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BACKGROUND TO BATTLE

Of the three German armies that staged the Ardennes operation, the only one to gain a significant breakthrough was General der Panzertruppe Hasso von Manteuffel's 5. Panzer-Armee in the center. After encircling the newly arrived and inexperienced 106th Infantry Division on the Schnee Eifel, the Germans created a substantial rupture in the American line. This rupture facilitated the advance of the southern elements of SS-Obergruppenführer Josef “Sepp” Dietrich's 6. Panzer-Armee, notably Kampfgruppe Peiper of 1. SS-Panzer-Division, as well as elements of 5. Panzer-Armee, especially the drive of 116. Panzer-Division toward Houfallize. The full exploitation of this sector was hampered by an extended American salient around the key road and rail junction of St. Vith, however, which acted as “a thumb down the German throat.” The German plan had presumed that St. Vith would serve as the major rail hub to support the offensive, so its capture was vital.

St. Vith had been the headquarters of the hapless 106th Infantry Division. Two of the division's three infantry regiments had been surrounded in the initial German attack and surrendered. Recognizing the importance of this sector, Eisenhower had ordered two US armored divisions into the area to stem the German advance. By December 17, Brigadier General William Hoge's CCB, 9th Armored Division had begun to arrive and began reinforcing the surviving 424th Infantry Regiment (106th Infantry Division). Brigadier General Bruce Clarke's CCB, 7th Armored Division began arriving in St. Vith on the same day and Clarke took overall command of the St. Vith defenses. German troops began appearing on the eastern fringes of St. Vith by the late afternoon of December 17.

The initial German attacks on St. Vith were uncoordinated due to the rush to move westward. Elements of Kampfgruppe Hansen of 1. SS-Panzer-Division
The Führer-Begleit-Brigade’s sister unit was the Führer-Grenadier-Brigade that was organized in a similar fashion. The brigade was committed piecemeal to the fighting near Bastogne, and one of its Kampfgruppen attacked the 80th Division in Heiderscheid on Christmas Eve 1944. It suffered significant losses in the fighting, including the StuG III assault gun to the left and this SdKfz 251/17 with a shielded 2cm autocannon in a Schwebelafette pedestal mount.

bumped into the western American defenses near the Poteau crossroads, while infantry forces from 18. Volksgrenadier-Division probed along the eastern edges of St. Vith. The bitterest fighting on December 18 took place around Poteau as CCA, 7th Armored Division attempted to seize the town, which was essential to keep open supply lines to the rear. As further elements of the 7th Armored Division began to arrive, they were deployed on the northern and eastern perimeters of St. Vith while CCB, 9th Armored Division took up the positions on the southern flank.

Manteuffel had expected his units to capture St. Vith on the first day of the offensive. On the night of December 17/18, he discussed the problem with Heeresgruppe B commander, Generalfeldmarschall Walter Model, who suggested that the Führer-Begleit-Brigade (FBB: Führer Escort Brigade) be committed to destroying the St. Vith pocket.

The Führer-Begleit-Brigade was commanded by Oberst Otto Remer, a personal favorite of Hitler after he played a central role in suppressing the Operation Valkyrie coup attempt in Berlin on July 20, 1944. The brigade had its origins early in the war when Hitler’s original bodyguard unit, the Leibstandarte-SS Adolf Hitler, began to be committed to combat operations. As a result, Generalmajor Erwin Rommel was instructed to form a Heer defense battalion for Hitler’s personal security. When the elite Infanterie-Regiment Großdeutschland was expanded to a division in March 1942, the Führer-Begleit-Bataillon was brought under its purview and became a motorized formation as the Führer-Begleit-Abteilung. It was headquartered at Hitler’s Wolfsschanze (Wolf’s Lair) forward headquarters in Rastenburg, East Prussia. In September 1944, in the wake of the Operation Market-Garden airborne landings in the Netherlands, Hitler ordered Remer to expand the unit into a brigade with a mission to protect the Wolfsschanze against a possible airborne attack (Remer 1947: 1). When Hitler moved his headquarters back to Berlin in November 1944, the Führer-Begleit-Brigade became redundant and was committed to the Ardennes offensive as the principal mobile reserve force of Manteuffel’s 5. Panzer-Armee.

Owing to its unique origins, the Führer-Begleit-Brigade had a non-standard organization. It somewhat resembled the second-wave Panzer-Brigaden organized in the late summer of 1944, but was larger, with a nominal strength of 7,177 troops and an actual strength of 6,037 at the start of the Ardennes campaign. Major Schnappauf’s Panzer-Regiment Führer-Begleit-Brigade was
supposed to consist of three battalions. The former II./PzRgt GD had 17 PzKpfw IV medium tanks and 38 Panzer IV/70 tank destroyers operational at the time of the Ardennes offensive. II./PzRgt FBB, formerly StuGAbt 200, had 27 StuG III assault guns and 14 StuH 42 assault howitzers operational. A battalion of Panther tanks from Panzergrenadier-Division Großdeutschland had been allotted, but it did not arrive in time for the Ardennes operation.

Panzergrenadier-Regiment Führer-Begleit-Brigade was unusual in its composition, with Major Fabian's I.(SPW)/PzGrRgt FBB in a mechanized configuration with SdKfz 251 armored half-tracks, Major Hubert Mickley's II.(Schnelle)/PzGrRgt FBB in a motorized configuration using trucks, and Hauptmann Gaum's III.(Fahrrad)/PzGrRgt FBB in a bicycle-mobile configuration. The third battalion was an anomaly, formed around Grenadier-Bataillon zbV 928, formerly a Landesschützen (militia) unit on guard duty in France and manned primarily by overage troops. In contrast, the other two battalions of Panzergrenadier-Regiment Führer-Begleit-Brigade were recruited out of the elite Großdeutschland replacement pools. One of the main shortcomings of the Panzergrenadier component was that there was "no regimental staff for the Panzergrenadier Regiment and for that reason, the brigade had to command three different battalions which had been armed and organized in very different ways" (Remer 1947: 5).

Among the Panzergrenadier companies, one stood out: 11./PzGrRgt FBB. This had been organized in August 1944 as a special "close-combat company" for the personal defense of Hitler. Among its troops were no fewer than six men with the Knight's Cross and several more with the German Cross in Gold. Although they wore normal Panzergrenadier insignia, they were issued paratrooper helmets and the paratrooper's jacket and each was armed with the 7.92mm StG 44 assault rifle and a 9mm P 38 pistol. Another anomaly was 3./PzGrRgt FBB, which was recruited from the Waffen-SS.

The brigade's artillery component was Artillerie-Regiment Führer-Begleit-Brigade, formerly Artillerie-Regiment 120, with two batteries of towed 10.5cm howitzers and one battery of towed 15cm howitzers. Remer later complained that the artillery was obliged to use ordinary trucks rather than tracked vehicles, which limited their mobility in the muddy winter conditions. The brigade also had an oversized Luftwaffe Flak-Regiment, Flak-Regiment Hermann Göring, with four Flak batteries (six 8.8cm and three 2cm Flak guns) and three searchlight batteries, a holdover from its role at the Wolfsschanze.
INTO COMBAT

The 7th Armored Division began moving from Übach, Germany on December 17 to reinforce the 106th Infantry Division. Although the initial intention was to counterattack, the German breakthrough in this sector led to an overwhelming flood of German units moving westward, including both 5. Panzer-Armee and 6. Panzer-Armee. As a result, Brigadier General Bruce Clarke's CCB, 7th Armored Division deployed for defensive action on the northeast side of St. Vith, while CCB, 9th Armored Division deployed on the southeast side of the town. CCA, 7th Armored Division was positioned to the northwest of St. Vith around Poteau and Recht, securing lines of communication back to American lines.

At 1600hrs on December 18, Remer was ordered to move the Führer-Begleit-Brigade from Daum to the front, a distance of about 30km. Remer traveled to the LXVI. Armeekorps headquarters outside of Prüm and met with corps commander General der Infanterie Wältcher Lucht to receive instructions. At the time, St. Vith was under attack by 18. Volksgrenadier-Division from the northeast, and 62. Volksgrenadier-Division from the southeast. Lucht instructed Remer that his mission was not to participate directly in the siege of St. Vith, but rather to attempt to accelerate the penetration farther west. The Führer-Begleit-Brigade set out on a nighttime road march along the road (now N626) through the Hohes Venn along the Eiterbach stream. The road was bounded by woods and the stream on either side, which in combination with the mud, ensured congested conditions. Remer arrived at 18. Volksgrenadier-Division headquarters at the Wallerode mill after dawn on Tuesday, December 19 and warned corps headquarters that the road conditions and congestion were so bad that the brigade would be delayed.

The brigade's advance detachment, consisting of a platoon of SdKfz 232 armored cars of Panzer-Aufklärungs-Kompanie Führer-Begleit-Brigade and a motorized company from II./PzGrRgt FBB riding on Volkswagen Kübelwagen and Schwimmwagen vehicles, finally arrived at the mill around noon, and continued down the road on route reconnaissance. The armored cars in the lead were hit by antitank fire on the bend of the road on the edge of the Prümer Berg woods, and the Panzergrenadier company was hit with artillery fire and suffered heavy casualties, stopping their advance. This probe convinced Remer that an attack emanating out of the Eiterbach road area would be dangerous, and that the proposed assembly in the fields west of the Auf der Höhe woods was too vulnerable. Remer claimed that he received contradictory instructions from Model's, Manteuffel's, and Lucht's headquarters as to whether the mission was to seize St. Vith or head farther west.

The advance detachment headed to the village of Medell northeast of St. Vith while Kampfgruppe Mickley, consisting of two dismounted Panzergrenadier companies from II./PzGrRgt FBB and an assault-gun company, headed to Wallerode. Remer ordered Kampfgruppe Mickley to support an attack by 18. Volksgrenadier-Division and about 200 dismounted Panzergrenadiere headed west out of Wallerode through the wooded Kninels Berg. They were spotted around 1300hrs by an outpost near Hunningen under Lieutenant Lee Mestas of the 2nd Platoon, Troop A, 87th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron. Mestas called in mortar fire from the squadron's heavy-weapons company and requested artillery support from a divisional forward observer. The ensuing barrage was estimated to have killed about 160
of the 200 men of the German force, and Mestas estimated that about 40 survivors withdrew. A patrol by CCB, 7th Armored Division later found some of the dead Panzergrenadiere in the area, wearing Großdeutschland armbands. The insignia confused American intelligence, which correctly believed Panzergrenadier-Division Großdeutschland to be on the Eastern Front.

The failed attack out of the Kninels Berg woods convinced Remer that it would be more prudent to skirt around St. Vith, and he instructed the remainder of the brigade to head north to Born before turning west toward Nieder-Emmels. The assault-gun company departed Wallerode for Born later in the day to join I./PzGrRgt FBB, which had entered the town earlier in the day.

On Tuesday, December 19, Model's Heeresgruppe B headquarters instructed Manteuffel that St. Vith was not to be bypassed, but captured. For the time being, the brunt of this mission fell on 18. Volksgrenadier-Division and 62. Volksgrenadier-Division, which were attacking CCB, 7th Armored Division and CCB, 9th Armored Division on the eastern and southeastern sides of the city, respectively. The initial attacks were largely fruitless, in no small measure due to the lack of artillery support. This was caused by the neighboring 6. Panzer-Armee barging into the 5. Panzer-Armee road network due to the poor road discipline of the SS-Panzer-Divisionen, especially 9. SS-Panzer-Division. Although steps were taken to rectify the situation, by December 20 it "had degenerated to a catastrophic extent" according to the chief-of-staff of 5. Panzer-Armee, resulting in enormous traffic jams.

Around dawn on December 20, I./PzGrRgt FBB, supported by an assault-gun company, pushed out of the woods around Born. Oberfeldwebel Lischak's I./PzGrRgt FBB sent a platoon on SdKfz 251 half-tracks through the woods, followed by the other two platoons on foot. On exiting the woods, they came under intense fire from US tanks, an outpost of CCA, 7th Armored Division, and suffered heavy casualties.

Kampfgruppe Fabian, consisting of elements of I./PzGrRgt FBB supported by tanks and assault guns, headed from Born to the west around Recht later in the morning. Recht had been held by the 17th Tank Battalion, but that morning the American unit was ordered to withdraw southward to Rodt, leaving the town at 0900hrs. The outposts heard the movement of Kampfgruppe Fabian but the American tanks had already departed before Kampfgruppe Fabian arrived in Recht.

That morning, other elements of I./PzGrRgt FBB headed down the road from Born to the southwest toward the village of Nieder-Emmels, arriving there after the 17th Tank Battalion had passed through. The only American forces remaining in the village were an outpost of M5A1 light tanks of the 2nd Platoon, Co. F, 87th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, which withdrew down the road to join a defensive line being established by Co. A, 17th Tank Battalion. The Kampfgruppe continued on into Ober-Emmels around sunset,
Otto Remer was born on August 18, 1912 and joined the Reichswehr as a junior officer in 1932. He served in a Schützen-Bataillon during the campaigns in Poland in 1939 and Yugoslavia in 1941, and in February 1943 became a battalion commander, leading 1/PzGrRgt GD. He received the Knight's Cross for the battalion's rearguard actions in the Kharkov campaign and the Oak Leaves to the Knight's Cross in November 1943. After being wounded, he was sent to command a Großdeutschland guard formation in Berlin. On July 20, 1944 during the Operation Valkyrie coup attempt against Hitler, Remer's troops were instrumental in regaining control of Berlin and he arrested many of the key plotters. Hitler elevated him in rank to Oberst and subsequently expanded the Großdeutschland guard unit to a brigade. After the Führer-Begleit-Brigade served in the Ardennes, it was expanded to a division. Remer's leadership of the Führer-Begleit-Brigade in the Ardennes and the Führer-Begleit-Division attracted the criticism of other officers. After the war, Remer was one of the founders of the neo-Nazi Socialist Reich Party which was banned in 1952. He fled to Egypt to avoid prosecution and subsequently became involved as a military advisor and weapons dealer to other Arab states including Syria. He returned to Germany in the 1980s, founding another neo-Nazi party, but fled to Spain in 1994 after another conviction.

again missing the 17th Tank Battalion. Although Remer intended to continue the assault farther to the southwest into Rodt (Sart-lez-St.Vith), 1./PzGrRgt FBB and its associated assault guns were hit by concentrated American artillery fire south of the villages and forced to a standstill. Further actions on Wednesday, December 20 were hampered by the continued entanglement of various elements of the Führer-Begleit-Brigade in traffic jams, exacerbated by fuel shortages. The prolonged idling of the vehicles and stop-go traffic led to fuel consumption rates three times higher than normal.

On the evening of Wednesday, December 20, Lucht's LXVI. Armeekorps headquarters instructed Remer to attack down the Nieder-Emmels-St. Vith road (N621) the next morning. Lucht hoped that this would undermine the defenses of CCB, 7th Armored Division from behind and accelerate the retreat of the 7th Armored Division from St. Vith. Remer decided to ignore the instructions, claiming that American forces would leave his flank vulnerable along the entire route. Instead, Remer chose a more cautious plan to proceed southwest to Rodt in the hopes of securing the Rodt–Vielsalm road (N675). Remer later wrote that "the road and terrain conditions had been my worst foe" and he was determined to secure a solid and useful road for farther movement west.

US artillery had been bombarding the Führer-Begleit-Brigade positions in Born and Nieder-Emmels, and Remer was informed that the source of this fire was an artillery battalion near Hinderhausen. While waiting for his forces to consolidate for the main attack, Remer decided to stage a raid in the hopes of silencing these guns. The raid was led by Major Mickley of 11./PzGrRgt FBB and was made up of the elite assault troops of Schommer's 11./PzGrRgt
Bruce C. Clarke was born on April 29, 1901 and dropped out of high school to enlist in the US Army in 1917. He attended the United States Military Academy and received his commission in the Corps of Engineers in 1925. He is credited with starting the Non-Commissioned Officers Academy system. In 1940, he led the 16th Engineer Battalion, the US Army's first armored engineer unit, and was instrumental in the development of the treadway bridge, widely used in World War II. He became the chief of staff of the 4th Armored Division in early 1942 and was assigned to lead the division's Combat Command A (CCA) on November 1, 1943. He was in command of CCA during the Arracourt tank battles in September 1944, and his outstanding performance there prompted Lieutenant General George S. Patton to push for his elevation to brigadier general in October 1944. Patton had been concerned about the leadership of the 7th Armored Division when it was under his command in September 1944 and the newly promoted Clarke was sent to command CCB, 7th Armored Division as part of a broader shakeup of its senior leadership at the end of October 1944. Clarke returned to the 4th Armored Division at the end of the war as its new divisional commander. During the Cold War years, Clarke went on to a series of higher commands at corps and army levels and eventually led US Army Europe and the Central Army Group of NATO.

FBB and another Panzergrenadier company under Leutnant von Rautenstrauch. Numbering about 300 men, the group infiltrated along the edge of the Bois d’Emmels woods to the southwest. They reached the N675 near where it exited the Bois d’Emmels woods west of Rodt and set up a hasty ambush for any traffic. They captured several jeeps and trucks moving down the road from CCA positions north around Poteau toward Rodt. Several senior American officers including the executive officer of CCA, 7th Armored Division were captured in this fashion. CCA headquarters near Poteau caught wind of the roadblock from troops who had escaped the ambush. The roadblock cut off the 40th Tank Battalion in the Poteau area from its battalion aid station in Rodt, so a platoon of M4 tanks from Co. B was sent down the road to clear it. By the time they reached the area, Kampfgruppe Mickley had already abandoned the roadblock and continued farther southwest. The activity in this area also prompted CCA to dispatch Co. A, 48th Armored Infantry Battalion into the area late in the day to prevent any further interference in links between Poteau and Rodt.

Kampfgruppe Mickley exited the woods northwest of Hinderhausen toward the positions of the 275th Armored Field Artillery Battalion around 2000hrs. Emerging out of the forest after dark, they damaged the nearest M7 105mm HMC. Reacting quickly, the battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Roy Clay, ordered one battery of M7 HMCs to engage the Panzergrenadiere with direct howitzer fire and their .50-caliber machine guns while the two other batteries kept up their fire-support missions. According to an American officer who was a prisoner of Mickley's group, the Germans
took very heavy losses. A light-tank platoon from Co. D, 17th Tank Battalion was dispatched to deal with the attack and caught many of the Panzergrenadiere in the open, firing deadly canister rounds at them. About 25–30 grenadiers were driven into a house on the edge of the town. The light tanks attacked the building, starting a fire that burned it to the ground. In the meantime, the rest of Kampfgruppe Mickley had retreated back into the woods and eventually returned to the Führer-Begleit-Brigade.

The fighting on the eastern side of St. Vith on Wednesday, December 20 was the turning point in LXVI. Armeekorps’ battle with the 7th Armored Division. The German field artillery had finally escaped from the traffic jams near the border and began to make its presence felt. An intense barrage of the town began at 1100hrs. Most of the German attacks were preceded by intense artillery fire, and the grenadiers of 18. Volksgrenadier-Division and 62. Volksgrenadier-Division attacked with little respite. For example, the positions of the 38th Armored Infantry Battalion (CCB, 7th Armored Division) were hit in five attacks that afternoon and three more during the late afternoon and early evening. The defensive line of CCB, 7th Armored Division was penetrated in at least three places by evening, with no replacements available. By 2200hrs, Clarke realized that the current positions were not tenable and decided to pull his forces out of the town, to the high ground west of St. Vith, beginning in the early hours of Thursday, December 21. Clarke estimated that he had lost almost half his strength in the day’s fighting on December 20. He consulted with the 7th Armored Division headquarters and plans were made to ensure that an escape route would be kept open to the southwest past Rodt. By this time, the 82nd Airborne Division had arrived and set up a new defensive perimeter to the west of Rodt along the Salm River near Vielsalm.

Remer planned to press the attack toward Rodt on Thursday, December 21, but was frustrated again by the difficulty in moving his units forward under poor road conditions. II./PzGrRgt FBB had been deployed in a depression immediately west of Nieder-Emmels and before dawn on Thursday, it was hit by American field artillery and so disrupted that the main attack on Rodt had to be postponed. The brigade artillery did not arrive until late on Thursday, and then only after desperate measures had been taken to haul them through the mud, including the use of the half-track prime movers of Flak-Regiment Hermann Göring.

The revised plan for the Führer-Begleit-Brigade attack was for a Kampfgruppe of Panzer-Regiment Führer-Begleit-Brigade consisting of two Panzer companies and two assault-gun companies to push down the road from Ober-Emmels toward Rodt while the newly arrived III./PzGrRgt FBB would push through the Frohervenn woods near Tomm Berg and attack from north of Rodt. III./PzGrRgt FBB had left its bicycles behind in Born after they had become so mud-encrusted as to be useless. The continuing delays in assembling the attack force meant that it did not get under way until the early-morning hours of Friday, December 22.

The American withdrawal from St. Vith on the night of December 20/21 was accompanied by other defensive shifts along the 7th Armored Division perimeter. CCA, which had been defending the northwest sector around Poteau, began to shift some of its units southward and closer to Rodt as the neighboring CCB defenses contracted. This increased the defenses now facing
Remer's brigade. When the 17th Tank Battalion withdrew from its northern positions around Recht on the morning of December 20, it left behind two platoons of M4 medium tanks on the southern side of the Frodervenn woods to the northeast of Rodt to form a security screen while the remainder of the battalion took up concentric defensive positions around Rodt. This defense line was about 1,000yd in length, or roughly one tank per 100yd, and could not be adequately patrolled by tanks alone. As a result, a platoon of infantry from Co. C, 38th Armored Infantry Battalion was attached with two to three riflemen assigned to each tank to set up a defensive perimeter. Since there were plans to eventually withdraw the 17th Tank Battalion farther down the road to Hinderhausen, the two tank platoons and associated riflemen were attached to Task Force Stine, under Captain Harlan Stine, the commander of Co. F, 87th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron. The original composition of Task Force Stine was a platoon of infantry and three to four M5A1 light tanks, so the additions substantially increased its strength.

Task Force Stine covered the intersection between CCA and CCB in the Rodt sector, but there was little coordination between the two commands due to the fluid and chaotic conditions. On the left was a small force from CCA consisting of Co. A, 48th Armored Infantry Battalion on the edge of the Bois d'Emmels woods, while to the right were elements of the 31st Tank Battalion. Rodt had served as the rear area for a number of units from CCA and CCB including the Service Company, 48th Armored Infantry Battalion under Captain Davenport, and the battalion aid station of the 40th Tank Battalion. The antitank platoon of Co. B, 48th Armored Infantry Battalion supported by a platoon of Co. A, 33rd Armored Engineer Battalion had been located south of the Co. A, 48th Armored Infantry Battalion positions since December 18, but during the fighting on December 22, they had moved to new positions on the southern fringe of Rodt, covering the motor-park area. They were supported by four M4 tanks of Co. A, 40th Tank Battalion. Some of the units in Rodt had already been instructed on the night of December 21 that they were to withdraw southward the next day to Crombach.
The road to Rodt

**German view:** In the pre-dawn light on the morning of Friday, December 22, Oberst Otto Remer led a Kampfgruppe of Panzer-Regiment Führung-Begleit-Brigade down the road to Rodt. The weather was snowy, typical of early winter, but the ground was still not frozen and so remained muddy in the farm fields. When the German troops exited the woods, there was considerable ground fog. The Panzergrenadiere accompanied the Panzer IV/70 tank destroyers of Panzer-Regiment Führung-Begleit-Brigade, mostly on foot, though some rode atop the vehicles. The main body of Remer's force exited from the woods around 0900hrs and the German grenadiers "shouted, whistled, and sang" according to American accounts of the fighting. It was a typical German infantry practice to instill unit cohesion.

**US view:** On the American side, Lieutenant Herbert Borcher's platoon of four M4 medium tanks from Co. A, 40th Tank Battalion spotted the grenadiers emerging from the woods around 0930hrs and took them under fire. The infantry from the 49th Armored Infantry Battalion were entrenched in foxholes dug into the farm fields. They immediately called in artillery fire which began to strike the German column. Some of the Panzergrenadiere managed to escape the firefight and reach the village of Rodt where another Panzergrenadier company had infiltrated earlier in the morning. The collapse of the defenses inside Rodt in the late morning led Combat Command A to order the infantry-tank defenses outside Rodt to withdraw, allowing the remainder of Remer's Kampfgruppe finally to reach the village by early afternoon.
Before dawn on Friday, December 22, Remer led the Kampfgruppe of Panzer-Regiment Führer-Begleit-Brigade down the road to Rodt. This consisted of 2 Kompanie, 1./PzRgt FBB and the assault guns of 2. Batterie, II./PzRgt FBB. The spearhead reported that the road was heavily defended by American armored vehicles where the road reached the Frodervenn woods immediately outside Rodt. This was the Task Force Stine roadblock consisting of M4 tanks of the 2nd Platoon, Co. A, 17th Tank Battalion. Remer ordered the column to attempt to skirt the roadblock by passing through cuts in the Frodervenn woods on the western side of the road, but in the process, some of the German armored vehicles became bogged down in the glutinous mud. In the dark, progress was very slow since the tanks and assault guns had to be led through the woods by scouts on foot. To complicate matters further, mines were discovered near the edge of the woods which had to be cleared.

While the Panzer columns haltingly moved down the road, the Panzergrenadiere of Gaum's III./PzGrRgt FBB moved through the woods. Snow had been falling since the previous evening, and visibility was often no more than 100yd. The plan was for a company of III./PzGrRgt FBB to infiltrate the town first, at which point the other two companies would accompany the main Panzer force into the town.

The German attack began around 0400hrs on the western side of the town. According to American accounts, the Panzergrenadiere "shouted, whistled, and sang." The antitank platoon of the 48th Armored Infantry Battalion opened fire, inflicting heavy casualties. The larger German force was able to fight its way into the town, however, capturing the antitank platoon command post and their headquarters half-track. The tanks of Co. A, 40th Tank Battalion intervened and began shelling the German infantry in the houses. One tank was hit six times by Panzerfaust fire without being disabled. By dawn, the initial German company had not been reinforced, and some of the Panzergrenadiere began to withdraw from the town. The American tanks began systematically clearing the houses, and also pursued the German infantry back to the woods north of the town. Task Force Stine sent some of its riflemen from the roadblock back toward the town to help with the clean-up. The German battalion commander, Hauptmann Gaum, was apparently captured during this initial skirmish.

Remer's Panzer column finally exited the woods in front of Rodt around 0900hrs and began to advance on the town along with the two other companies of Panzergrenadiere. Lieutenant Borcher's platoon from Co. A, 40th Tank Battalion spotted the Panzergrenadiere emerging from the woods around 0930hrs and took them under fire. This tank platoon was reinforced by Lieutenant Fielder's platoon from Co. A and Lieutenant Rider's platoon from Co. B. The flanking fire from these tanks kept Remer's tanks bottled up in the woods except for a few that had already reached the outskirts of Rodt.

The fighting inside Rodt lasted for about three hours, pitting the Panzers and Panzergrenadiere against Davenport's Service Company of the 48th Armored Infantry Battalion, the antitank platoon, and assorted other troops. Most of the cooks and clerks on the American side were lightly armed with carbines, and they lacked the usual assortment of heavier infantry weapons.

Before the fighting intensified in Rodt in mid-morning, Captain Stine and his attached riflemen had already returned to the crossroads to find that the
M4 medium tanks of Co. A, 17th Tank Battalion had pulled out to join the rest of their battalion. Mounting up on the M5A1 light tanks, they trailed behind, but found that a few of the M4s had become bogged down in the deep mud in the fields south of Rodt. They were largely unaware of the actions inside Rodt due to the fog.

The fighting inside Rodt continued until noon. Before noon, Captain Davenport consolidated the numerous German prisoners and ordered the surviving American troops to withdraw southward to Crombach. Co. B, 48th Armored Infantry Battalion was also instructed to withdraw southward toward Crombach, as their associated companies in the Poteau area to the north were heavily engaged in a separate battle with German forces in the area. Other elements of CCA including the platoons of the 40th Tank Battalion were instructed to withdraw north back to Poteau.

The Führer-Begleit-Brigade secured Rodt around 1200–1300hrs. Remer’s account indicates that about 50 prisoners were taken and that 20 tanks were knocked out or abandoned. The latter figure is doubtful; more likely, this number includes half-tracks that were destroyed or left behind in the battalion motor-pool. Remer made no effort to pursue the retreating American columns. The late-arriving II./PzGrRgt FBB was instructed to block the road to Vielsalm, and much of the afternoon was spent trying to recover the numerous vehicles that had become trapped in the frozen mud and snow during the early-morning advance.

News of the German capture of Rodt was very unwelcome at Clarke’s CCB headquarters because this town and the neighboring Hinderhausen were vital junctions in a planned escape route toward the Salm River. Clarke had been arguing with the corps commander, Major General Matthew Ridgway, that immediate withdrawal was imperative given the losses suffered over the previous several days of fighting and the lack of reserves. Furthermore, the capture of Rodt separated CCA from CCB. Clarke had already ordered all non-essential vehicles to begin the evacuation east earlier in the day. Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, who had recently taken over control of this sector from the First US Army, overruled Ridgway and authorized the 7th Armored Division to fall back over the Salm River.

Clarke assigned the task of reestablishing a connection between CCA and CCB to Task Force Boylan, led by the commander of the 87th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, Lieutenant Colonel Vincent Boylan. Clarke also shifted Co. C, 814th Tank Destroyer Battalion to this sector with one platoon deployed in a defensive perimeter outside of Crombach and the other platoons attached to Task Force Boylan. The task force included 50–60 riflemen from Co. C, 23rd Armored Infantry Battalion and Co. C, 38th Armored Infantry Battalion, seven M36 90mm GMC tank destroyers from Co. C, 814th Tank Destroyer Battalion, two platoons of M5A1 light tanks from Co. F, 87th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron and Co. D, 17th Tank Battalion, and 11–12 M4 medium tanks from Co. A, 17th Tank Battalion.

Although the Führer-Begleit-Brigade remained largely idle on the evening of December 22, LXVI. Armeekorps continued its push west from St. Vith, sending infantry from 62. Volksgrenadier-Division along the rail-line toward Crombach. German infantry broke into the town on the night of December 22/23, and Clarke was obliged to evacuate his headquarters to Commanster farther to the east. Clarke received permission to retreat over the Salm River
at 0530hrs on December 23. By this stage, elements of CCB in the Hinderhausen area had been cut off from those in Crombach and farther south. Task Force Boylan served as a rearguard to block Remer’s farther advance while the CCB units withdrew. Fortunately for the Americans, the temperatures had dropped that night to below freezing, and the muddy and impassable country road to Commanster became frozen and passable.

The Führer-Begleit-Brigade restarted its advance down the road to Hinderhausen at 0800hrs on Saturday, December 23. They ran into the rearguards of Task Force Boylan. The tank destroyers claimed to have knocked out three PzKpfw IV and one Panther; Remer acknowledged the loss of two tanks. Task Force Boylan lost or abandoned two M36 tank destroyers, three M4 medium tanks, and a few M5A1 light tanks during the fight for the roadblock. Once the rearguard withdrew, Remer reconfigured his spearhead, switching from Panzer-Regiment Führer-Begleit-Brigade to 11./PzGrRgt FBB supported by a company of StuG III assault guns. This force ran into Task Force Boylan again in Commanster, with the 2nd Platoon, Co. C, 814th Tank Destroyer Battalion claiming to have knocked out one PzKpfw IV and a Panther, while losing one M36; two M4s were also lost. Boylan attempted to delay the Führer-Begleit-Brigade as long as possible since the roads westward were jammed with retreating American traffic. Some artillery support was received, and Boylan directed the fire against the swarms of German vehicles passing through Hinderhausen. The Führer-Begleit-Brigade continued in pursuit of Task Force Boylan to Rogery and finally halted after encountering another rearguard at Cierreux near the banks of the Salm River. Task Force Boylan crossed the Salm River at Vielsalm after dark, with Lieutenant Colonel Boylan the last man over the bridge at 1926hrs. With the chase over, the Führer-Begleit-Brigade was removed from control of LXVI. Armeekorps for reassignment to a new sector of 5. Panzer-Armee late in the day.

The Führer-Begleit-Brigade had little impact on the fighting for St. Vith, and its performance was unexceptional in view of its resources. The American defense of St. Vith had been overcome by the obstinate struggle of the two poorly equipped Völksgrenadier-Divisionen of LXVI. Armeekorps. Remer’s advance displayed none of the relentless dash of neighboring German Panzer units which pressed on in spite of the terrain difficulties. The Führer-Begleit-Brigade was stopped time and again by small improvised task forces of CCB, 7th Armored Division.
Tactical innovation in the Wehrmacht began to decline after the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 due to the enormous demands of waging war on too many fronts. Mechanization of the Panzergrenadier force never reached its intended goals and the Wehrmacht never achieved the same depth of infantry motorization and mechanization as the US and British armies in World War II. Panzergrenadier units in France in the summer of 1944 were still a highly effective force in spite of the paucity of equipment due to the extensive combat experience of the NCOs and officers. The performance of these units was undermined, however, by the overwhelming weaknesses of the Wehrmacht by 1944. They were frequently employed in hopeless defensive missions, with the destruction of the Panzer-Lehr-Division in June-July 1944 being a prime example. They never fully
recovered from the losses in the summer of 1944. Even a favored unit such as the Führer-Begleit-Brigade was still using bicycles in the Ardennes campaign.

The US Army was able to take advantage of its considerable industrial resources fully to mechanize its armored-infantry battalions. More importantly, doctrinal changes in 1942–43 reinforced combined-arms integration through the use of combat commands. This tactical innovation proved instrumental in enhancing the offensive capabilities of US armored divisions in the 1944–45 campaigns in the ETO.

Panzer grenadier and armored-infantry battalions were better suited for offensive assignments than defensive assignments, as is evident from the three battle examples presented in this book. There was nothing inherently wrong with the use of mechanized infantry in defensive assignments except that the Panzer-Division and US armored division did not have enough riflemen when compared to conventional infantry formations. The success or failure of these units usually depended on whether the senior commands used them for missions appropriate to their capabilities. In 1944–45, the Panzer grenadier force was often condemned to impossible missions due to the desperate circumstances facing the Wehrmacht.

The half-track did not solve the problem of infantry mechanization. Half-tracks were better than trucks in combined-arms battles, but they were still not as mobile as tanks in soft ground conditions. Most armies abandoned the half-track after World War II in favor of tracked vehicles that were closer in mobility to tanks. The US Army began to adopt tracked armored personnel carriers (APCs) in the late 1940s, though they did not become the predominant infantry transporter until well into the 1950s. This trend was further reinforced by the advent of the nuclear battlefield which burdened the foot soldier with new and fearsome threats. The Panzer grenadier force of the postwar Bundeswehr followed much the same path. The issue of infantry mechanization remained controversial through the present. Should infantry vehicles be as heavily armored as the tanks they accompany? Can any army afford to procure and operate such expensive vehicles? These controversies are an echo of debates going back to the early 1940s and the infancy of infantry mechanization.
UNIT ORGANIZATIONS

Panzergrenadier-Regiment

The Panzergrenadier-Regiment was reorganized under the Type 1944 KStN. Among the major changes was the reduction from 11 to ten companies, disbandment of the Flak company and incorporation of Flak elements into the schwere-Kompanie (heavy company), and consolidation of the supply section within each company into a Versorgungs-Kompanie (Supply Company) under battalion command. Each Panzergrenadier-Bataillon had four companies consisting of three Panzergrenadier companies and a heavy-weapons company. Within a regiment, the companies of I. Bataillon were numbered 1–4 while those of II. Bataillon were numbered 5–8. The regiment’s 9. Kompanie was an Infanterie-Geschütz (infantry gun) company, while 10. Kompanie was the Pionier-Kompanie.

A Panzergrenadier-Bataillon (gep.) had a heavier complement of weapons than a Panzergrenadier-Bataillon (mot.) since the half-tracks were usually fitted with an organic light machine gun lacking on trucks. This meant the half-track battalion had 105 light machine guns while the truck battalion had only 60. Half-track battalions had 21 2cm Flak guns (SdKfz 251/17 or 251/21) while the truck battalions had only six towed 2cm Flak guns. Half-track battalions had 12 7.5cm infantry guns (SdKfz 251/9) while the truck battalions had none. The Panzergrenadier-Bataillon (mot.) was organized in the same fashion as the half-track battalion, but substituting trucks for half-tracks. This meant a motorized battalion had 143 trucks and 25 motorcycles while the half-track battalion had 87 half-tracks, 71 trucks, and 24 motorcycles.

The Panzergrenadier-Bataillon (gep.) Stab had five SdKfz 251 half-tracks, three of which were radio-equipped Kommandopanzerwagen. The three basic companies had a Kompanie-Trupp with two radio-equipped SdKfz 251 and one 2cm Flak SdKfz 251. Each company had three rifle platoons (1.–3. Zug), each with three SdKfz 251 troop carriers and one 2cm Flak SdKfz 251. 4. (schwere) Zug had a single command half-track, a Flak und s.MG Gruppe with three 2cm Flak SdKfz 251, a Granatwerfer (mortar) Gruppe with two SdKfz 251 half-tracks and 8cm mortars, and a Kanonengruppe with two SdKfz 251/9. The various 2cm Flak half-tracks were variously the SdKfz 251/17 or the preferred 2cm Drilling SdKfz 251/21; in practice, many units did not have a full complement of these specialized vehicles. In total, the half-track Panzergrenadier-Kompanie had 21 half-tracks, four trucks, and two motorcycles. In terms of troop strength, the half-track battalion had 26 officers, 168 NCOs, and 673 troops (867 total); the motorized battalion was only slightly different with 868 personnel in total.

US armored-infantry battalion

A US Army 1943-pattern armored-infantry battalion consisted of five companies: a HQ company, three rifle companies, and a service company. The battalion HQ included a company HQ, reconnaissance platoon, three M8 75mm HMC assault guns, three M4 81mm self-propelled mortars on halftracks, a heavy-machine-gun platoon, and a maintenance section.

The rifle company had a company HQ platoon, three rifle platoons, and an antitank platoon. The company HQ included two jeeps, two supply trucks, and two half-tracks. Each rifle platoon included five half-tracks, three of which carried rifle squads, one of which carried the 60mm mortar squad, and one of which carried the light-machine-gun squad with two additional .30-caliber machine guns. In general, each half-track was fitted with a .30-caliber machine gun, except for the platoon leader’s half-track which was authorized a .50-caliber heavy machine gun; in practice, many half-tracks substituted .50-caliber machine guns. The 1942 armored-infantry company had a towed 37mm antitank gun in each rifle platoon, but the new 1943-pattern companies moved these to an antitank platoon with three 57mm antitank guns towed by half-tracks. The infantry platoons were strengthened by raising the squad size from 11 to 12 men and adding an M1 2.36in rocket launcher (bazooka) to each squad. This meant a 1943 company had 251 troops and 20 half-tracks while the 1941–42 company had 178 men and 17 half-tracks. The US Army armored-infantry battalion was somewhat larger than its German counterpart in terms of personnel, with 1,062 officers and men compared to 867.


The battle for Rodt, December 20–23, 1944

1 Morning, December 20: A Kampfgruppe based on I./PzGrRgt FBB heads into Nieder-Emmels after it is abandoned by the 17th Tank Battalion.

2 Dusk, December 20: The Kampfgruppe reaches Ober-Emmels around nightfall, but is hit by a heavy American artillery concentration and halts for the night.

3 Night of December 20/21: The Führer-Begleit-Brigade dispatches a raiding party under Major Hubert Mickley which infiltrates through the woods north of Rodt, reaching the road to Poteau. They set up ambushes and intercept the Poteau–Roddert road during the day.

4 0000hrs, December 20: The Kampfgruppe Mickley raids point party exits the woods and attempts to overrun the forward positions of the 275th Field Artillery Battalion outside Hinterhauser. They are beaten off and sustain heavy casualties.

5 Dawn, December 21: While Mickley stages his raid, II./PzGrRgt FBB attempts to join up with the main body of the brigade, but is badly disrupted by an artillery barrage while waiting west of Nieder-Emmels.

6 December 21: As the 7th Armored Division pulls back from St. Vith, it leaves behind rearguards to cover the withdrawal, including Task Force Stine to the northeast of Rodt.

7 Before dawn, December 22: When Panzer-Regiment Führer-Begleit-Brigade moves out of the woods and reaches the outskirts of Rodt where fighting begins.

8 0440hrs, December 22: Elements of Panzer-Regiment Führer-Begleit-Brigade move out of the woods and reach the outskirts of Rodt where fighting begins.

9 0930hrs, December 22: The main body of Remer's force exits the woods and is brought under heavy fire from assorted US units in the fields to the west. As a result, the attack on Rodt is delayed.

10 1030hrs, December 22: As Remer's units make their way into Rodt from the northern side, the fighting inside the town intensifies.

11 1200hrs, December 22: Captain Davenport, leading the US forces inside Rodt, orders his dwindling forces to prepare to escape the town. The Führer-Begleit-Brigade secures the town around 1200-1300hrs.

12 0800hrs, December 23: The Führer-Begleit-Brigade moves out of Rodt but runs into a rearguard set up by Task Force Boylan which harasses the German column as it withdraws to the southwest. Task Force Boylan crosses the Salm River after dark with the Führer-Begleit-Brigade in pursuit.

Battlefield environment

The autumn weather in Belgium had been wetter than usual and the soil was saturated and muddy. Temperatures for the first week of the offensive were slightly above freezing during the day, though often below freezing at night. There was a thaw on December 18, and the temperatures were not cold enough until December 22–23 actually to freeze the soil to any depth. This severely limited German mobility since vehicles, even tanks, became bogged down after they left the roads. The muddy fields channeled German attack forces down available roads, and made towns and road junctions such as St. Vith especially important. German schemes to bypass centers of resistance were impossible for the Panzer columns and their essential support vehicles.

Although the popular image of the Battle of the Bulge is of snow-covered terrain, in fact, snow cover was not predominant in the first week of the fighting. The first heavy snows arrived on December 22, depositing 2–3ft in some areas. The weather during the first few days of the fighting was characterized by clinging ground fog — especially in the early-morning hours — with frequent spells of rain or freezing rain, and occasional snow at night.

St. Vith was located in an open expanse of flat farmland surrounded by forest. To the northeast were the pine barrens of the Hohe Venn, including the Sankt Vith Wald immediately east of the town. On the western side of St. Vith was the Bois d'Emmels. The roads from the German border into Belgium were mostly graveled. While these were adequate for infantry, the tanks and tracked vehicles churned them into glutinous mud trenches, trapping subsequent vehicle columns.

A point worth mentioning is that the towns in the area had multiple names. The St. Vith area was German speaking and so there were German, French, and sometimes Flemish place names for the various towns; Sankt Vith in German, Saint Vith in French.

The Belgian–German border in the Schnee Eifel region was dominated by pine forests, crisscrossed by narrow, graveled roads. When subjected to heavy vehicle traffic, these roads soon turned into muddy morasses due to the wet early winter conditions. This particular scene was photographed by the author in one of the woods north of Rodt near Poteau.