of passage be recorded. This information proved invaluable as an aid to reuniting the lost, strayed, and

straggling.[58]

During the early morning hours of 19 December, the barrier lines were completed. Company B covered the area on the west bank of the Ourthe River from Hotton to Durbuy inclusive. The 1st Platoon defended the immediate area of Hotton and Melreux; the 2d Platoon the area from Melreux to Durbuy; and the 3d Platoon the vicinity of Durbuy and the left flank.[59]

At 0400 on 19 December, the 1st Platoon of Company A, under Lieutenant Floyd D. Wright, was ordered to Hampteau to prepare a roadblock and a footbridge for demolition.[60] Ten minutes later the 2d Platoon, under Lieutenant Paul Curtis, departed for Marcourt on a similar mission regarding a class 10 bridge. At the same time, the 3d Platoon, under Lieutenant Raymond A. Trafford, was ordered to remain as battalion reserve in the vicinity of Harsin, the battalion CP. Later in the morning, the 2d Platoon reinforced its right flank at (432791) with a strong roadblock consisting of one squad, two bazooka teams, and one .50-caliber machine gun.

More specifically, the following defenses were completed on 19 December. (Map 4)

1. Two antitank minefields at (368880), 200 yards down-stream from [the railroad bridge mentioned below].

2. A railroad bridge at (360890) prepared for demolition, and a ford beneath mined.

3. Highway bridge on N29 at (369879) prepared for demolition and defended by two 40-mm. guns from the 440th AAA [Antiaircraft Artillery] Weapons Battalion, two .50-caliber machine guns, and two bazookas.

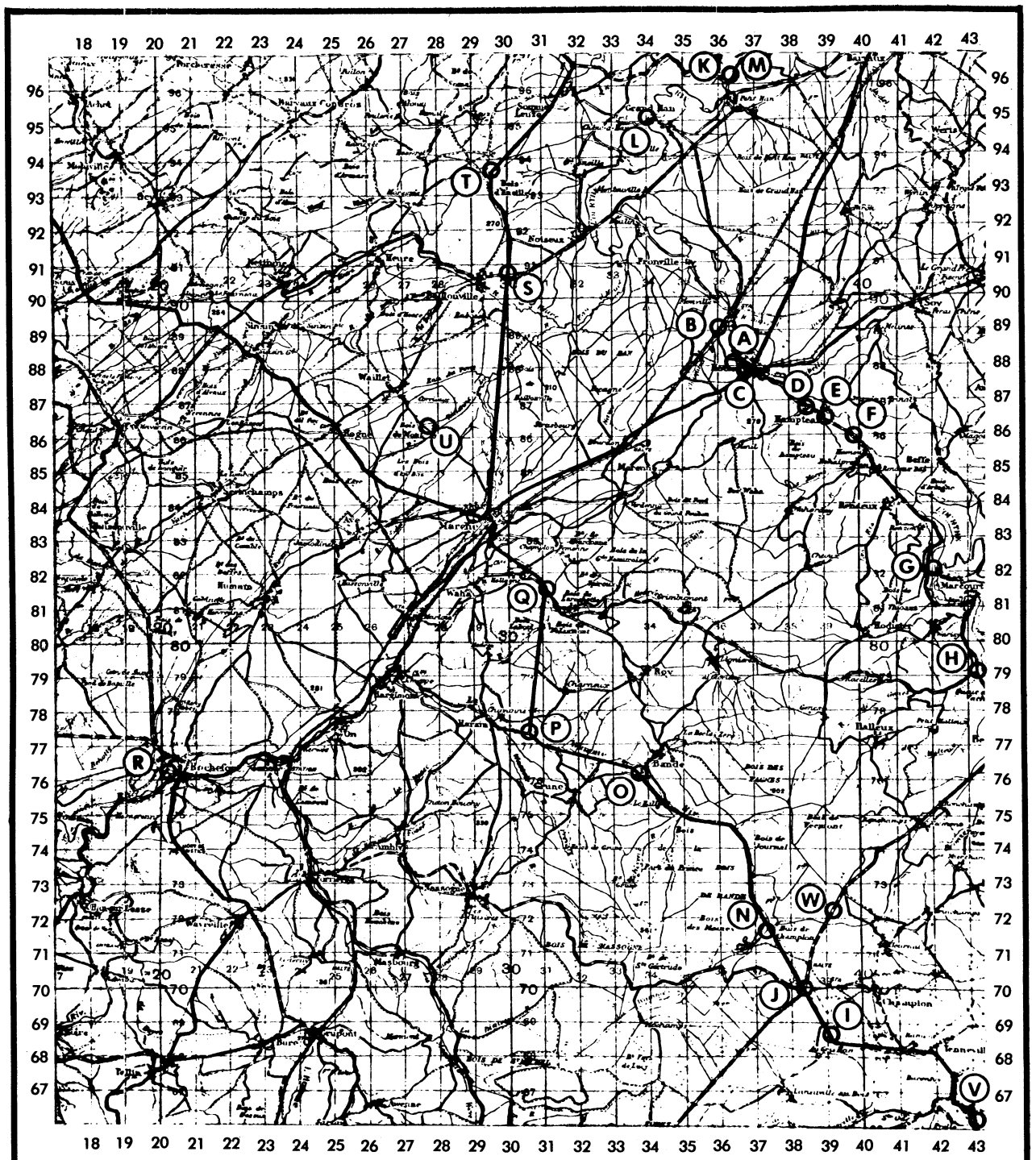
4. Footbridge at Hampteau at (384867) prepared for demolition, defended by two .50-caliber machine guns and one .30-caliber machine gun.

5. Refugee and straggler point established at (390865) in cooperation with local defense officials.

6. Two footbridges at (399859) guarded and prepared

Map 4

51st Engineer Combat Battalion Lines of Defenses, Hotton Area, 19-20 December 1944



SCALE

MILE 1 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 MILES

LEGEND

A - Two antitank mines
B - Railroad bridge prepared for demolition
C - Highway bridge prepared for demolition
D - Footbridge prepared for demolition
E - Refugee and straggler point
F - Two footbridges prepared for demolition
G - Class 10 bridge prepared for demolition
H - Road junction defended by one squad
I - Abatis; 30 mines to be installed
J - Intersection defended
K - Bridge prepared for demolition
L - Weak bridge defended by bazooka & machine gun
M - Piers of destroyed bridge prepared for demolition
N - Masonry bridge prepared for demolition
O - String of mines
P - Intersection defended by tank retriever
Q - Intersection defended
R - Roadblock, with bridge ready for demolition
S - Enemy advance blocked
T - Abatis and mines
U - Culvert prepared for demolition
V - Roadblock
W - Roadblock

for demolition.

7. Class 10 bridge at Marcourt (421820) prepared for destruction, defended by a half-track, bazooka, two .50-caliber machine guns, and one .30-caliber machine gun.

8. Road junction at (433790) defended by one squad, one bazooka, and one .50-caliber machine gun.

9. Abatis at (390686), 30 mines to be installed after trees blown.

10. Intersection at (383698) defended by platoon of 9th Canadian Forestry Company, 10 men from 158th Engineer Combat Battalion, 13 men from 51st Engineer Combat Battalion, 13 men from 440th AAA Weapons Battalion, one 40-mm. gun, one bazooka, and one .50-caliber machine gun.

Enemy air was active over the barrier line on 19 December, strafing Highway N35 north of Marche at Baillonville (295907) and the N4 road junction near Pisson [Pessoux] (180903).

Defenses were strengthened on 20 December, and by 2400 on that date the following barrier line had been established:

1. Bridge prepared for demolition at (363961).

2. Weak bridge at (341950) defended by a bazooka and a .30-caliber machine gun.

3. Piers of destroyed bridge prepared for demolition at (362961); crossing protected by a .50-caliber machine gun and bazooka.

4. Masonry bridge at (373717) prepared for demolition.

5. String of mines at (337761).

6. Intersection at (306773) defended by tank retriever with 81-mm. mortar, four railroad cars ready to push across road, and one .50-caliber machine gun.

7. Intersection at (310815) defended by 40-mm. gun, and all men and equipment falling back from road from south and east.

8. Roadblock at Rochefort (202762), with bridge

prepared for demolition and defended by 40-mm. gun, bazooka, one .50-caliber machine gun, and one .30-caliber machine gun.

9. Highway N35: Marche-Aye-Humain-Rochefort blocked to enemy advance from southeast with debris at intersection (300907); at (295936) with abatis and mines; and at (279861) culvert prepared for demolition.

10. Roadblock on N4 at (430662). This block was reported complete at 2230, with one squad of Company A in position defending it.

11. Contact was made with one squad of the 299th Engineer Combat Battalion maintaining a roadblock on Highway N28 at (392721). This roadblock and its defenses were then tied in and coordinated with the plan of defense for the intersection of Highways N4 and N28.

Much of the credit for coordinating the scattered defenses between Hotton and Marche is due to Captain Karl G. Pedersen, the modest and diffident-looking CO of Company A. When his roadblocks were established about 0400 on 20 December, Captain Pedersen cleared with the CO of the 158th Engineer Combat Battalion, which was about two miles south of the junction of N4 and N28. The CO of the 158th informed Captain Pedersen that there were 15 tanks and an unknown number of infantry approximately five miles south of his position. About 1300 on 20 December, the 158th displaced to the west on another mission, leaving only scattered elements between Captain Pedersen's roadblocks and the enemy's concentration of troops. Although 50 Canadian foresters reinforced Captain Pedersen's unit at 0400 on 21 December, these men were also called away on another mission at 1510 the same day. He was reinforced by an unknown major with a bazooka team, an unknown chief warrant officer with a .50-caliber machine gun, and one 40-mm. AA [antiaircraft] gun from the 440th AAA Battalion.[61]

During the days when these roadblocks were held, they

were subjected to numerous minor probings by jeeps and armored vehicles. As with the remainder of the 51st Engineer Combat Battalion, the successful defense of these roadblocks hinged on deception. According to Colonel Fraser, it was due to "deceiving the enemy as to the strength of my small, practically isolated force, in spite of known superiority to my front and known enemy infiltration to my rear." The significance of the defense in the larger picture was that it enabled the 84th Division to reorganize defensive positions around the city of Marche and to keep that city out of enemy hands.[62]

The battle of Hotton occurred on 21 December. Just before the enemy struck at the Hotton bridge, he attempted to break through the Company A positions and at Hampteau overcame resistance put up by a squad of Company A. The Hampteau defense had been organized by Lieutenant Floyd D. Wright, platoon leader of the 1st Platoon of Company A. About 30 yards northeast of the footbridge across the river, on the road to Soy, a minefield was hastily laid and the position across the river was outposted with Private Stanley A. Driggs and his Ml rifle. Thirty to 40 yards from the footbridge, on the southwest side of the river, a bazooka team of three men and a detonator for the bridge were placed. Along the Hotton-La Roche [Laroche] road, two bazooka teams were placed 700 yards apart, protected by daisy chains of mines. Two .50-caliber machine guns, half a squad of riflemen, and two tanks were placed west of the Hotton-La Roche [Laroche] road.[63]

Three jeep patrols from the 820th Tank Destroyer Battalion reported that they had received small arms fire in the vicinity of La Roche [Laroche], that they had relayed this information to the 2d Platoon of Company A at Marcourt, and that the 2d Platoon had subsequently blown their Marcourt bridge. After attempting unsuccessfully to persuade the 820th to reinforce the 2d Platoon's roadblock at Marcourt, Lieutenant Wright sent his platoon sergeant,

Staff Sergeant Donald A. Bonifay, with an M8 armored car and one squad (Sergeant Benjamin Ham's) to Marcourt. Task Force Bonifay arrived at the 2d Platoon at 0130 on 21 December, where Lieutenant Paul Curtis, 2d Platoon leader, put them out to assist in the defense of the town. Lieutenant Curtis reported that there had been a brief, brisk firefight between two half-tracks approaching the bridge and his own .50-caliber machine guns. No casualties resulted from this firefight, but through mistaken identity one guard was killed and one wounded when they halted an American patrol at Marcourt.

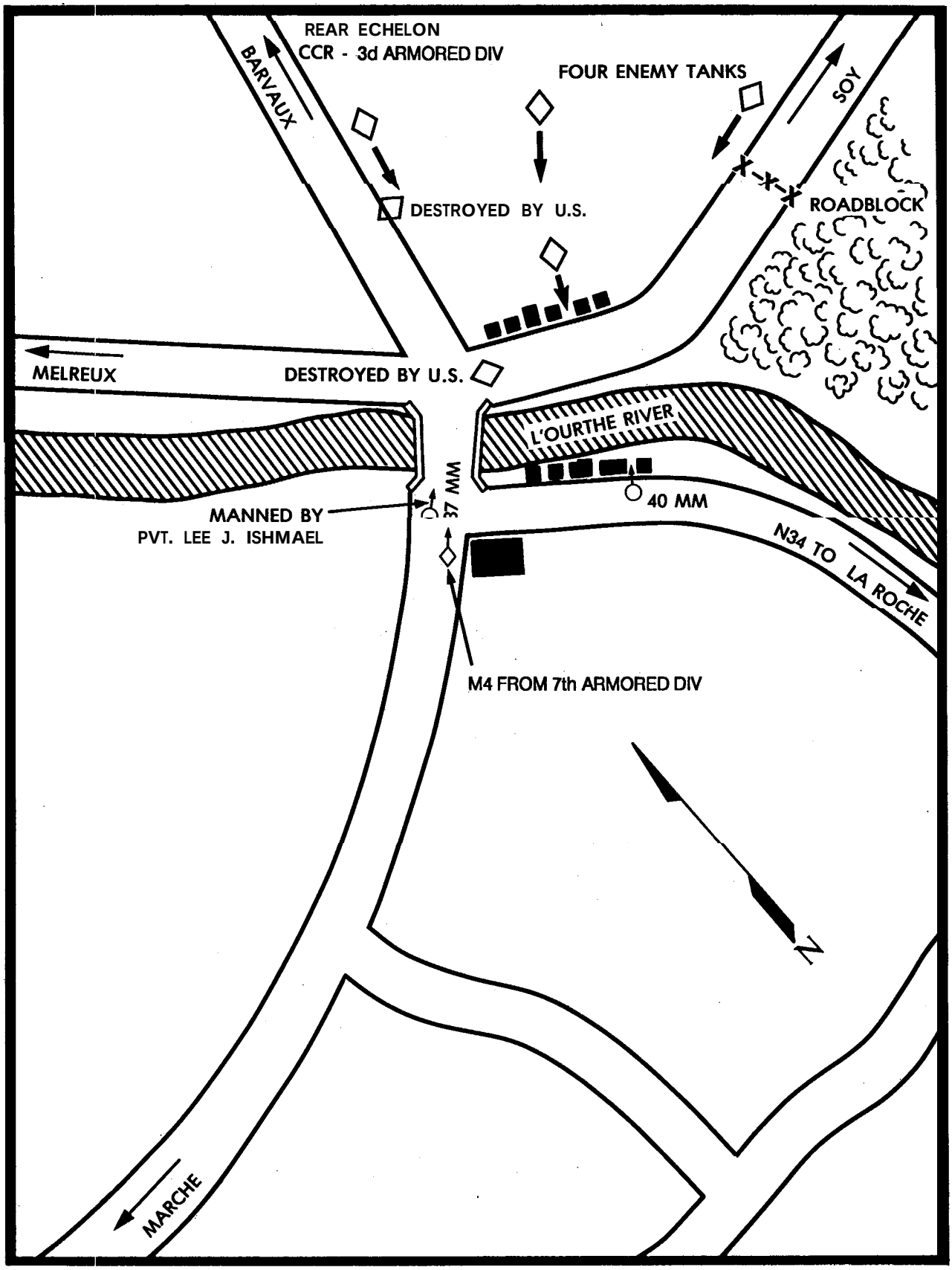
Leaving Sergeant Ham's squad in Marcourt, Sergeant Bonifay returned to Hampteau just in time to get in on the excitement there. At 0510, Private Driggs ran back across the bridge and reported that an armored car was approaching along the secondary road from the northeast. The armored car started shelling the high ground behind and in the village and then started firing its small arms at the bazooka teams. A battalion staff officer, Captain Richard F. Huxmann, directed Sergeant Bonifay to blow the bridge; however, this was impossible because the detonator had been removed. The shelling set Hampteau on fire, and by this time the battle of Hotton was commencing and Colonel Fraser ordered Lieutenant Wright to send his men to reinforce Company B at Hotton. Taking a last look at the burning and completely deserted town of Hampteau at 0900, Sergeant Bonifay made his way back to Hotton on foot to join the battle that was in progress there.

The sequel to the Hampteau action is that Lieutenant Paul Curtis, accompanied by Sergeants Joseph H. Ochson and Harry S. Wimberley, returned in the afternoon in an attempt to rewire and blow the bridge. Lieutenant Curtis was killed in the unsuccessful attempt.[64]

On 21 December bitter fighting took place at the point (369879) where a vital class 70 bridge spanned the Ourthe River at Hotton. (Map 5) Hotton is at the junction

Map 5

51st Engineer Combat Battalion Defenses, Hotton Area, 21 December 1944



of N4 (which runs southeast to La Roche [Laroche]) and N28 (which runs northeast toward Barvaux and southwest toward Marche). The bridge is perpendicular to N4 and connects N28 on both sides of the river. On the east side of the river the road to Soy branches off to the northeast. Along the southern borders of this road are wooded areas and rising ground. Houses line both sides of the river and are closely spaced. The main enemy thrusts at Hotton came from the northeast; from the direction of Soy and Erezee.[65]

The sparkplug of the defense of Hotton was Captain Preston C. Hodges, a veteran graduate of Fort Belvoir's sixth OCS [Officer Candidate School] class, who had commanded or been associated with Company B of the 51st for two years.[66] His leadership held together the miscellaneous elements present at the bridge and inspired them to stand and ward off the enemy attacks. Captain Hodges remained exposed to small arms and artillery fire during the battle in order to coordinate the firing of the various weapons and elements under his command. Although slightly wounded by a shell fragment during the battle, Captain Hodges remained at his station until the battle of Hotton had been won and the town was firmly in Allied hands.[67]

The personnel and equipment available to Captain Hodges for the defense of Hotton initially consisted of the following: one squad of the 1st Platoon of Company B, 51st Engineers, commanded by First Lieutenant Bruce W. Jamison; half a squad of men from Company A, 51st Engineers; a squad of Armored Engineers from the 3d Armored Division, equipped with a 37-mm. antitank gun; two 40-mm. Bofors antiaircraft guns (pressed into service from the 440th AAA Battalion); and a smattering of bazookas and .50-caliber machine guns. Most of this equipment and personnel was on the southwest side of the river bridge. On the northeast side of the bridge were personnel of the

3d Armored Division trains, supported by what appeared to be a platoon of light tanks and a platoon of medium tanks. A medical unit also was present on the northeast side of the river, lining the Barvaux road. This unit was also part of the 3d Armored Division.[68]

The Hotton bridge was a two-way timber bridge. Defense from the northeast side of the bridge and river was difficult due to limited observation and the obstruction to movement caused by the buildings of the town. Positions on the west bank could be observed by the enemy but were choicer because they allowed freedom of movement, fields of fire, and better sight of what the enemy was doing. On the night of 19-20 December, Lieutenant Jamison prepared this bridge and the Melreux railroad bridge for demolition. He used 800 pounds of TNT and 300 pounds of satchel charges on the Hotton bridge, preparing one abutment and three piers.[69]

The same night that the bridge had been prepared for demolition, an enemy patrol of 20 men dressed in American uniforms advanced on the bridge, and they came down and started to walk across the bridge. It was never learned what their mission was, but it was supposed that they were to blow the bridge.[70] (See Appendix A.)

One of the most valuable assets that the small group of the 51st Engineer Combat Battalion had available at Hotton was a vehicle from the 7th Armored Division, with a five-man crew.[71] There is disagreement in both oral and written testimony as to whether this was a tank destroyer or an M4 medium tank with a 76-mm. gun. All observers and participants agree it had a 76-mm. gun. They also agree that its crew did a heroic job in the defense of the Hotton bridge, away from their unit. It is unfortunate that none of the Engineers present at the battle of Hotton have clues to the identity of the tank crew.[72]

Before daylight on the morning of 21 December, Lieutenants Wright and Jamison located this armored

vehicle in an ordnance detachment on the outskirts of Hotton. These officers prevailed on the sergeant (tank commander) to get his tank into action to support the detachment defending the Hotton bridge. The tank was employed near the end of the bridge on the west side of the river, close to a protecting house that shielded its hull but allowed it a good field of fire.[73]

Early on the morning of the 21st, Captain Hodges borrowed a 37-mm. antitank gun from the 23d Armored Engineers of the 3d Armored Division across the river. (See Map 5.) The crew, according to all observers, was very hesitant about manning the gun. Private Lee J. Ishmael, driver for Colonel Fraser, volunteered to fire the gun and he manned it throughout the battle.[74]

About 0700 on the morning of 21 December, the enemy commenced shelling Hotton. Shortly thereafter, a fire-fight developed between elements of the 3d Armored Division and enemy armor and infantry coming out of the woods on the east side of the river. Captain John W. Barnes, S-3 of the 51st Engineer Combat Battalion, who had just returned from inspecting roadblocks on Highway N4, received the information from Lieutenant Wright that Hampteau had fallen and the group there had been forced back to Hotton which was being threatened. Captain Barnes asked for volunteers from Headquarters and Service Company to go to Hotton and check the enemy vehicles attempting to break through there. The others in Captain Barnes' group were Warrant Officer Julius J. Horecka, Master Sergeant Edward Colley, Technical Sergeant Kenneth Kelly, Sergeant Arnold Parker, Private Lee J. Ishmael, Private Peter Serianni, and Private Willis Rackus. Horecka took these men ahead in a 2 1/2-ton truck. When they arrived in Hotton there was a small-scale battle in progress between the 3d Armored and enemy armor.[75]

The 3d Armored tanks started engaging enemy infantry, which came out of the woods east of Hotton and up the road

on the east side of the Ourthe River. A medium and a light tank from the 3d Armored started down the Soy road toward the enemy infantry, but they were both stopped by a Mark VI tank approaching the bridge from the Soy road. The Mark VI quickly knocked out the light tank; the M4 fired one shot at the enemy Tiger and then backed into a building. The enemy tank crippled the 3d Armored medium tank, and the crew evacuated. The Tiger tank continued toward the bridge unmolested.[76]

At this point Private Ishmael manned the 37-mm. antitank gun, which the crew from the 23d Armored Engineer Battalion had hesitated to put into action. Ishmael was a veteran member of the battalion. During late 1942 and 1943, when the battalion had been at Plattsburg Barracks, Private Ishmael had instructed on the 37-mm. He shot approximately 16 rounds in three minutes of rapid firing, during which observers noted a few tracers bounce off the Mark VI. Three shots hit the tank's bogie wheels, and the most effective shot wedged between the turret and the hull. This shell apparently prevented the tank's gun from turning around.[77]

Sergeant Kenneth Kelly, who assisted Private Ishmael in swinging the 37-mm. gun around, also fired at the tank with a bazooka, which was loaded by Lieutenant Munny Y. M. Lee. Results were not observed because of the smoke and dust, but it is believed that the rounds from the 37-mm. gun knocked the tank out. The crew dispersed, but two were killed and one captured from the group in the tank. Sergeant Kelly also observed a 2 1/2-ton truck, hit by this same German Mark VI, go up in flames.[78]

About the time that Private Ishmael was dealing with this tank, Colonel Fraser was leaving the battalion CP in the Marche area. He had been in close touch with the situations at Hampteau and Hotton until the wire to Hotton went out. Colonel Fraser had appealed to the 84th Division for help to be sent to Hotton When the 84th (at

Marche) scoffed at reports of activity at Hotton, Colonel Fraser put the Hotton telephone close to the Marche line to allow the 84th to hear the sounds of shelling at Hotton. Finally, at about 0830, he went to Hotton himself. In order to coordinate the activities of his battalion with what the 3d Armored Division was doing on the other side of the river, Colonel Fraser crossed the bridge and was isolated in the enemy territory for much of the morning after the enemy armored spearhead started to advance toward the bridge. He made his way back safely, saw that Captain Hodges had the situation well under control, and then proceeded to Marche to recheck with the 84th Division on reinforcements for Hotton.[79]

Meanwhile, Captain John W. Barnes, battalion S-3, was off on another mission. After Captain Barnes had sent a squad of volunteers from Headquarters and Service Company to Hotton, he went down N4 to the outskirts of Marche, where a Captain Siegal of the 523d Ordnance Battalion was manning an Ml0 at one of the 51st's roadblocks. Captain Barnes brought the Ml0 back through Marche toward Hotton to reinforce the position there. He was stopped by the commanding general of the 84th Division, to whom Captain Barnes explained the situation. According to Captain Barnes, "General Alexander R. Bolling told me he wanted facts and not rumors or hearsay and he would not allow me to go on with the Ml0 until he knew more of the situation." General Bolling then dispatched one of his reconnaissance officers in his personal armored car to confirm the seriousness of the situation. When the 84th's troops did arrive, however, it was already 1500 and the battle was over.[80]

Captain Hodges states that the three most decisive actions of the battle of Hotton were the manning of the 37-mm. AT gun by Private Ishmael, the effective firing done by the stray tank of the 7th Armored Division, and the bravery of an unknown, unnamed soldier who volunteered

to cross the bridge and flush out several tanks with his bazooka. Captain Hodges and the men from the 51st did not recognize this unknown hero, nor did they have an opportunity in the heat of battle to ask his name, but they were all loud in their praise of his action. After Private Ishmael had knocked out his tank, mortar fire started coming in fairly heavily around the bridge site. Another enemy tank started to edge along the road from Erezee toward the bridge; still another came directly toward the bridge from the northeast. Three shots were fired from the 7th Armored tank. The third one hit the enemy tank approaching from the northeast, knocking it out and killing the crew. On later inspection it was found that the tank was loaded with U.S. GI equipment. The tank had reached within 75 yards of the bridge when it was knocked out. The other enemy tank approaching from Erezee slid in behind some buildings on the northeast side of the river. It was close enough to the bridge to menace the personnel guarding the bridge. Captain Hodges relates that at this time an unknown soldier approached him at the bridge and said: "Captain, I'll flush out that tank over there." "Well, boy, go ahead," Captain Hodges replied.

The unnamed soldier took off alone across the bridge with a bazooka and two rounds of ammunition in his pocket. He was seen ducking into a building on the far right corner of the bridge. Shortly thereafter the personnel at the bridge heard a smash like a bazooka round and the enemy tank pulled up between two buildings so that part of its hull was showing out of an aperture of only two feet between the buildings. The 7th Armored Division tank fired accurately through this two-foot opening, destroying the tank. Expending all but two rounds of its ammunition, this tank remained in position, unscathed, near the bridge. Captain Hodges estimates that it destroyed or damaged at least four enemy tanks and scared away several others.[81]

During the battle, the wiring on the demolition charges on the bridge was shot out by enemy shell fire. Lieutenants Jamison and Wright, without waiting for orders, entered the shoulder-deep water and, under enemy small arms fire, repaired the wiring.[82]

Throughout the morning and during the early afternoon, the tank-infantry battle raged. About 1400, the enemy armor showed signs that it had had about enough and started to withdraw, but the sniper small arms fire was still hot on the northeast side of the bridge. The situation was finally relieved at 1500 with the arrival of a task force of the 3d Armored Division under command of Brigadier General Maurice Rose. The relief force of the 84th Division then appeared on the scene from Marche. Most of the elements of the 51st Battalion withdrew toward Marche, having accomplished their mission of holding the bridge. Half of a squad was left at the Hotton bridge to blow it if necessary during the ensuing days.[83] Captain Hodges reports that there were frequent arguments between the commands of the 3d Armored Division and the 84th Division as to whether the bridge should be blown. In lieu of an agreement between the generals involved, the squad at the bridge took no action and refused to blow the bridge.[84]

Despite the bitter fighting at Hotton on 21 December, only two members of the 51st's force were casualties, both from shell fragments. Captain Hodges received a shell fragment wound in his leg, while Private Ishmael was wounded in the hand. (These casualty figures do not include casualties among the attached personnel who fought with the 51st at Hotton.)[85]

The significance of the defense of the Hotton bridge, which elements of the 51st carried on during the seven-hour battle, is that the actions preserved a key link in Allied supply lines to forward units, behind which the 84th Division was organizing and arriving at Marche.[86]

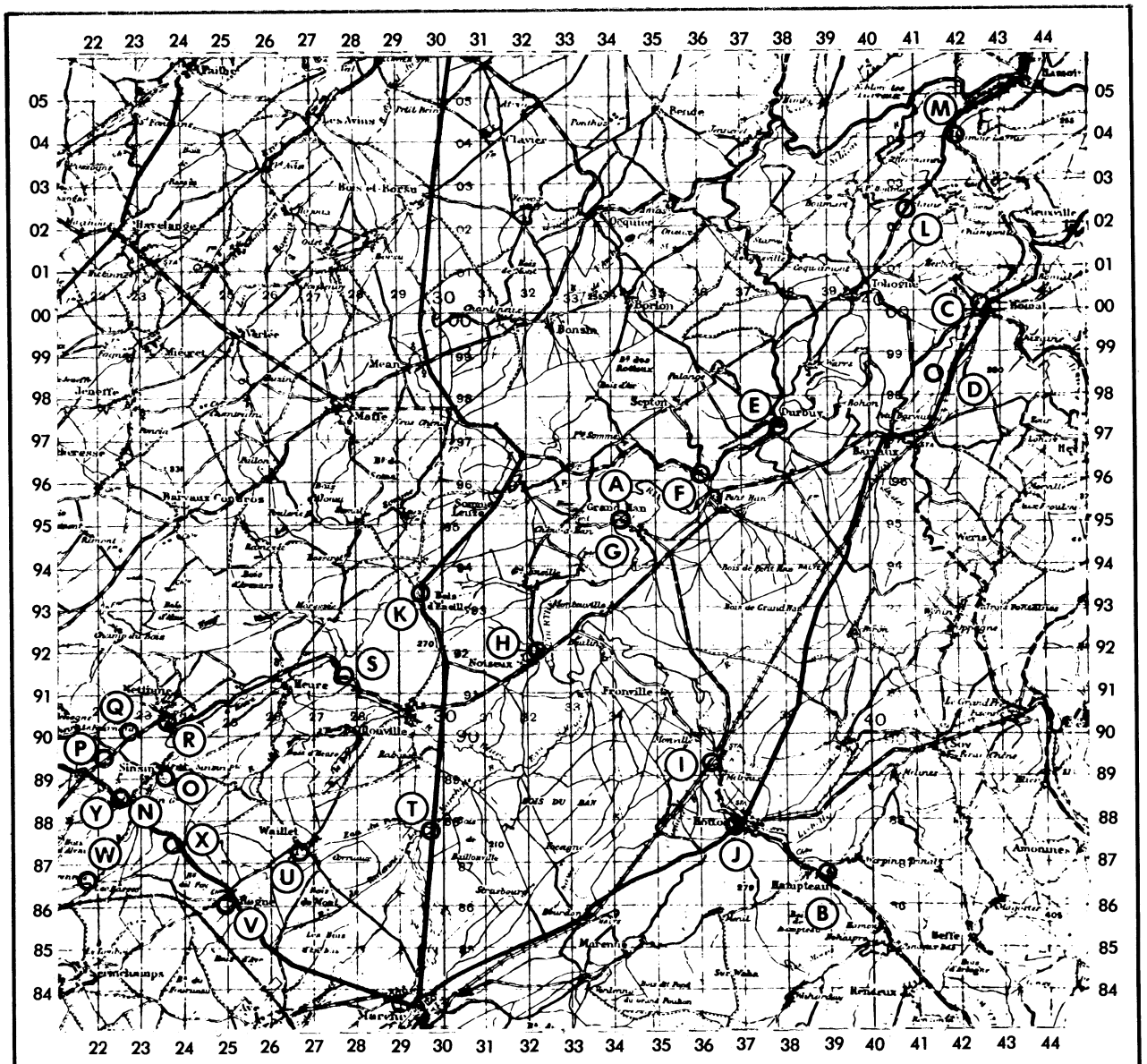
During the next ten days, prior to being relieved by British troops on 3 January, the companies of the 51st continued their mission of maintaining roadblocks and bridge protection along an extended front. On 22 December, a barrier line was installed from Hamoir (423052) to Hotton (369879), along the Ourthe River, thence through Marche and southwest to Rochefort. The line consisted of prepared demolitions inculverts; mines in roads at critical intersections, combined with bazooka teams; and 40-mm. AA guns.[87]

At 1500 on 22 December, Company C, now returned from its defense of Trois-Ponts, sent a reconnaissance party along Highway N4 to set up roadblocks. The party consisted of Major Yates, Captain Scheuber, Lieutenant Green, and Lieutenant Nabors. The men approached southeast of Marche and were fired on by the lead vehicles of an enemy armored column at (310805). They stopped their jeep and advanced on foot and were soon cut off by five enemy tanks, two half-tracks filled with enemy personnel, and additional armor that was not actually seen. All officers but Major Yates escaped by taking off through fields and avoiding roads. Major Yates, who had only a few days before returned from the hospital where he had been confined with a foot injury, could not run and hence hid in a bush by the road. After two hours he was discovered, disarmed, and taken prisoner. When the man guarding Major Yates relaxed his vigil for a moment, Major Yates dived into a stream beside which they stood, worked his way downstream under about three feet of water, and escaped under a hail of small arms fire to return to friendly lines shortly before 2200 the same night.[88]

On 22 December, Company A relieved Company B of the responsibility of roadblocks in the vicinity of Aye, Humain, and Rochefort; Company B extended its defenses from Durbuy to Hamoir, taking over from the 300th Engineer Combat Battalion. (Map 6) The following guards and

Map 6

51st Engineer Combat Battalion, Companies B, A, and C, Defensive Positions Established in Hotton Area, 22-23 December 1944


22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44
05 04 03 02 01 00 99 98 97 96 95 94 93 92 91 90 89 88 87 86 85 84
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V
W
X
Y
Hotton
Noiseux
Fronville
Waillet
Hampteau
Amonine
Marenne
Durbuy
Grand Han
Bomal
Barvaux
Septon
Bonsin
Meuvy
Maffe
Sinsin
Heure
Villerzeul
Marche
Rendeux
Belle
Tohogne
Ozoir
Clavier
Ham-sur-Heure
Jemelle
Mirwart
Rochefort
Frahan
Wéris
Ortheuville
Bois d'Estelle
Bois du Bas
Bois de Grand Han
Bois de Petit Han
Bois de Mont
Bois de Fer
Champ de Rose
Champ de Bois
Les Bois d'Epeu
Les Bois d'Ogne
Les Bois de Bonsin
Les Bois de Rendeux
Les Bois de Frahan
Les Bois de Wéris
Les Bois de Durbuy
Les Bois de Barvaux
Les Bois de Septon
Les Bois de Hotton
Les Bois de Marenne
Les Bois de Rendeux
Les Bois de Belle
Les Bois de Tohogne
Les Bois de Bomal
Les Bois de Grand Han
Les Bois de Petit Han

sive positions were established and maintained by Company B on 22 December:

(341950)--guard on footbridge;

(390868)--reconnaissance made of Hampteau bridge (quiet);

(424001)--bridge mined, up and downstream;

(415985)--footbridge;

(377972)--footbridge;

(360962)--bridge mined;

(341950)--footbridge mined;

(322920)--bridge out;

(362892)--railroad bridge out;

(369879)--bridge mined;

(295932)--abatis;

(407025)--culvert mined; and

(419040)--crater for road and railroad.[89]

At noon on 22 December, a party led by Lieutenant Wright proceeded as far a Jemelle, where it was reported to them that enemy tanks and infantry were in Manogne. Lieutenant Wright was then ordered to prepare abatis in the vicinity of (242741) and to mine the road at (243798). The 3d Platoon of Company A was ordered to prepare roadblocks on Highway N35 between Jemelle and Marche. Lieutenant Wright's 1st Platoon of Company A then commenced a merry chase that eventually carried them back as far as Givet. After establishing a roadblock at (242745) in the vicinity of Forrieres, he successfully moved his platoon to Rochefort, the Aye, and Marche. Lieutenant Wright returned to Rochefort at 1900 on 22 December to blow a bridge there, accomplished his mission, and returned to Marche. The following morning, he received orders to repair the Rochefort bridge. While in the town, the platoon was attacked and driven back to Givet along with the 84th Division.

The 2d and 3d Platoons of Company A were responsible for the following defenses prepared and/or maintained on

22 December:

(226883)--abatis;

(235889)--bridge mined;

(221894) and (229900)--roadblocks coordinated with elements of 309th Engineer Combat Battalion:

(236902)--road and bridge mined;

(264411)--bridge mined; coordinated with elements of 309th Engineer Combat Battalion; and

(278915)--bridge and road mined.

Company C strengthened the defenses of the 51st on 23 December by manning the following positions:

(298878)--abatis with string of mines;

(267871)--bridge mined;

(250860)--bridge mined;

(219866)--culvert mined and minefield on both sides of road;

(236875)--road mined; and

(226883)--abatis.

The ensuing days were anticlimactic. Company B was relieved of all duties on the barrier line on the Our River from Hotton to Hamoir, the with the exception of the demolition crew in Hotton. The latter was strengthened on 27 December from half a squad to one officer and 10 EM [enlisted men], and the bridge was rewired so it could be demolished from either side. At 0140 on 26 December, the railroad bridge at Melreux was blown. During the remainder of the period before being relieved, Company B maintained a roadblock on Highway N35 south of the junction at N29 and also maintained a roadblock on N35 north of the junction with N29.

Although the enemy had been held off at Hotton, and its advance toward Marche on N4 had been delayed, there was still some enemy activity after 22 December--generally to the east and southeast, and south and southwest of Marche. The enemy appeared to be attempting to encircle Marche and to move to the Meuse River to the west. During

the period from 24 December until relieved by elements of the XXX British Corps on 3 January, the battalion was attached to the 84th Division in direct support. The battalion continued to hold a series of roadblocks and bridges against numerous enemy probings, but experienced no serious threats.[90]

Total battalion casualties for the operation were five killed, six wounded, and two missing.[91]

Epilogue

by
Barry W. Fowle

Following the Battle of the Bulge, as the fighting in the Ardennes became known, the 51st supported a succession of frontline divisions. In January 1945, the battalion operated in close cooperation with the 307th Engineer Combat Battalion of the 82d Airborne Division. Later the 51st worked with the 275th Battalion of the 75th Infantry Division. The weather rather than the Germans became the battalion's main foe, as the troops struggled to keep open the main supply routes in spite of the heavy snowfall and wind-swept drifts.

In the first two months of 1945, as the Allied armies pushed east into Germany, the battalion built many bridges. Most were double-single Baileys. They built at least seven of these, ranging in length from 50 to 130 feet. They also built a 130-foot double--double Bailey near Trois-Ponts as well as some treadways and foot bridges. Some of these they finished under fire.

During the first part of February the battalion entered Germany in support of the 82d Airborne Division in its drive toward the east through the Ardennes. In this sector there were no roads, only woods. The 51st blazed forest trails, cut firebreaks, and opened third-class roads to take the pounding of division traffic. The battalion performed other time-honored sapper roles as well, clearing obstructions, mines, and booby traps when needed. On 17 February, recognition for the 51st's part in stopping the Germans in the Ardennes caught up with the

battalion in the form of a Presidential Unit Citation

In March, the battalion was once again at the center of a critical operation. It was carrying out a routine road maintenance mission, clearing mines, filling craters, and moving debris, when it was relieved from direct support of the 9th Infantry Division. The 51st moved to Bad Neuenahr in preparation for constructing a heavy ponton bridge across the Rhine River at Kripp in support of the seizure of the Ludendorff Bridge at Remagen. Late at night on the 11th, the 51st completed a 969-foot 25-ton ponton bridge. The bridge was constructed under harassing enemy artillery fire and intermittent strafing by enemy planes. One man was killed and one wounded from Company C, while two men were killed and one wounded from the supporting 181st Heavy Ponton Battalion. The bridge was the second put across the Rhine by the Allies.

Then it was back to road maintenance and bridge construction, including one extraordinary burst of energy. On 25 March, Company C constructed a 50-foot double-single Bailey bridge in the morning and built a 110-foot triple-single Bailey in the afternoon. After nightfall, the unit built yet a third bridge, a 50-foot double-single Bailey. After that remarkable day's work for Company C, it was back to fixing roads, removing obstacles, constructing culverts, and posting signs for the advance across Germany.

In April, the last month of the war, the 51st still concentrated on road maintenance" For a time, the battalion supported the 9th Infantry Division. Then it was reassigned to the 86th. The transfer involved more than paperwork: the 86th was hundreds of miles away. To get to its new assignment, the 51st made a forced motor march of 255 miles in one day to its new command post in Petersaurach. Only one vehicle broke down during the march, a tribute to the care which the battalion took of its equipment.

Shortly after joining the 86th, the battalion became involved in another major bridging operation, this time over the Danube River. Company A began the treadway bridge at Ingolstadt late at night on 26 April. The men worked past midnight into the early hours of the morning. All the while, heavy fire came from a barracks building about 200 feet in front of the landing site. A sniper with a burp gun almost hit Colonel Fraser while he supervised construction from the incomplete span. With the bridge only 40 feet from the far shore, the 300 desperate SS men who had barricaded themselves in the building were finally driven out by a landing party from the 86th. At eight o'clock in the morning the 324-foot treadway was across, just in time for the Germans, now prisoners of war, to come across.

The battalion was lucky at Ingolstadt. There were no men killed or wounded. Every commander realized that the war was coming to an end and hoped to avoid casualties. But, although the end was in sight, the war still was not over. On 7 May, just one day before V-E Day, Sergeant Alex George was killed and T-5 William Schender injured when a premature blast occurred while destroying unserviceable explosives.

The battalion stayed in Germany through the summer. It joined in the first stages of the long and arduous reconstruction task that faced victors and vanquished alike in Europe, removing rubble from the Main River so that commercial barge traffic could start anew. In a way the 51st came full circle that summer. In July the battalion once again operated sawmills, this time for peaceful uses rather than for troops on the march. In early October, active service in Europe ended. On 16 October, the battalion boarded the SS Eufaula Victory at Marseille, France, and sailed the next morning. Ten days later, at Camp Patrick Henry, Virginia, the 51st Engineer Combat Battalion was inactivated. In existence for just

over two years and seven months, the 51st Engineer Combat Battalion had served overseas 18 days short of two years and had made a major contribution to Allied success on the western front.