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MILITARY MONOGRAPH

TITLE: CONTACT AT HOUFFALIZE

SCOPE The "Battle of the Bulge" was terminated on
16 January 1945 when the First and Third US Armies
met at Houffalize, Belgium. This is an account
of the initial contact established between the
two armies.

41-63

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SKETCH 1

SCALE 1/1,000,000

(In a printed manuscript, this sketch should be on the title page.)



SKETCH 2

SCALE 1/



SKETCH 3

SCALE 1/25000

CONTACT AT HOUFFALIZE

"16 January 1945

At 0905, 41st Cavalry of the 11th Armored Division made contact with 41st Infantry of the 2nd Armored Division in Houffalize, thus terminating the Bastogne Operation so far as the 3rd Army is concerned."¹

Thus did General Patton in his notes on the Bastogne Operation refer to the accomplishment of the mission which had been assigned to a task force composed of troops of the 41st Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron. Although it would be difficult for any one of the participants in this undertaking to condense twenty-four long hours into one simple sentence, it must be admitted that the Third Army commander's note does state specifically what happened, but from the Army Headquarters' point of view. For those of us on the ground, the contact established between the First and Third Armies at Houffalize, Belgium, on the morning of 16 January 45, was the climax of a struggle against the Germans, the terrain, and the weather.

A month prior to this time, we of the 41st Cav Ren Sq had been with the other elements of the 11th Armd Div in south central England--doubtful that we would ever get across the English Channel or into combat.

1. Notes on Bastogne Operation, Hq Third US Army, 16 January 1945.

When the sudden orders came for our move, we had no idea of the seriousness of the situation in Belgium, which became increasingly apparent as the squadron made a forced march from Cherbourg to the Sedan-Givet area on the west bank of the Meuse River, thence across this river on 24 December 1944, "with the dual mission of securing liaison with British forces on the north and establishing contact with the enemy northeast of the Meuse River."¹ It was not until this date that most of us in the lower units knew that the Germans had broken through the American lines in the Ardennes sector of Belgium and France, and were attempting to split the Allies. With the crossing of the Meuse, we knew that we had finally realized our desire "to get into the fight". For the next twenty-one days we were actively engaged in the main effort to close "The Bulge" and shut the door to Western Europe which the von Rundstedt offensive had opened.

The final phase of the fighting in the Ardennes salient was characterized by the concerted drive by the 1st and 3rd U S Armies on the key town of Houffalize, Belgium, on the Ourthe River, ten miles north of Bastogne (Sketch 1). The 41st Cav Rcn Sq was the 3rd Army unit which was given the mission of contacting the 1st Army in the vicinity of Houffalize. This action by the squadron which terminated the Bastogne Operation covered a twenty-four hour period which can be discussed in three phases--the preparation, the move to contact, and the actual contact.

1. After Action Report, 11th Armored Division, 23 Dec 44- 31 Jan 45.

PREPARATORY PHASE

To achieve the proper perspective of this action, it will be necessary to consider first the preparatory phase--those few hours immediately preceding the assignment of the contact mission. During the month of January, the entire weight of the 3rd Army was in the attack directed at driving the Germans behind the Siegfried Line. The 11th Armored Div was directed to relieve elements of the 101st Airborne Division in the vicinity of Longchamps and to launch an attack northwest as far as Bertogne, and thereafter east to seize and secure the high ground south of Houffalize.¹

On the morning of 15 Jan 45, the 41st Cav Rcn Sq (less Troop B), attached to Combat Command A, was deployed along the northern fringe of Les Assins Woods (Sketch 2) in the vicinity of Monaville, Belgium. These woods had been cleared of the enemy the day before in a dismounted attack by Troops A and C abreast with Troop E (assault guns) and Company F (light tanks) in direct support. The advance had been made against heavy mortar fire, some artillery, and moderate resistance from ground troops armed with automatic weapons. This action had inflicted heavy casualties on both troops; Troop A experienced particularly severe losses. Lack of the necessarily detailed preparation and coordination for a dismounted attack by inexperienced troops was the underlying reason for the many casualties and resulting confusion in this troop. As the objectives were attained, it became necessary for Troop D to replace Troop A in the line, so that the commander of Troop A could reorganize and reequip his unit

1. After Action Report, 11th Armored Division, 23 Dec 44- 31 Jan 45.

preparatory to resuming the attack on the next day. At approximately 1800 that evening, elements of the 193rd Inf Regt, 17th Abn Div were moved in to reinforce the squadron. The combined units, airborne and reconnaissance, were prepared to continue the attack on the right flank of CCA.

Plans for renewal of the attack were changed the next morning. At 1100, 16 Jan 45, the squadron was ordered to release control of its sector to the 17th Abn Div units and to withdraw from position, reassemble in the vicinity of Monaville, and then move to the north and east of Bertogne to protect the northern flank of CCA in its advance to the east. Company F moved first, at 1300, to the vicinity of Rastadt, and outposted the roads to the north. At the same time the 2nd Platoon of Troop A was assigned the mission of proceeding northeast to the Ourthe River, in the vicinity of Grinvet, and to contact patrols of the 1st Army in that area.

Lt. Col. H. M. Foy, the squadron commander, with the remainder of Troop A, proceeded to Bertogne to report to the commanding general of CCA, Brig. Gen. W. A. Holbrook, Jr. I, as squadron executive officer, was directed to remain in Monaville to direct the movement of the other troops (Hq, C, D, and E). By 1630, all troops had been withdrawn and had started to Bertogne, so I closed the headquarters in Monaville and moved to the new sector.

No sooner had I arrived in Bertogne and jumped from my half-track than General Holbrook and Col. J.J.B. Williams, the division chief of staff, came speeding up in their $\frac{1}{2}$ ton vehicles. They were obviously excited and were calling for Colonel Foy. I rushed over to them, re-

ported and said that Colonel Foy was forward with Troop C.

"Mike," General Holbrook said, "We have another mission that you and the remainder of the squadron must undertake. This is an extremely important mission--A "must", directed by the Army commander."

I told the general that I had some troops available and that we could start immediately. What was the mission?

"Someone must get to Houffalize tonight and contact the 1st Army as it comes down from the north", General Holbrook stated.

Colonel Williams then spoke up, "This is a delicate, difficult assignment for anyone because Houffalize is at least ten miles behind the German lines. But someone must get through to establish contact with the 2nd Armd Div as it comes down from Achouffe. They may already be there. General Patton wants this mission accomplished without delay and he wants this division to do it."

"Here is an excellent reconnaissance squadron mission, Mike", General Holbrook reassured me. "We've got to get around to the northern flank of the division and then through the German lines if they extend that far. It should be interesting!"

I instructed the S-3 to alert Troop D, an assault gun platoon, and any tanks that might be available. Then the general, the chief of staff, and I began a serious map study to see just what this assignment would entail. True, Houffalize was approximately ten miles behind the lines; was on the dominating high ground; the routes of approach, except by way of the main highway, were indistinct snow-covered trails through the woods; and it was already starting to get dark.

We had gotten word to Colonel Foy that an important situation had arisen, therefore he came back to the squadron CP. Then we were able to organize a small task force composed of Troops D and E, 2nd Platoon of Troop A, and Company F. I was placed in command of this composite group and assigned the mission of proceeding northeast to meet elements of the 1st Army, believed to be in the vicinity of Houffalize, the Corps objective.

As will be recalled, the tank company and the 2nd Platoon, Troop A, were on outpost and patrol missions on the combat command flank. These two units were directed by radio message to rally in the vicinity of Rastadt and the commanders were to meet me at the edge of town for further orders.

Since the morning of 13 January when this attack began, the full strength of the Corps had been focused on Houffalize. The Corps commander now directed that this objective be reached without further delay. CCA, organized into two task forces, had been attacking eastward astride the Bertogne-Compogne-Mabompre road all during the day. An integral tank task force had pushed rapidly eastward clearing the Pied Du Mont woods at 1130, Compogne at 1510, Rastadt immediately thereafter, and Velleroux shortly before dark. During this attack by CCA, the 41st Cavalry had been moving from Monaville to Bertogne to be employed as the security element for the CCA left flank and as stated had just closed into Bertogne when this new mission was assigned.

With Troop D and Troop E, I left Bertogne at 1730 advancing north-east thence east to the previously indicated rallying point. One platoon of Troop D was sent ahead of the column as the point unit and to conduct necessary route reconnaissance. Just as we were leaving, an A Troop "jeep" carrying a seriously wounded sergeant came in from along our proposed route. The sergeant's jeep had struck a mine some two miles from the village, and the sergeant believed that there was an extensive mine field across the field north of the Pied Du Mont woods. If this were correct, the mine field would be directly across our proposed route of march.

From Bertogne to Rastadt, I rode in my half-track directly behind the last vehicle of the point. The column had advanced only about two miles when it came to a sudden halt. Anxious to keep moving as long as there were some daylight, I ran to the head of the column to ascertain the reason for the delay. The point commander was standing in front of the lead $\frac{1}{4}$ ton.

"What's the trouble, Tousley?" I asked.

"Major, we've found that mine field. Here it is, right in front of us and there don't seem to be any clear lanes." (He had checked for about 100 yards on either side of the trail).

No mines were visible to our immediate front, but they could be seen just under the snow to the right and left. I noted that there was evidence that two or more vehicles had passed through the mine belt a few feet to the right of the main trail. Not wanting to delay any longer and

not being able to find any by-pass, I ordered one $\frac{1}{4}$ to move ahead along the trail--through the mines! The $\frac{1}{4}$ ton made it! The other vehicles of the point, six in all, then proceeded through the same gap. I stood at the entrance to watch them by.

As the command half-track drove up, I stepped up on the battery box and motioned the driver forward. In the split second that followed, there was a terrific, blinding explosion and then everything went black for a few seconds. As I regained my senses, I found myself sprawled in the snow about ten feet from the badly damaged half-track. A quick check indicated that no one had been more than badly shaken, but that the half-track was now immobile. The left front wheel had struck a mine just as the vehicle started forward.

Realizing that it would now be impossible to get any other vehicles through the obstacle at this point, I directed that all effort be devoted to finding a possible by-pass. Shortly thereafter, an enlisted man dashed up in a $\frac{1}{4}$ ton to say that he knew of a route around the mines and would guide us the rest of the way to Rastadt (he then told me what he had been sent to meet us and show us the proper route.) Had I waited for this guide or spent more time looking for this by-pass, I could have saved my half-track and some unnecessary strain on the men's nerves. But in my mind there existed the definite possibility that this mine field could have delayed me for many hours. I believe that the loss of the half-track and the anxiety of the men were small price to pay to avoid delay, however.

After I had commandeered an armored car from Troop D and re-established communications with my command and squadron headquarters, we continued on to Rastadt.

Meanwhile, the other elements of the combat command were very heavily engaged with the enemy in the vicinity of Velleroux. These forces were striding the main road and were endeavoring to continue the advance to the northeast. At 1910, leading elements of the tank task force, continuing eastward through a defile between Velleroux and Mabompre, were heavily counter-attacked in the northern flank by enemy tanks, artillery and anti-tank fire. As a result, the task force was forced to withdraw to the high ground west of Velleroux. The enemy was believed to have withdrawn in the direction of Bonnerue and Houffalize. All of this action had taken place while I was enroute to Rastadt from Bertogne.

When I reached Rastadt, I found that the tank company and the Troop A platoon were assembled as had been directed. The town and its inhabitants, civilian and military, were in a state of complete confusion and excitement. Troops of the CCA task force, driven from position east of Velleroux, were falling back into Rastadt, which was still burning as a result of the fighting that had taken place there a few hours earlier. To add to the confusion, it was completely dark except for the light created by the burning buildings, and consequently the officers and non-commissioned officers were having a difficult time reorganizing their units. Captain Mullins, the tank company commander, told me that

he had assembled the other 41st Cavalry officers and non-commissioned officers in an abandoned house nearby. He knew that I would want to have these men together for the detailed planning and issuance of orders to effect the accomplishment of our assigned mission. As I opened the door into the improvised conference room, I heard the platoon leader of the 2nd Platoon, Troop A, Lt. "Big Gene" Ellenson say,

"It can't be done! I hope the major doesn't think we're going through there tonight."

"That's just when we're going", I cut in. "And you're going to lead the way."

In spite of this spontaneous remark, I fully realized that it was going to take a great deal of map study and planning if I was to get this force to Houffalize. Before any orders could be issued, it was imperative that I, assisted by suggestions from the other officers, make a thorough study of the situation and terrain that confronted us. This study reemphasized the fact that no one in our assembled group had ever made a personal reconnaissance of the proposed area of operations, that it was now completely dark and visibility was very limited, and lastly, that none of us knew the location or the strength of the enemy.

The region through which we were to move was typical of the entire Ardennes locale. There were no main roads--the only road of any consequence was a single lane dirt road from Rastadt to Bonnerue, thence north to the Ourthe River at Grinvet; all other routes were mere logging trails through the forests. The forest themselves were very heavily planted due to the government's replanting program. If forced off any

road or trail, the only alternative would be to dismount the men and walk. The map showed that the only available route from Bonnerue to Houffalize was a trail through the dense Ardennes forests--this trail crossing a stream which flowed into the Ourthe River through a deep valley just west of Houffalize. As if these tricks of nature were not enough, we were faced with the problem of advancing through a minimum of eighteen inches of snow which had undoubtedly drifted in many places. My map study indicated clearly that the terrain would be as formidable, if not more so, than any enemy we might encounter.

The meager facts supplied by the CCA elements that had been in action during the day were the only information we had of the enemy. The consensus of opinion was that, after the counter-attack in the vicinity of Velleroux, the Germans had withdrawn to the northeast in the direction of Houffalize or to the north in the direction of Bonnerue. It must be borne in mind, however, that any information obtained from combat elements tended to be slightly colored by fruitful imaginations. After careful consideration of all known facts, it was clear that contact could be expected enroute to or in the vicinity of Houffalize.

Based upon a detailed map study, personal knowledge of the Ardennes type terrain, and the enemy information available, I evolved my scheme of maneuver. The task force would advance initially in a column prepared to split into two forces--a main body and a reconnaissance unit--where possible. The mission of the so-called reconnaissance unit would be to continually probe to the flanks for alternate routes.

From Rastadt, we would move in one column for about two thousand yards to a point where a trail branched to the right of the Rastadt-Bonnerue road. I anticipated that the main route would be blocked at this point, so planned to have the reconnaissance unit select another route or to outflank any hostile force at this junction.

The column organization in order of march at this time was as follows:

Reconnaissance Unit

Troop D (-1 platoon)
1st Platoon, Troop E

Main Body

2nd Platoon, Troop A
Company F (Tanks)
Troop E (Assault guns) (-1 platoon)
3rd Platoon, Troop D

My command vehicle, a tank, was located at the head of Company F.

Upon clearing the woods south of Bonnerue, the scheme of maneuver called for us to skirt the village to the south and east and to reenter the woods on any passable trail. The reconnaissance unit was to locate, if possible, a feasible route around Bonnerue, into the woods, and thence on to the objective avoiding enemy contact in so far as possible.

During this initial conference, no specific orders for the seizure of Houffalize were issued. This phase of the operation was still in the preliminary planning stage. However, in my mind, I envisioned that there were three distinct steps to be taken to assure successful accomplishment of the mission. These steps were (1) to dispose troops

to observe and contain any Germans still in the town, (2) to seize the high ground south of Houffalize as a means of assisting CCA, and (3) to dispatch patrols across the Ourthe River in an effort to establish a junction with 2nd Armd Div.

The plan for the advance on Houffalize was discussed with the key officers and non-commissioned officers. I issued the necessary orders to implement this plan and directed that all personnel be thoroughly oriented as to our mission and the steps to effect its accomplishment.

After these commanders had returned to their units and briefed their men, I ordered Troop D to initiate the move toward Houffalize. Troop D was enroute by 2300--and a long, tense night began.

MOVE TO CONTACT

When I departed from Rastadt on that night of 15 January 1945, I did so very reluctantly. I had no conception of the potentialities of the next few hours, confused indication of enemy locations, no daylight reconnaissance of the route ahead, and visions of being another heroic but useless "Lost Battalion". In spite of these shortcomings, however, I felt that I had a compact, effective force which was augmented by a sound, workable plan of operation. The combination of these two should form a successful team.

I was soon to learn that the plan, as it is with all others, was subject to change without notice and that it must be highly flexible to be usable.

Troop D, the leading element, had advanced two thousand yards when

the first change in plans occurred. At the road junction where the column was to split into two units, we found that we were blocked by several large craters that had been blown in the trail to the right. The woods here appeared to have been bombed or heavily shelled and as a result it was impossible to use the other route. Therefore I ordered the entire column to continue on the main axis of advance until we had emerged from the woods south of Bonnerue. At this point, I would make further changes that might be expedient.

I had hoped to bypass Bonnerue by moving cross-country to the south and east; however, I soon found that this plan was not feasible. The country was open--not wooded--but the snow had effectively concealed any possible trails, and cross-country movement would be hampered by the rugged terrain. The only alternative was to go through the now dark village.

The movement of the column was by bounds--one unit moving into and through the town while the other units covered this move. By this means the entire column succeeded in getting through Bonnerue and onto the trail to the northeast without any incidents other than the fact that a few vehicles deviated slightly from the correct route. (The next morning, another platoon of Troop A, passing through this same village, captured the remnants of a German company that had hidden there through the night.)

Upon reaching the high ground northeast of Bonnerue, the task force was reorganized and then continued on its mission. The nature of the

route from here on dictated that we proceed in one column through the Bois du Couturie to Houffalize. The composition of the column now was:

2nd Platoon, Troop A
Troop D (-3 Platoon)(1 Platoon, Troop E, atchd)
Company F
Troop E (-1 Platoon)
3rd Platoon, Troop D

Now the terrain, the night, and the weather became our main foes. Progress through this heavy, sinister forest was a slow, tedious undertaking. Lieutenant Ellenson virtually walked the entire distance because it was necessary that he constantly check and re-check to be certain that he kept us on the correct route. Many times the map did not match the ground in either direction or location; very probably this disagreement was due to the illusion caused by the deep snow, the darkness, and the nervous tension. All of the men were "on edge" expecting an attack at any moment from any direction. Actually no enemy was encountered during this movement, but I believe that the presence of a real enemy would have relieved a great deal of the nervous tension. As it was, the column proceeded slowly, nervously and anxiously through the long, dark night hoping that the next minute would bring daylight, and that, the objective.

By 0300, we had reached the bridge across the Rau de Suhel, about two miles west of Houffalize. Upon arrival, I was greatly relieved to find it still intact. During my preliminary map study some six hours earlier, I had made a mental note of how effective a block could be

created by destroying the bridge. However, the Germans had evidently missed an opportunity to delay our column because the bridge had not been destroyed.

But before I could fully appreciate our good fortune at this point, I found that across the stream there was indeed an obstacle--more effective than any man-made block. Immediately beyond the bridge the trail went up a steep slope, about forty degrees, which was now covered by a coat of ice. It was impossible for any wheeled vehicles to move up this hill under their own power. After several attempts to "rush" vehicles up the grade and concurrent efforts to hastily corduroy the roadway, it was decided that the tanks would have to be used as prime movers for the other vehicles. Consequently, all available grousers, a maximum of two per tank track, were distributed and the slow process of pulling vehicles up the one-hundred yard long hill began. While about one third of the personnel were thus employed, I directed that as many men as possible make maximum use of pioneer tools to chop ice from the road. Any other men not otherwise busy were to man the vehicular weapons to guard the column against surprise attack.

The move from the bridge to the top of the hill took two and a half hours. It was a continual battle against the ice, the night, and the increasing fatigue. Many men, especially those immobile in the vehicles, started falling asleep from sheer exhaustion. For this reason, it was imperative to detail an officer to continually "ride herd" on the column and to get it reorganized. As each individual vehicle reached the crest, it resumed its place in the column and awaited

those still to be forced up the slope.

By 0530, all vehicles except the assault gun ammunition trailers were up the hill, all the men had been awakened, and we were prepared to continue on our way. The remainder of the route was the usual snow-covered, indistinct trail but without any serious hindrances to our advance.

At 0630, the column emerged from the Bois du Couturie and made the descent into the Ourthe River valley. As we rounded an unfinished water mill at the foot of the hill, our goal came into view some six-hundred yards to the east. Perched on the ridge to our front stood Houffalize, a pre-war resort town, now the focal point of a determined Allied effort to crush the German offensive.

CONTACT

Up until the moment that the lead armored car fell into the tank trap, I had firmly believed that the task force could sneak into Houffalize undetected. But a few minutes after passing the water mill, the first armored car of Ellenson's platoon dropped through the light coat of snow into a hastily dug, but well concealed, trap in the middle of the road. We were within two hundred yards of our target--within sight of Houffalize, but blocked by one of our own vehicles.

Inasmuch as the assigned mission was to get to Houffalize and contact elements of the 2nd Armd Div to close the now-famous Ardennes "Bulge", we had to go ahead in spite of the armored car. To make a personal reconnaissance of the approaches to the town and to be able

to report that the task force had reached its destination, I took Lieutenant Ellenson and walked ahead two-hundred yards to the city limits sign. We walked around this sign a couple of times and congratulated each other upon the fact that we had finally reached Houffalize.

As we started back toward the column, Lieutenant Ellenson suddenly said to me, "Say, Major, there's someone up there on the hill to the left. It looks like an OP to me."

I could see where he was pointing and there did appear to be a man, or two men, in a foxhole. Lieutenant Ellenson shouted several times in an effort to attract the man's attention, but got no reply.

"Let's go up there," Ellenson said. "It's probably a 2nd Armored patrol."

Without thinking, I said "Okay", and we started up the hill. Ellenson hollered to his car commander, Sergeant Till, that we were going up the hill and would be right back.

We climbed up about fifty yards until we were within fifteen or twenty feet of the outpost. Our high hopes were dashed to the ground as the man in the foxhole stood up, trained a machine gun on us, and shouted something in German. Both of us stopped dead in our tracks and reflected for a fraction of a second as to what we should do. Ellenson's only weapon was his flashlight and mine was my pistol, snug in its holster. Before we could think very much, the German again said something that sounded much like "Hands up!"

Lieutenant Ellenson threw his flashlight down and put his hands up saying as he did so, "I guess we are caught, Major."

I hesitated for a second, just long enough to shout to Sergeant Till, "This is a German up here--fire at him."

Fortunately the alert Sergeant heard me. He fired the anti-aircraft machine gun in the direction of the German. This fire diverted his attention long enough for Ellenson to slide down the hill and for me to jump behind a nearby log. Why that German soldier did not fire at us, I shall never know. Instead, when fired on, he jumped out of his fox-hole and ran back into town. Ellenson and I hastily returned to the column.

The firing by Sergeant Till seemed to awaken what troops there were in Houffalize because immediately small arms, antitank, and mortar fire began to fall all around us. I directed that the armored car in the trap be abandoned temporarily and that all other vehicles seek protection behind the mill--the town dominated the field east of the mill which the column had started across.

The sudden outburst of activity made it quite evident that Houffalize was still occupied by the enemy. If I were to establish contact with 1st Army units, it would be necessary either to get into the town, to get patrols across the Ourthe River to the north, or to just sit tight until I saw friendly elements approaching from the north and northwest. I decided to do all three things in combination.

The plan at this time was to contain the German troops in the town by assault gun (75MM) fire from our present position; to dispatch Troop D dismounted to the high ground south of the town to report what enemy or friendly activity they observed; and to have the tank company push closer to our objective on either side of the river. The remaining unit, Ellenson's platoon, was to keep on the alert to detect the approach of any friendly patrols.

I reported by radio to squadron headquarters that patrols had reached the objective; that it was still occupied by German troops; and that as yet no contact had been established with the 2nd Armd Div. In return I received a message to the effect that CCA would continue its attack at about 0800, astride the Mabompre-Houffalize road, and therefore to be alert for the approach of these troops from the south, and that there was no additional information as to the location of First Army troops north of the river. I later learned that CCA and CCB of the 2nd Armd Div were disposed along the high ground some 1500 yards north of our position.¹

I would have known the exact location of 2nd Armd Div troops earlier if arrangements had been made at squadron or division headquarters to establish direct radio communications between the two divisions. As it was, the only contact was through Army channels. Quite possibly, "on-the-spot" contact between the two armies would have been established hours earlier had the two advancing divisions been in radio or telephone communication.

1. After Action Report, 67th Armd Regt, Jan 45; After Action Report, 66th Armd Regt, Jan 45.

At about 0800, Troop D reported its dismounted men in position (Sketch 3). From the high ground, this troop could observe activity in Houffalize and its environs. Thus they could report the movement of enemy reinforcements into the town or the approach of CCA from the southwest. In addition, these men were well situated to provide forward observation personnel for the control of the assault gun fire.

With reference to assault guns, I came to the conclusion that it would be possible to place only one platoon (two guns) in firing position in the vicinity of the mill. The most forward platoon, 1st Platoon Troop E, was moved into the open field just fifty yards east of the mill (Sketch 3.) True, this was a vulnerable point but it was the only suitable firing position in the immediate area; however, the enemy mortar and small arms fire from Houffalize was sporadic and inaccurate. I believed that the Germans were firing unobserved harassing fire and that their field of fire was limited. Once the assault gun platoon was in position, it opened fire on the town in an effort to neutralize enemy forward observers and antitank weapons. While these guns were firing, the troop commander, Captain Krivak, was making a reconnaissance for favorable positions for the other four guns. He recommended that these platoons fire by indirect fire methods from their positions in the column. This I approved. The method of indirect fire was made possible and effective by use of the Troop D forward observers located on the high ground overlooking Houffalize.

Now that I had a firm base of fire and a holding (or observing) force, I was especially desirous of getting a maneuvering force into use. I planned to use the light tanks for this purpose. With this in mind, the tank company commander, Captain Mullins, and his other officers and senior non-commissioned officers conducted a thorough reconnaissance for tankable routes. They were looking for a means of getting into Houffalize either by crossing the Ourthe or by swinging to the south and entering the town through Troop D's position--the frontal approach to the objective was under German observation and the armored car was still blocking the road. All reconnaissance to the river and along trails other than the main one proved futile. There were no vehicular bridges or fords across the river and all other trails were effectively blocked by felled trees interlaced across them. The only tank approach to Houffalize was the route we were on--across the field dominated by the town itself.

I directed that, under cover of assault-gun fire, a tank be sent forward to pull the armored car out of the trap. This was done, only to cause an appreciable increase in small arms fire which began to become increasingly effective. The tank threw a track as it was just starting to pull the armored car free. Consequently, another tank was dispatched to complete the job. After several unsuccessful attempts, the disabled vehicle was pulled clear. At this moment, heavy mortar fire began to fall on the exposed assault gun platoon. This fire had telling effect as it hit in the trees over the guns;

the tree bursts caused a shower of shell fragments on the open turret vehicles below. The platoon leader and several men were seriously wounded by these fragments; therefore, I ordered the guns to move back out of the position.

Simultaneously with the mortar attack, heavy artillery fire began to fall on the Troop D positions. From my position, I could observe this fire and believed it to be friendly artillery fire coming in from the northwest. This belief was confirmed in a few moments by the troop commander as he requested permission to abandon his position. I ordered Troop D to move out of the impact area but to remain in a position from which they could continue observing to the north, south, and east. This change was subsequently reported to squadron headquarters along with a request that steps be taken to lift the 1st Army artillery barrage.

A few minutes before 0900, Lieutenant Ellenson reported that his platoon could see troops moving across the high ground directly north on the opposite side of the river. As I turned my attention in that direction, I too could see dismounted men moving southeast across the high ground about 1500 yards away. Being quite certain that these men must be the 1st Army troops, I directed that a patrol be sent out to establish contact. The patrol was to proceed with due caution to avoid trouble, should the men we saw be in reality retreating Germans. There was also the probability that our own patrol might be mistaken for an enemy unit. However it was difficult to restrain the desire

of all the men to dash out and establish the initial contact themselves.

As the patrol was dispatched, I also directed the tank company to make a determined effort to get into Houffalize. This they were to do by moving due east along the now cleared trail, thence to the high ground south of the objective, and into the town from the south. The mission of the tank company was not to capture Houffalize single-handed, but rather to conduct a lightning harassing raid to determine in so far as possible the German strength in the town. Captain Mullins was told to move into the town, make a rapid tour of that portion south of the river, and then to withdraw to the high ground where Troop D was situated. From his position on the hill south of town, he then could assist Troop D in its overwatching mission and cut off any Germans being forced back by the CCA attack.

Company F had little difficulty getting across the open ground, receiving only small arms and mortar fire as it advanced. There was no opposition to its move to the high ground because troops in the town had no good fields of fire. The tanks then moved into the town firing 37MM and machine guns, setting fire to buildings, flushing several Germans from houses, and then withdrawing to their previously designated positions.

I was observing all of this action but at the same time anxiously awaiting word from the contact patrol. From our positions, we could see more and more troops trudging through the snow on the far side of the river. Certainly these must be the long awaited 1st Army elements.

Events moved rapidly thereafter. The patrol returned a few minutes before 1000 to report that it had contacted elements of the 41st Armored Infantry, 2nd Armored Division. The juncture between the 1st and 3rd Armies had been established, thereby eliminating the Ardennes salient that the Germans had created in the Allied lines a month before. The mission assigned the 41st Cav Rcn Sq had been accomplished.

I immediately reported this initial contact to squadron headquarters and requested further instructions. In reply, I was notified that the squadron commander was enroute to my position and that a platoon of Troop A had contacted patrols from the 334th Infantry Regiment and the 82nd Armored Reconnaissance Battalion (2nd Armd Div) farther west along the Ourthe at about the same time that we had contacted the 41st Armd. Inf. Seemingly, the two armies were now joining forces all along the river.

Upon arrival, Colonel Foy directed me to maintain my present position until CCA had reached Houffalize. He said that their attack was well underway and that I could expect them to reach the objective within two or three hours. The squadron commander then went with the contact patrol across the river to meet the 41st Armd Inf commander for a comparison of future plans.

Upon his return from the personal liaison mission, Colonel Foy gave me an account of his discussion with the 41st Armd Inf commander, reiterated his instructions as to my actions pending CCA's arrival, and then returned to the squadron command post, which was still in Bertogne.

For the remainder of the day, our mission was to keep Houffalize and its approaches under observation and to report the progress of CCA. The combat command was advancing steadily up the road from the southwest, being delayed by a scattered, retreating enemy using road blocks and mines to great effect. This CCA attack was coordinated with the advance of CCB and the 101st Abn Div from the south. Shortly after 1300, elements of the 42nd Tank Battalion, CCA, reached their objective, the high ground south of and overlooking Houffalize--the position occupied by the light tanks and Troop D. Through the remaining daylight hours, the balance of CCA closed on the objective; the position was organized for defense; and close contact between units was established all along the line. Control of the Houffalize sector passed to CCA at 1600.

At 1630, the 41st Cav Rcn Sq task force withdrew to the squadron CP at Bonnerue leaving an outpost on the trail west of Houffalize, and patrols along the south bank of the Ourthe River to maintain the contact with 1st Army units along the northern bank.

The impression made by this single operation on the officers and enlisted men involved was deep and effective. By forced application over a compact twenty-four hour period all personnel suddenly saw the need for and value of months of pre-combat training. Without Lieutenant Ellenson's keen ability to read a map under extreme pressure, the column certainly would have been led astray and might never have reached the objective. Throughout the action, teamwork between men

and units; between tanks and dismounted men; and between assault guns and well-located forward observers was acutely apparent to all concerned. Likewise, no one could help but notice the distinct reliance placed on radio communication to achieve maximum coordination with a minimum of effort. In addition, there were many instances demonstrating the soundness of scouting and patrolling techniques; need for detailed prior planning; effective small unit leadership; and a variety of other basic elements of reconnaissance unit and individual training.

The contact mission as assigned the CG 11th Armd Div was, I believe, an ideal reconnaissance squadron undertaking. The requirements for the success of this type of assignment are: a high degree of mobility; maximum surprise; varied, effective firepower; flexible communications; and well-organized dismounted men. All of these necessary factors were present within the 41st Cav Rcn Sq. The specific mission possibly could have been accomplished by either tank or armored infantry units of the division as effectively, but not without a diversion of effort or a sacrifice of strength in the main attack. Moreover, the reconnaissance squadron possessing the tools necessary to accomplish this mission was readily available to the division commander.

The successful accomplishment of this special mission is another example of the capability of a reconnaissance squadron to execute any mission which it may reasonably be assigned. Because of the flexibility and versatility of this type organization, it forms an integral part of the support echelon of the armored division.

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