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THE OPERATIONS OF "TASK FORCE L", 109TH INFANTRY  
(28TH INFANTRY DIVISION) NEAR GROSBOUS, LUXEMBOURG  
20 - 23 DECEMBER 1944

(ARDENNES-ALSACE CAMPAIGN)

(Personal Experience of a Task Force Commander)

Type of operation described:

REINFORCED RIFLE COMPANY AS SECURITY  
FOR THE EXPOSED FLANK OF A DEFENSIVE POSITION

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THE OPERATIONS OF "TASK FORCE L", 109TH INFANTRY  
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20 - 23 DECEMBER 1944

(ARDENNES-ALSACE CAMPAIGN)

(Personal Experience of a Task Force Commander)

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of "Task Force L", 109th Infantry, 28th Infantry Division, in the vicinity of Grosbous, Luxembourg, 20-23 December, 1944, fighting against the German Ardennes Offensive.

"Task Force L", in reality a heavily reinforced rifle company, consisted of the following:

Company L, 109th Infantry;

1 Heavy Machine Gun Platoon, Company M, 109th Infantry;

1 Section, 81mm Mortar Platoon, Company M, 109th Infantry;

1 Section, Anti-Tank Platoon, 3d Battalion Headquarters Company, 109th Infantry (2 57mm Anti-Tank Guns);

1 Platoon, Company C, 707th Medium Tank Battalion (2 M-4 "Sherman" Medium Tanks);

1 Platoon, Company A, 630th Tank Destroyer Battalion (2 76mm Towed Anti-Tank Guns);

1 Squad, Company A, 103d Engineer Combat Battalion;

1 Radio Team, Headquarters Company, 109th Infantry (1 SCR 284 mounted on  $\frac{1}{4}$ -ton vehicle);

1 Forward Observer Team, 108th Field Artillery Battalion (155 Howitzer).

All of these units were sadly depleted in strength, after having battled against overwhelming odds for four days and nights. As shown before, the tank platoon consisted of only two tanks, and the tank destroyer platoon had only two guns; Company L, the basic unit, consisted of approximately 100 men. (1)

In order to explain why this small "task force" was formed and how it was employed, it will be necessary to first describe the general situation along the Western European front and what had happened along that front, particularly in the 28th Infantry Division sector of the VIII Corps, First United States Army, during the preceding four days.

#### THE GENERAL SITUATION

After the victorious dash across France and Belgium during the late summer and early fall of 1944, the Allied Armies had pushed up generally against the West Wall defenses of the German border from The Netherlands to Switzerland. Fighting elements had pushed on to the limits of logistical support, and there was a pause along the entire Western front. (2) Early in December the Third United States Army was preparing for a thrust into the Saar basin. (3) Farther north, the First and Ninth United States Armies were massing for an attack which was planned to carry them across the Roer river, over the Cologne plain, and into the heart of the Nazi Reich. As part of this preparation, the Divis-

(1) Personal Knowledge; (2) A-1, pp. 56-60; (3) A-1, pp. 71, 72.

ions of the V Corps, First Army, were being torn to shreds as they battered their way yard by yard through the "green hell" of Hurtgen forest toward the Roer dams, the capture of which was necessary before the main attack could be launched. (4)

Between the Third Army and the positions selected for the northern attack lay the 80-mile quiet front of the VIII Corps, extending through the mountainous Ardennes region of Belgium and Luxembourg. In order to concentrate as large a force as possible for the big attack, the high command had decided to risk holding this line with an extremely thin force. (See Map A) (5)

For three months activity along this front had been negligible. Minor patrol activities were carried on by both sides, and there was a regular exchange of carefully rationed artillery fire. Training and rehabilitation were emphasized for the defending troops. (6)

On 16 December 1944, this long VIII Corps front was held, from north to south, by the 106th Infantry Division, the 28th Infantry Division, Combat Command A of the 9th Armored Division, and the 4th Infantry Division. Two of these units, the 106th Infantry Division and CCA, 9th Armored Division, were new to the combat zone and had been moved to this quiet sector for purposes of battle indoctrination. The other two, 28th Infantry Division and 4th Infantry Division, had been badly mauled in the bitter battle of Hurtgen forest, and had been sent there for rest and reorgani-

(4) A-1, pp. 69-71; (5) A-1, p. 78; A-2, pp. 142, 143;  
(6) A-1, pp. 77-82.

zation. (7) The 28th Division had lost 248 officers and 5,452 enlisted men as battle casualties during three weeks of this fierce fighting in November. (8) Men of the organization had jokingly changed their battle cry from "Roll On, 28th!" to "Roll Over, 28th, and Make Room for Replacements!" (9)

Then, before daylight on the morning of 16 December, the entire VIII Corps front erupted. (See Map A) The Nazi Wehrmacht had massed three Armies, consisting of twenty divisions with a heavy preponderance of armor, and slashed through the thin American line, heading for Brussels, the Meuse, Antwerp, and the North Sea. (10) The German Sixth Panzer Army shoved aside the 99th Infantry Division, southernmost unit of V Corps, and crashed through the defenses of the 106th Division. The Fifth Panzer Army smashed through the Southern regiment of the 106th Division and split the 28th Division, penetrating its sector in several places for a depth of several miles. And the Seventh German Army was hurled against the Southern regiment of the 28th Division, the 9th Armored Division's CCA, and the Northern portion of the 4th Infantry Division. (11)

The greatest counter-offensive drive ever thrown against American troops had been successfully launched by the Germans, and for three days fresh Nazi divisions were shoved into the breached line to exploit the initial success. (12)

(7) A-1, p. 77; A-2, p. 143; (8) A-4, ch. III (pages not numbered) (9) Personal Knowledge; (10) A-3, p. 195; (11) A-1, pp. 106-115; (12) A-1, pp. 136-149.

THE 28TH DIVISION SITUATION

(MAP B)

Almost from the time of the first blow struck by the Germans, the situation along the 28th Division's portion of the line was described by higher headquarters as "fluid". (13) All three regiments had been on the line, with the division covering a 27-mile front, and all three had been hit hard. (14)

The 112th Infantry, on the north, had been cut off from contact with the rest of the division by the drive of the 47th Panzer Corps, and on the second day of the battle, in the absence of orders from division headquarters, had been pulled north to St. Vith by Major General Troy H. Middleton, VIII Corps Commander. (15) This regiment fought the remainder of the Ardennes battle as an attachment, successively, of the 106th Infantry Division, 7th Armored Division, 75th Infantry Division and XVIII Airborne Corps. (16) When operational control of the 28th Division, along with VIII Corps, passed to Third Army on 201330 December, this regiment remained in First Army. (17)

The 110th Infantry, in the center of the division line, was hardest hit. The main effort of the 47th Panzer Corps literally smashed this thinly spread out regiment to bits. Companies, platoons, and squads were isolated and wiped out, captured, or pushed back. (18) The major portion of the 109th Field Artillery Battalion, in direct support of the 110th Infantry, finally on 19 December struggled into Bastogne, where it was attached to the 907th Glider Field Ar-

(13) A-1, p. 173; A-7, pp. 108, 111; (14) A-1, p. 175;  
(15) A-1, p. 114; (16) A-1, p. 154; A-4, ch. IV; (17) A-3, p. 173;  
A-7, p. 113; (18) A-1, p. 113; A-4, ch. IV.

tillery Battalion of the beleagured 101st Airborne Division. (19) Also at Bastogne was "Task Force Snafu", made up of miscellaneous personnel of the 28th Division and other organizations, under the command of Captain Charles Brown of the 110th Infantry. (20) Others fought along side of clerks, general service engineers, and the division band in an unsuccessful attempt to defend Wiltz, the town where the division headquarters was located. (21) Finally on 20 December the remnants of the regiment, consisting of 454 enlisted men and 42 officers, was collected under division control and formed a defense line south of Bastogne. (22)

*not shown*  
The 109th Infantry, on the south, stood up better under the initial assault. Company E was cut off at Longsdorf and minor penetrations were made in Company F and Company I sectors. The 60th Armored Infantry Battalion of CCA, 9th Armored Division, on the regiment's right, withdrew to Eppeldorf, about three miles from its original front. The 28th Division Commander ordered the 109th to roll back with the 9th Armored, so as not to expose its flank. With its own left flank hanging open and exposed by the penetrations in the 110th Infantry front, the 109th, on 18 December, began to pivot to the south, and on the 20th had formed a line, facing generally north, at right angles to its original position, on the high ground south of Ettlebruck. (23) This line was extended on the right by CCA of the 9th Armored Division, CCA of the 10th Armored Division, and elements of the 4th Infantry Division, forming the southern

(19) A-5, p. 73; (20) A-5, pp. 69, 70; (21) A-1, p. 176; A-2, p. 156; A-4, ch. IV; (22) A-1, p. 185; A-4, ch. IV; (23) A-4, ch. IV; A-6.

"hinge" of the American line against the penetration. (24)

The 107th Field Artillery Battalion (105-Howitzer); the 108th Field Artillery Battalion (155-Howitzer); Company A, 103d Engineer Combat Battalion; Company A, 630th Tank Destroyer Battalion (Towed); and Company C, 707th Medium Tank Battalion all swung to the south with the 109th Infantry, forming RCT 109. On 20 December contact with division headquarters had been lost and RCT 109 was attached to CCA, 9th Armored Division, which in turn was attached to 10th Armored Division. (25)

Thus, by 20 December, contact between units of the 28th Division had become severed and it could not be employed as a unit. (See Map B) RCT 112 was fighting on the north flank of the "bulge" as part of the First Army. A portion of the 109th Field Artillery and individuals from other division units were at Bastogne but out of direct contact with division headquarters. The remnants of the 110th Infantry, divisional special troops, and division headquarters were at Sibret, Belgium, forming part of the VIII Corps line (now part of Third Army) at the western limits of the penetration. And RCT 109 was on the south flank with XII Corps, Third Army. (26)

The following statement of Lieutenant Colonel George Dyer, Special Assistant to the Chief of Staff, XII Corps, is indicative of the confusion which prevailed all around the perimeter of the "bulge" which had been driven into the American lines: "So confused was the situation, and so rapidly did units move in and out that some were never

(24) A-1, pp. 184; 185; A-3, p. 173; (25) A-1, p. 104; A-4, ch. IV; A-6; A-7, p. 114; (26) A-4, ch. IV.

pinned down long enough to be reflected on XII Corps paper; a good example of this is the 109th regiment of the 28th Infantry Division, the rest of which had been scattered off to the North and West, which appears on no XII Corps station list, though it was briefly part of the Corps." (27)

THE SITUATION OF COMPANY L, 109TH INFANTRY

(map 35)

For a clear picture of the condition and effectiveness of "Task Force L", it is necessary to explain in more detail the operations of Company L, the basic unit of the "task force", during this four-day period of fighting and confusion, 16-19 December 1944. (See Map BB)

Company L, 109th Infantry, was the southernmost unit of the 28th Division when the German attack hit. Although the company's front was far too wide to be adequately defended -- approximately two miles -- the ground it occupied was admirably adaptable for a defensive situation. Located at a major river junction, the company straddled the Sure river at Reisdorf and faced the Germans across the Our river. On the north, L Company was tied in with I Company and on the south with the 60th Armored Infantry Battalion, 9th Armored Division. The positions of the riflemen were on high ground, which on a large portion of the long company front dropped almost precipitously down to the west bank of the Our. (28)

During the Nazi's initial artillery preparation, which aroused the company at 0600 on the 16th, the house where L Company's Command Post was located received direct hits from

(27) A-8, p. 288; (28) Personal Knowledge.

both conventional artillery and Nebelwerfer rockets, which set it afire. And starting with dawn, and continuing for two days at intervals of from four to six hours, L Company's foxholes were charged by waves of drunken or "hopped up" German "Supermen", wildly firing Schmeiser machine pistols and shouting unintelligible battle cries containing references to "Twenty-eighth" and "Cognac". (29)

Armor could not operate on this particular portion of the front because of the two rivers and the rugged terrain. And with an abundance of artillery support, L Company managed to beat back every attack. Company requests for fire were delivered by M Company's 81-mm mortars, regimental Cannon Company, two battalions of 28th Division Artillery, and a battalion of field artillery from the Ninth Armored Division. (30)

All of this was not done without considerable loss, both killed and wounded. And on the 17th all available manpower, including the company's kitchen personnel, was brought up and put in the line. (31)

Shortly after noon on the third day, 18 December, the company was ordered, via SCR 300, to fall back to Bettendorf, the location of 3d Battalion headquarters. This was accomplished with considerable difficulty and some casualties, as a limited penetration in I Company's sector to the north enabled the enemy to cover the road back with automatic weapons fire. (See Map BB) After engaging in a limited fire fight, the company managed to reach the Bettendorf position about the time darkness fell, but to do so it had been nec-

(29) Personal Knowledge; (30) The writer cannot identify this Armored F.A. Bn; however, "Cobblestone" was its telephone code name; (31) A-6; Personal Knowledge.

essary to abandon a quantity of ammunition, emergency rations, and the personal effects of practically all members of the company. One 60-mm mortar was also lost. It was reported by one member of the mortar crew that he had abandoned the weapon after it had been hit by small arms fire, ruining the elevating mechanism, but the company commander was never assured whether this actually happened or whether the mortar was abandoned in the near panic which accompanied the daylight withdrawal. (32)

At Bettendorf a defensive position was taken by Company L while the remainder of the battalion slipped to the rear under cover of darkness to join the rest of the regiment in a newly selected defensive position on the high ground north and east of Diekirch. (See Map BB) (33) This was an extremely difficult move, since enemy tanks had come down from the north and cut the main road from Bettendorf to Diekirch, which paralleled the Sure river on the north. (34) With considerable trepidation and no prior reconnaissance, the battalion succeeded in crossing the river at Bettendorf<sup>How?</sup> and moved down an unimproved road south of the river to another bridge at Gilsdorf, west of the German road block. There it recrossed to join the remainder of the regiment. After the rest of the battalion had started back, L Company moved back, one platoon at a time, over the same route, but not until after about ten casualties had been sustained from intense artillery, rocket, and mortar fire. The last group from the company to leave Bettendorf assisted members of

(32) Personal Knowledge; (33) (34) A-6; Personal Knowledge.

Company A, 103d Engineer Combat Battalion, to blow both bridges after crossing. (35)

The new position near Diekirch was held through the next day, 19 December, but was subjected to repeated attacks of both infantry and tanks. In a limited counter attack, directed toward the German road block which had cut the main route back, L Company's first platoon captured 81 prisoners. In spite of these successes, by nightfall it was apparent that the regiment's new mission of covering the flank of CCA, 9th Armored Division, could not be accomplished from this position, and another withdrawal to the south bank of the river at Ettlebruck was ordered. (See Map BB) (36)

Again Company L was given the task of covering the movement, which began immediately after dark. (37) The route of withdrawal was covered by enemy artillery fire, and more than 30 casualties were suffered as the regiment pulled south. (38) When L Company had crossed the river, the bridge at Ettlebruck was blown, and the remainder of the night was spent by the company digging in along the river bank through the town. (39)

#### "TASK FORCE L" IS FORMED

However, by daylight plans had been changed, "Task Force L" had been formed, and a new move was in progress.

A new solid line was being formed on the south flank of the German area of penetration by XII Corps. This new

(35) Personal Knowledge; (36) A-4, ch. IV; A-6; (37) Personal Knowledge; (38) A-6; (39) Personal Knowledge.

line extended east and west from the vicinity of Echter-  
nach to the high ground about two miles south of Ettlebruck. *map C*

(40) RCF 109 was to form the western portion of the line. Its 2d Battalion, which had suffered greatest in the previous four days fighting, was tied in with 9th Armored units left of Ermsdorf. The 1st Battalion dug in on the high ground just south of Ettlebruck. 3d Battalion was to cover the left flank of this line, and in order to accomplish this was broken down into three units which were to be posted at major road junctions to the west of the main line. (See Map C) (41)

I Company, reinforced, moved into Feulen. K Company, reinforced, moved into Merzig. 3d Battalion headquarters was set up at Michelbuch. And "Task Force L" was to move seven miles southwest and occupy the town of Grosbous. (42)

Orders given the little "task force" were in substance as follows: Move out at 0500 (about an hour and a half before daylight) and go to Grosbous. If the enemy is in the town, drive him out and occupy it. If the enemy is not there, set up a perimeter defense and hold at all costs. The German 5th Parachute Division and 352 Volksgrenadier Division are known to be operating to our immediate north and west and may move against the town from any direction. Communicate directly with regiment, by-passing battalion channels. Good-bye and good luck. (43)

The men and officers of this little group, after four days and nights of constant contact with the enemy, were so

(40) A-1, p. 184; (41) (42) A-4, ch. IV; A-6; (43) Personal Knowledge.

worn with loss of sleep and fatigue that the ominous sound of the orders did not arouse undue concern or interest. They were almost too tired, cold and hungry to care.

Incessant attack by the enemy and the digging of three successive positions during the withdrawal had fatigued them almost beyond endurance. (44)

Blankets, rolls, and overcoats had, for the most part, been lost or abandoned, and the December weather seemed to grow more bitterly cold each hour. (45)

There had hardly been time to eat, even if food had been available. When they had left their original position at Reisdorf shortly after noon on the 18th, each man had carried one-third of a K-ration with him in his pocket. Another one-third of a K-ration had been issued as they left Diekirch on the night of the 19th. And while in Ettlebruck, during the early morning hours of 20 December, many members of the company had shared in a quantity of canned poultry and fruit juices left there by the 102d Evacuation hospital, which had made an extremely hurried evacuation. (46)

The men of the attached units had suffered about the same experiences. For instance, Lieutenant Quarry, who commanded the tank platoon from Company C, 707th Tank Battalion, had two tanks hit and burned while he was riding in them during the previous four days. The second time, after escaping from the burning vehicle, he had been forced to swim the Sure river under a hail of enemy small-arms fire. (47)

So it was a pretty badly beaten unit that headed for Grosbous. Morale was certainly at a low ebb.

(44) (45) (46) (47) Personal Knowledge.

As the column moved out of Ettlebruck, some enemy had apparently succeeded in crossing the river, and a few shots were exchanged with one German in the churchyard in the center of town. (48)

I Company and K Company had already taken up their positions in Feulen and Merzig, respectively, when "Task Force I" moved through, but except for the one lone German at the Ettlebruck church, no enemy had been contacted by any elements of the battalion. When daylight came, however, one unforeseen difficulty was encountered. The road became jammed with refugees, on foot, in trucks, on bicycles, pushing carts, and leading ox-carts, seriously impeding the progress of the vehicular elements of the column, which were following by bounds behind the dismounted rifle elements. (49)

#### ORGANIZATION OF A PERIMETER DEFENSE AT GROSBOWS

Except for the difficulty of pushing through the swarm of Luxembourg farmers, fleeing with all their livestock and possessions, Grosbous was entered and occupied without incident. But immediately upon arrival in the town, the "task force" was confronted with four obvious problems, which the commander felt should be dealt with according to the following priority: first, organization of the defensive position; second, providing some rest for the men, now near the point of exhaustion; third, providing some adequate feeding plan; and fourth, exercising some manner of control over the civilians.

(48) (49) Personal Knowledge.

To cope with problem number one, the task force commander and the platoon leaders immediately made a reconnaissance to determine how the perimeter defense was to be set up. (See Map D)

They found that Grosbous was a typical European village, with buildings of solid masonry construction extending for about 1000 yards along the highway and along side-streets for 200 to 300 yards on either side. The main highway, over which the "task force" had entered the town, was a hard-surfaced road coming in from the east and curving through the town, going out in a southwesterly direction. From the cobblestone square in front of the village church, another hard-surfaced road led out of the town, almost due south. To the north and northwest, six unimproved roads and wagon trails led up into the wooded hills.

The village lay on the north side and near the end of a valley, about 1500 yards in width, which extended generally from west to east. To the north of the town high hills rose rather abruptly. These were heavily wooded on the crest, but the lower portions were cleared pasture lands and terraced cultivated fields. On the south side of the valley a low ridge, wooded along the crest, generally paralleled the main highway leading through the town. A small creek flowed easterly along the floor of the valley, and three others, one running through the town, emptied into this, flowing down from the hills in a southwesterly direction. However, all were small and were little or no obstacle to either foot troops or tracked vehicles. South of the town,

near the village cemetery, was a large orchard. Except for this, the floor of the valley consisted of cleared fields. All surfaced roads were lined on either side by rows of regularly spaced tall trees.

Although as stated in the orders to the "task force", large bodies of enemy were known to be operating to the north and west and could approach the town unimpeded from almost any direction, it appeared that the most likely approach was from the east, along the route over which the "task force" had just come. And this route was blocked at Feulen by Company I and at Merzig by Company K.

Time would not permit an extensive reconnaissance of the six unimproved roads leading over the high hills to the north and northwest, and although they obviously led to German-held territory, it did not appear likely that any large enemy force would attempt to use these poor and difficult routes when better ones were easily accessible. The paved roads to the south and southwest led in the direction of American-held areas but were undefended near Grosbous and were open to any enemy making a flanking movement from the west. But last contact with the enemy had been at Ettlebruck, so the road to that place was considered to be the most likely approach and it was decided that this route would be most heavily defended. (See Map D) (50)

A perimeter defensive position was laid out around the town, extending about 1200 yards in a north-south direction and about 750 yards from east to west. This extended, roughly, around the outermost buildings of the town

(50) Personal Knowledge.

and could not be contracted without greatly reducing visibility and fields of fire. Obviously, it could not be tightly defended by a half-strength rifle company. So it was organized into squad positions -- for squads consisting of five or six men -- as close-in support of the automatic weapons and anti-tank guns. For the most part it was possible to cover the wide gaps between squads and platoons with small-arms fire. But even spaced as thin as they were, no riflemen were left for an inner perimeter or reserve. (51)

The first platoon was deployed for about 750 yards around the eastern and northeastern portions of the town, covering the main road toward Merzig, Feulen, and Ettlebruck and one unimproved road to the north. L Company's .50 caliber machine gun was dug in with the center squad, firing directly up the main road. A section of heavy .30 caliber machine guns was placed with a rifle squad north of this main road, and the other section of heavy machine guns and a rifle squad were dug in south of the main road. The two 76-mm tank destroyer guns were placed on high ground, north of the town, protected by the northernmost squad and also covering the main avenue of approach. (52)

The third platoon was stretched for about 600 yards around the south and southwest portions of the perimeter. Each squad of this platoon was reinforced with a light .30 caliber machine gun. (53) The two surfaced roads, leading south and southwest out of the town, were each covered by one of these squads. The third squad was dug in between these roads in the large orchard. One of the 57-mm anti-tank

(51) (52) Personal Knowledge; (53) One extra light machine gun had been picked up from a knocked-out American tank several days earlier.

guns was emplaced to cover the road leading to the southwest. (54)

The second platoon, with no automatic weapons except Browning automatic rifles, was placed to the west and north of the town, covering about 500 yards across five of the unimproved roads which led up to the wooded hills. The remaining 57-mm anti-tank gun was placed on the left flank of this position, where it could fire up one of the unimproved roads and across three others. (55)

The two 81-mm mortars and the company's remaining two 60-mm mortars were set up near the cemetery in the southern part of the village, emplaced to cover the eastern and northeastern approaches. (56)

The two medium tanks were left in the center of the town to be utilized as a mobile reserve against attack from any direction. These, along with L Company's first sergeant, the regimental radio team, and the engineer squad, constituted the entire reserve of the "task force". (57)

Men were just not available to set up an adequate outpost system, and listening posts were held down to a bare minimum. Three two-man outposts were set up. One was near a large farm house about 500 yards down the main road in front of the third platoon, near a bridge where the road crossed a creek. And the third was put in at the edge of the woods about 400 yards forward of the second platoon's middle squad. (58)

As soon as the necessary foxholes and emplacements for the crew-served weapons could be dug, problem number two was

(54) (55) (56) (57) (58) Personal Knowledge.

tackled and measures were taken to obtain some sleep and rest for the men. A system was set up whereby half of the men could occupy houses immediately adjacent to their assigned positions. This reduced the number actually in their holes to barely enough to man the crew-served weapons with an additional two, three, or four riflemen to each squad position. But unless some rest could be obtained it seemed obvious that they would be in no physical condition to put up any resistance. (59)

The third problem -- that of feeding -- virtually solved itself. In Ettlebruck the battalion S-4 had managed to obtain about 100 blankets for L Company, and these, along with a quantity of K-rations, were brought to Grosbous in company transportation with the "task force" and issued there. That relieved the immediate hunger problem, and very soon these rations were supplemented, to a large extent, by smoked hams and sausages which the men soon ferreted out of the chimney smoke closets of many of the abandoned Luxembourg homes. (60)

These rations and the much-needed rest which the men managed to obtain undisturbed by the enemy during the remainder of 20 December served to buoy the spirits of the "task force" considerably, and morale reached the highest peak in several days.

#### THE CIVILIAN PROBLEM

The final problem, that dealing with the civilians, was approached next. Some American Army service unit had been

(59) (60) Personal Knowledge.

billeted in the village previously, and had been withdrawn to the rear as soon as the extent of the German break-through became known. When these troops had left, many of the Luxembourg residents began to doubt the wisdom and safety of remaining friendly to Allied personnel, and doubtless there were some who had real sympathy for the Nazi cause. In any case, many of these civilians, either hostile or with wavering loyalty toward Americans, had prepared a welcome for the onrushing Germans. When "Task Force L" arrived in the town it was confronted with many Swastika flags and Nazi banners displayed in front of homes and places of business, and it seemed likely that the position was infested with unfriendly persons and potential spies, indistinguishable from those who were friendly and deserving of treatment as Allies. (61)

As the perimeter defense was being prepared around the town, many of the residents, with their livestock and other portable possessions, started to leave. The problem was to prevent spies and informers from going to the German forces with information concerning the strength, armament, and position of the "task force", and at the same time to enable the loyal Luxembourgers to escape from falling into the hands of the Germans again. Many would undoubtedly have, in such a case, suffered severe retaliation for having been friendly and cooperative with American forces since their liberation the previous September.

The "task force" commander, with an interpreter, went to the mayor and village priest and laid down this rule: those

(61) Personal Knowledge.

who wished to leave could do so, using only those routes to the southwest and south away from known German-held territory, and they were given a three-hour deadline to clear the town. No one would be permitted to pass outside of the perimeter after the deadline hour, and those who remained would have to take the risk of remaining in their homes and cellars if a battle developed. This word was quickly spread, and a large majority of the residents made a hurried exit. (62)

There was another more favorable aspect to the civilian situation. As L Company was leaving Diekirch on the night of the 19th the "task force" commander had witnessed the execution of several persons -- described as Nazi collaborators -- by members of the Luxembourg "police", who were former members of the underground and were now identified by an arm-band and armed with captured German weapons. Now Diekirch was in the hands of the Wehrmacht, and a group of 15 of these "police", several of whom were recognized as those who had shot the collaborators, arrived at Grosbous and offered their services. Their offer was accepted, and they were utilized as welcome replacements in the depleted rifle platoons of L Company. Throughout the remainder of this operation they stayed and fought as members of the "task force". (63)

#### CHANGES ON THE REGIMENTAL FRONT

Another serious problem soon arose. The SCR 284 proved incapable of maintaining continuous or adequate communication

(62) (63) Personal Knowledge.

with regimental headquarters, and shortly after dark a liaison officer from regiment arrived in a  $\frac{1}{2}$ -ton vehicle over the road which led from the south. He informed the "task force" commander that after a more careful study of the situation, the regimental commander, Colonel James E. Rudder, felt that the flank security mission could best be accomplished from a defensive position on the low, wooded ridge to the southwest, paralleling the main road at a distance of from 1000 to 1300 yards. He also stated that a telephone line was then in the process of being strung from regimental headquarters to the company and should be in within a couple of hours. (64)

He said that the 1st Battalion had observed large numbers of enemy in Ettlebruck and had been directing a considerable volume of artillery fire on them. I Company, at Feulen, had been attacked by a strong combat patrol and had repulsed it. (See Map C) (65)

With this information, the "task force" moved across the valley and began to dig in along the edge of the woods near the crest of the ridge, stretched out on a front of about 1300 yards. (66)

After about three hours had been used in digging in these new positions, the regimental wire team arrived, and the "task force" leader immediately called his regimental commander and informed him of the situation. As a result of this conversation, it was decided that the original perimeter defense around the town should be reoccupied and

(64) Personal Knowledge; (65) A-6; (66) Personal Knowledge.

that the new position on the crest of the ridge should serve as an alternate position. As soon as the foxholes and gun emplacements were completed, the entire "task force" moved back into the perimeter positions around Grosbous, and the telephone line was extended to the command post which had been established there. (67)

21 December was a quiet day at Grosbous, but information of increased enemy activity in other portions of the regimental sector was received with regularity over the wire from the regimental command post. Once during the day, a regimental liaison officer again arrived at the "task force" position to get first-hand information of the situation there and to <sup>advise</sup> (apprize) the "task force" commander of what was happening elsewhere. (See Map E) (68)

At 0520 that morning, Company I had repulsed an attack made by a company of enemy infantry at Feulen. CCA, 9th Armored Division, reported increased pressure near Ermsdorf and the G-2 of that organization warned of a probable Nazi drive from the northwest. (69)

1st Battalion had fought off combat patrols and had captured a German officer who carried an operation map which showed that the 352 Volksgrenadier Division was to attack through Ettlebruck and then turn south to Arlon and Luxembourg City, utilizing the Feulen-Merzig-Grosbous road. <sup>MAP A</sup> <sup>MAP E</sup> (70)

By noon the pressure on I Company had increased to such a degree that Feulen could not be held by this small force, and it was pulled south and east to the high ground over-

(67) (68) Personal Knowledge; (69) A-6; (70) A-6; Personal Knowledge.

looking Merzig. (See Map E) (71)

The position of Company C, on the left flank of the 1st Battalion, was adjusted to tie in with I Company. Constant enemy activity, including motor movement, was reported from then on in front of these two companies. Enemy infantry, supported by tanks, pressed against K Company at Merzig, and shortly after dark that unit was pulled back astride the road to Michelbuch, extending the regimental line to the south. The road to Grosbous was now cleared for the enemy. (72)

#### DEFENSE OF THE VILLAGE

At about 2100 "Task Force L's" listening post on the road from Merzig reported enemy troops approaching. It was an extremely dark night and the number could not be estimated with any accuracy -- on the spot estimates ranging from 50 to 200. They were moving incautiously, massed on the road, and making considerable noise. The "task force" was immediately alerted and all men swiftly went to their assigned foxholes. (See Map D) (73)

Although it was too dark to see anything, soon movement could be readily heard 300 to 400 yards in front of the main line. The .50 caliber machine gun opened up first, spraying the road directly to its front. After the initial burst it was joined by fire from the two sections of heavy .30 caliber machine guns and all of the rifles and automatic rifles of the first platoon. (74)

(71) A-4, ch. IV; A-6; (72) (73) A-6; (74) Personal Knowledge.

Cries of pain and surprise proved that the fire was effective, and the enemy who were not hit immediately took to their heels. The men of the "task force" sat tight in their holes, no pursuit being attempted in the inky darkness. (75)

A report of the incident was immediately telephoned to regiment, and after about an hour with no further enemy activity, the "task force" was ordered to move up on the ridge to its alternate position. (76) It is to be remembered at this time that the mission of RCF 109 was not to guard the Feulen-Merzig-Grosbous road, but was to protect the exposed flank of the XII Corps line from envelopment from the west and northwest.

This shift of positions, though unimpeded by the enemy, was not without incident. In attempting to tow one of the 76-mm tank destroyer guns from its position above the town, the half-tracked prime mover slid on the steep, muddy ground, and the gun was wedged between two trees. It could not be extricated in the dark, so part of the breech mechanism was removed to prevent its being used by the Germans, and it was temporarily abandoned. (77)

#### ORGANIZATION OF DEFENSE LINE ON THE RIDGE

On the ridge, the "task force" occupied the previously prepared positions, spread across a front of about 1300 yards and generally paralleling the main road through Grosbous at a range of from 1000 to 1500 yards. (See Map F)

The ground on the ridge was extremely muddy and slippery,  
(75) (76) (77) Personal Knowledge.

and the tracked vehicles had considerable difficulty in moving to good firing positions. However, through the skillful efforts of the half-track driver, the remaining 76-mm tank destroyer gun was placed in a good position about 150 yards to the right (east) of the road. The two tanks remained on the hard-surfaced road in positions where they had exceptionally good fields of fire but were completely exposed. The two 57-mm anti-tank guns were placed to cover two unimproved roads, running along the top of the ridge, one to the east and one to the west. The attached squad of engineers served as close-in rifle support for these weapons. (78)

The rifle platoons were assigned sectors of about 300 yards each. The second platoon was placed on the left of the road, reinforced by the three light machine guns and the .50 caliber machine gun. The first platoon was on the immediate right of the road, providing close-in support for the tank destroyer gun and reinforced with a section of .30 caliber machine guns. The third platoon was on the right of the first, also reinforced with one section of heavy .30 caliber machine guns. (79)

The 81-mm mortars and the 60-mm mortars were in defiladed positions about 1800 yards range to the center of the town and less to most observed portions of the main highway. (80)

To give the "task force" some protection on its right flank, the commanding officer of RCT 109 had ordered Company A, 103d Engineer Combat Battalion (minus the squad with the "task force") to dig in a position in the draw between "Task Force L" and the main regimental line. (See Map E) This

(78) (79) (80) Personal Knowledge.

gap, however, was about one mile in width and could not possibly be covered by this small unit. And the position selected by these engineers to defend was so deep in the heavily wooded draw that the "task force" could not tie in with them. To do so would have meant the sacrifice of all good fields of fire and visibility by pulling the defense force back to a reverse slope position on the heavily wooded ridge. But the engineers remained there and did not take any part in the subsequent action. (81)

Continued activity was reported from other sections of the regimental front. That portion of the road from Merzig to Feulen, now in German hands, was interdicted by our artillery throughout the night. At 0300, 22 December, the enemy penetrated our lines between C Company and B Company, but *cos not shown* A Company -- the regimental reserve -- was committed and the line was restored. By daylight the enemy had pushed down the road from Merzig toward Michelbuch, and all available men at 3d Battalion command post were thrown into the fight at that point. (See Map E) (82)

During the night, liaison officers from the 318th and 319th Infantry Regiments, 80th Infantry Division, had contacted regiment and stated that their units, a part of III Corps, Third Army, were moving north and would attack through our lines sometime in the morning. Grosbous, however, lay just east of their division boundary, and "Task Force I" would probably be relieved, they said, by elements of the 26th Infantry Division which was moving up on the left of the 80th. (83)

(81) A-6; Personal Knowledge; (82) A-6; (83) A-4, ch. IV; A-6.

Meanwhile, "Task Force L" spent the remainder of the night improving its position and patrolling to determine the enemy's movements. Shortly after daylight a light tank was observed about 1800 yards to the northeast, moving down the road toward Grosbous. Closer observation, through field glasses, revealed that two men in O.D. uniforms were pedaling furiously down the road on bicycles, about 200 or 300 yards in front of the tank. These men were soon identified as a patrol which had been sent out from the 1st platoon during the night. The forward observer from the 108th Field Artillery Battalion (155-Howitzer), immediately called for a fire mission, and several rounds were fired at the tank. Although no direct hits were made, some near misses caused the tank to head back. It turned off on an unimproved road leading into the wooded hills on the north and was soon out of sight. The artillery firing served a very useful purpose, however, furnishing registration data for the fire direction center. (84)

The two members of the patrol, when they finally arrived at the "task force" position, reported that they had stopped at a farmhouse when they heard the tank approaching. They immediately seized the two bicycles, which were at the house and appeared to be the fastest available means of transportation, and headed back for the company.

They further reported that 31 dead German infantrymen were scattered over the road in front of the Grosbous position, where the fight in the dark had taken place the night before. Most of them, they said, appeared to have been stopped

(84) Personal Knowledge.

by the .50 caliber gun. (85)

By the time they had arrived, snow had begun to fall, and it was soon coming down so heavily that visibility was limited to a few yards. This continued with undiminished intensity for about two hours.

In the meantime, the "task force" commander was informed that the attack near 3d Battalion headquarters had been beaten off, and that the 318th and 319th Infantry Regiments had passed through all other elements of the regiment and were now attacking in an attempt to recapture Merzig and Feulen and Ettlebruck. (86) Although no contact had been made with anyone from the 26th Infantry Division, that organization was known to be moving forward somewhere nearby. It was not known, however, from which direction it would be coming. Orders to "Task Force L" were to watch for the 26th Division and to inform regiment when it was contacted. (87)

#### AMBUSH OF THE GERMAN COLUMN

About 1000 hours the snow began to lessen and a solid column of troops and vehicles could be seen on the road to Grosbous, extending through the town and off to the southwest for several hundred yards, strung out laterally across the front of the "task force" at about 1300 yards range. Visibility was not good enough to determine whether it was a friendly or enemy force. (See Map F) (88)

Patrols were immediately sent down toward the road to

(85) Personal Knowledge; (86) A-9; (87) (88) Personal Knowledge.

determine whether it was a friendly or enemy force. Regiment was called in an effort to learn the identity of this column. The regimental command was not at the command post, and the regimental executive officer ordered the "task force" commander not to fire on the column, for fear that it might be the 26th Division units which were past due in that area or one of the 80th Division units which had just arrived. Although it was pointed out that it was extremely unlikely that any friendly troops would be coming from that direction, it was also unlikely that an attacking enemy would be in closed column on the road with no apparent flank security, and the order held that no fire was to be delivered unless positive identification could be made. (89)

By this time the snow had almost completely stopped, and the patrols were back with positive news that the column was German. The regimental commander, who had just arrived back at his C.P. called then to say that no American units could be on that road and to fire away. (90)

All this time the enemy column continued to move slowly down the road, and the task force, perched on the ridge along their south flank, was undetected. (91)

The German column, which was stretched along the road for about a mile and a half, consisted mostly of foot troops. Near the tail of the column there were some vehicles, three or four light artillery pieces -- probably 75-mm howitzers --, and two light tanks. The infantry troops were closed up tight, with one column on each side of the road. The vehicles were in closed column. (92)

(89) (90) (91) (92) Personal Knowledge.

It was quickly decided that it would be most effective to bring the heaviest possible volume of fire down on the unsuspecting enemy at one time, and word was sent up and down the line for no one to fire a single round until the artillery opened up. Then they were told to pour it on. (93)

The 108th Field Artillery Battalion (155-Howitzer) was called to fire on that portion of the column east of Grosbous, and the 107th Field Artillery Battalion (105-Howitzer) was asked for a fire mission on the leading portions of the column, southwest of the town. The two tanks and the one 76-mm tank destroyer gun, all located near the center of the position, would fire at the best targets they could pick up along the entire line, concentrating on the vehicles. The mortars, both 81-mm and 60-mm, were to fire into the town to dislodge troops that were obscured from sight by the buildings. Although the range was too great for effective rifle fire, all machine guns, rifles, and automatic rifles were to be fired into that portion of the column nearest their front. (94)

The forward observer from the 108th Field Artillery contacted his unit by radio and was told that the entire battalion would fire the mission and keep it up as long as profitable targets were available. There was no observer team from the 107th Field Artillery Battalion present, but an L Company platoon leader was designated to fill this berth and arrangements were made to relay the fire mission and adjustment calls through regiment to this unit. This whole battalion would also fire the mission. (95)

(93) (94) (95) Personal Knowledge.

As soon as the first call of "on the way" was received from the artillery, a hand signal was given by the "task force" commander and everything opened up.

The German column almost seemed to disintegrate under the initial blast of fire. Some of the vehicles managed to turn around and head back, out of sight. Others were knocked out by the tanks and tank-destroyer fire. Still others were abandoned. Individuals and small groups of infantry were seen scurrying for cover toward buildings and up the steep slopes on the other side of town. Not one round of any kind was fired in return by the bewildered enemy. (96)

Particularly effective "pursuit by fire" was delivered against the small groups above the village by the 76-mm tank destroyer gun. Firing high explosive ammunition at a range of about 2000 yards, this weapon scored several direct hits on small knots of men, sharply silhouetted against the background of snow-covered fields between the town and woods. (97)

Every weapon in the task force was utilized except the two 57-mm anti-tank guns and the rifles of the engineer squad, covering the flanks and rear of the defensive position. (98)

For almost 20 minutes this devastating fire was continued, until no more targets were visible. Then the 1st platoon was pulled out of its position in the center of the line and was sent hurrying toward the town to drive out any Germans who had taken refuge there. Little resistance was met. Five enemy were killed by rifle and carbine fire just as the leading men of the platoon reached the first buildings of the town. Others were encountered near the church, in the center of the

(96) (97) (98) Personal Knowledge.

town, but they were fleeing as rapidly as possible and offered practically no opposition. One L Company man was wounded when a rifle grenade fired by a retreating German exploded against the stone wall of a building near him. That was the only casualty suffered by "Task Force L" during its entire period of operations, 20-23 December. (99)

Just as the first platoon was entering the village, the 3d Battalion commander arrived on the scene. After the town had been cleared, he ordered the first platoon moved back to its position on the ridge in preparation for and expected counter attack. The tank destroyer gun, abandoned the night before, was now dislodged and also brought up to the ridge. (100)

Flushed with their success, the men of the "task force" waited confidently in their foxholes, but no counter attack developed. Many of the German infantrymen had reached the cover of the woods north of the town, and some near the head and tail of the column had managed to get out of sight of the "task force". But those who survived the ambush did not re-organize and attack the position, although they undoubtedly greatly outnumbered the defenders. (101)

Although it was not known at this time, the explanation for this probably lies in the fact that the 80th Division was just launching its attack toward Merzig and Feulen, and the main body of Germans had its hands full. While "Task Force L" was enjoying its successful ambush of the column, elements of the 319th Infantry caught a similar group on the road between Merzig and Feulen -- probably another serial of the

(99) (100) (101) Personal Knowledge.

same formation -- and completely disorganized it with artillery and direct fire. (102)

No accurate estimate of the German casualties can be made. The mopping-up operation in the town was hastily executed, and the pursuit was not carried along the road to either the east or southwest. However, the enemy unit involved was identified as the 915th Regiment, 352 Volksgrenadier Division. G-2, Third Army, estimated that this division had an effective combat strength of 7000 on 21 December (103), and this estimate had dropped to 5000 by 24 December. (104) A portion of this considerable loss was undoubtedly sustained in this action. From the position on the ridge, numerous enemy dead could be seen strewn along the road. (105)

Since the remainder of his unit had been relieved by the 319th Infantry and had moved for rest and a hot meal to the town of Schandel, about five miles due south of Grosbous, the 3d Battalion commander remained with "Task Force L" the remainder of the day and throughout the night. (106)

No more German activity was encountered, and at 0515 on the 23rd leading elements of the 104th Infantry, 26th Infantry Division, arrived at the position. (107) They explained that they had not arrived there the previous day, along with the 80th Division units, because they had met considerable enemy resistance on the road southwest of Grosbous. Upon their arrival, "Task Force L" was disbanded. The attached units were released to their parent organiza-

(102) A-9; (103) A-10; G-2 Annex 28, p. CXXIII; (104) A-10; G-2 Annex 28, p. CXXV; (105); (106); (107) Personal Knowledge.

tions, and L Company moved to Vichten, about five miles to the southwest, where a hot meal was served and preparations were made for a new attack, to be launched in coordination with the 10th Armored Division the following morning. (108)

There was still to be more fighting around Grosbous, however. The 104th Infantry did not immediately occupy Grosbous when "Task Force L" left the ridge, and it was necessary for this regiment to fight to regain the town, capturing a few prisoners there the following night. It was two days after "Task Force L" had left the position before the pocket of resistance encountered by the 26th Division troops southwest of Grosbous was cleared. (109)

#### ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

Upon close analysis it would appear that the errors of the German attacking force contributed in great measure to the success enjoyed by "Task Force L" at Grosbous and on the ridge overlooking the town.

✓ The first attacking force of Germans to move against the town, moving right down the road in a massed formation with no attempt to maintain secrecy and no normal security elements employed, was set up like pins in a bowling alley for the American machine guns. ✓ It is almost impossible to understand why the larger <sup>(second)</sup> force would move down the road in closed formation the following day, without any flank security, even under cover of the dense snowfall, since they must have known that there were defending forces nearby.

(108) Personal Knowledge; (109) A-10; G-2 Annex 28, p. CXXIII; A-11.

The only reasonable explanation for these actions of the German troops is overconfidence. They were part of a victorious army which in a few days had torn gaping holes in the American lines. And on the same road American troops had withdrawn from both Feulen and Merzig soon after being attacked and had left passage through these towns open to the Nazis. They must have assumed that the same pattern of defense -- slight delay and then withdrawal -- would be followed at Grosbous.

*327th  
Supporting  
Amalgam  
needed.*

This German unit, the 352 Volksgrenadier Division, was given a combat evaluation of "good fighting unit" by Third Army G-2 (110) and was further described as having been composed of young German Air Force and Naval personnel who, after three and a half months of training and reorganization, had become "good assault infantry troops". (111) But their actions against "Task Force L" and their estimates of the situation were completely erroneous.

✓ The security measures taken by "Task Force L" were not particularly commendable either. After that unit had moved to its alternate position on the ridge it failed to keep adequate listening posts near the road and town. As a result, apparently a large force of Germans managed to slip past, under cover of darkness or the morning snowfall, and this enemy force caused considerable delay to the units of the 26th Infantry Division. Of course it is not known for certain that the enemy encountered by the 104th Infantry southwest of Grosbous went south by this route, but is a reasonable assumption that they did. Certainly they easily

(110) A-10; G-2 Annex 29, Estimate No. 11, p. CXXXIII;  
(111) A-10; G-2 Annex 28, p. CXXV.

*Yes, perhaps  
the lack  
of security  
at the house  
became  
a force which  
has surprised  
at 6:20 AM  
the unit  
apparently  
felt that the  
road had been  
cleared by  
the pursuing force.*