CWEWS

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July-August 2014

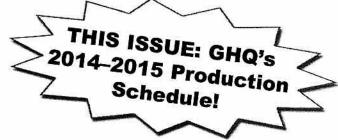
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PARKER'S CROSSROADS DECEMBER 23, 1944 Alamo in the Ardennes

Baraque de Fraiture is a small crossroads settlement located in the heart of the Ardennes forest. For several days in December 1944 it was the scene of one of the most dramatic yet uncelebrated clashes of the Battle of the Bulge. The story of the battle of Parker's Crossroads began on December 16th, 1944, the first day of the Operation Wacht am Rhien, the German's 2nd Ardennes offensive.



In early December, the untested US 106th Infantry Division relieved the 2nd Infantry Division along a 22-mile long front in the Ardennes. It was felt that being stationed along a quiet sector of the front would allow the Golden Lion division to gain combat experience before serious offensive operations began next spring. This plan was shattered on the morning of the 16th, when a wave of German armor and infantry swept around the flanks and surrounded two of the division's three infantry regiments. The 589th Field Artillery Battalion was deployed in direct support of one of the 422nd Infantry Regiment but managed to escape the initial German onslaught. During the withdrawal, the battalion was ambushed, losing its battalion commander and all but three



of its 105mm howitzers. This left Arthur Major Parker, the battalion S3, acting commander. Major Parker's reduced battery was subsequently ordered west towards Baraque de Fraiture, arriving there on December 19th.

Located at the crossing of the main north-south road from Bastogne through Houffalize to Liege with a good paved road westward from Vielsalm through La Roche, Baraque de Fraiture was an X-shaped crossroads with only a few inhabited farm buildings. Possession of this crossroads was critical because the Liege road was the exact boundary between the flank divisions of US two corps, neither one able to hold the road in strength. Loss of the junction would permit the Germans to move in either of three directions to flank or penetrate the US First Army line.



Parker's howitzers were initially reinforced with M16 and M15 MGMCs from the 203rd Armoured Anti-Aircraft Battalion. A glider infantry company belonging to the 82nd Airborne Division, a cavalry troop from the 7th Armoured

Division, and two M7 Priests from the 5th Armoured Division arrived on the night of the 22nd. Altogether, the US forces in Baraque de Fraiture numbered somewhat less than 300 soldiers. Major Parker orders were to organize a strong point and fire on approaching enemy forces.

After several fire missions, Parker was ordered to displace to the north towards Bra. Major Parker appreciated the importance of holding this location even if higher headquarters did not. He decided to either ignore the order or delay its implementation until there was no possibility of withdrawal. The reinforcements reached the crossroads none too soon. Probing attacks by the 560th Volksgrenadiers Division were already feeling out the American positions. During one of these attacks, Major Parker was wounded by mortar shell fragments, lost consciousness, and was evacuated. Major Elliot Goldstein, the original battalion executive officer but actually junior to Parker, took command.

In the predawn darkness of the 23rd, an enemy patrol was hit by the M16 quad-50's and several enemy soldiers were taken prisoner. Most of the prisoners belonged to the 560th Volksgrenadiers but, an officer and NCO from the patrol were from the 2nd SS Panzer Division, scouting for attack positions. All through the 22nd the 2nd SS Panzer waited in its final assembly areas. Toward evening enough fuel arrived to allow the 4th Panzer Grenadier Regiment, some tanks, and an artillery battalion to advance. During the night the grenadiers relieved the small reconnaissance detachments of the 560th Volksgrenadiers which had been watching the

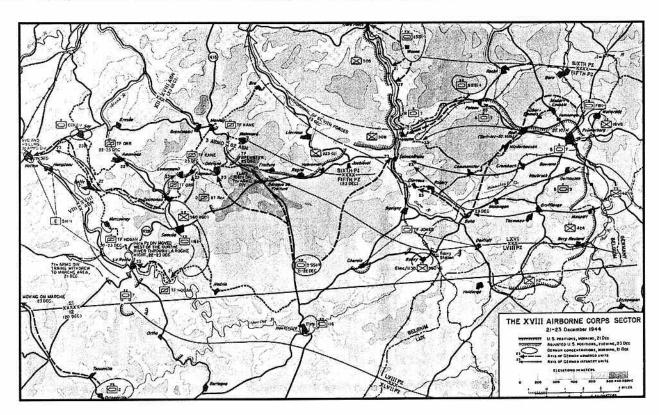
crossroads and filed through the woods to set up a cordon west and north of the crossroads.

The commander of the 4th Panzer Grenadier had placed his 2nd Battalion on the right of the main north-south highway, while his 3rd Battalion deployed around and to the rear of the crossroads. Before dawn of the 23rd the first move came, as the 2nd Battalion made a surprise attack on Fraiture and was driven back after a bitter fight with the glider infantry.

Additional American reinforcements arrived in the early afternoon of the 23rd in the form of a platoon of M4 Shermans from the Armoured Division. This group originally contained a tank platoon, an armoured infantry platoon, and a paratrooper company from the 509th Parachute Battalion. Heading towards Baraque de Fraiture from Manhay, this



force ran into a German held roadblock whereupon the armoured infantry and paratroopers dismounted to clear the roadblock. The tankers buttoned up their hatches and forced their way through, arriving at the crossroads around 1pm. With the surprise attack by 2nd Battalion repulsed, the Germans settled down to surround and soften up the American positions. Radios that had been taken from



captured American vehicles were used to jam the wave band on which the American forward observers were calling for fire. Whenever word flashed over the air that shells were on their way, enemy mortars dumped shells on American observation posts easily spotted within the small perimeter, making any observation of fire virtually impossible.

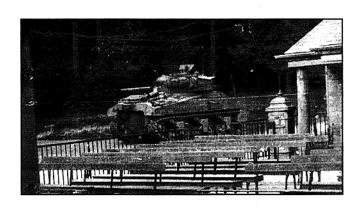
But time was running out for the US forces holding the crossroads. Shortly after 1600 the German artillery started its work in earnest, with mortars and field artillery pummeling the area around the crossroads. Then, preceded by two panzer companies the entire rifle strength of the 4th Panzer Grenadier Regiment closed upon the Americans. Outlined against new-fallen snow the American positions were clearly visible to the panzers, and the Shermans had no maneuver room in which to back up the line. Within the next hour the Germans completed the reduction of the crossroads defense, sweeping up prisoners, armoured cars, half-tracks, and the three howitzers.

Three American tanks managed to escape under the veil of dusk. Earlier they had succeeded in spotting some panzers, which were firing flares and knocked them out. A number of men escaped north through the woods. Some got a break when a herd of cattle stampeded near the crossroads, providing a momentary screen. Company F of the 325th Glider Infantry suffered the most but stood its ground until permission was given to withdrawal. Ultimately forty-four

of the original one hundred sixteen glider infantrymen who had gone to the crossroads returned to their own lines.

Drastically outnumbered and unable to compensate for weakness by maneuver, the defenders of the Baraque de Fraiture crossroads had succumbed, like so many small forces at other crossroads in the Ardennes. However, the Alamo Defense had been a splendid success, holding firm for two days against the 2nd SS Panzer whose two mechanized infantry regiments had to make a deliberate attack against a vastly outnumbered force having only a few stone buildings for cover. The already over-stretched 82nd Airborne Division stretched some more, swung back and covered the gap and the 3rd Armoured Division was given time to form another tank-infantry delaying force just south of Manhay.

- George Chrestensen



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