

TAC NEWS

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The Defense of Trois-Ponts

December 18, 1944

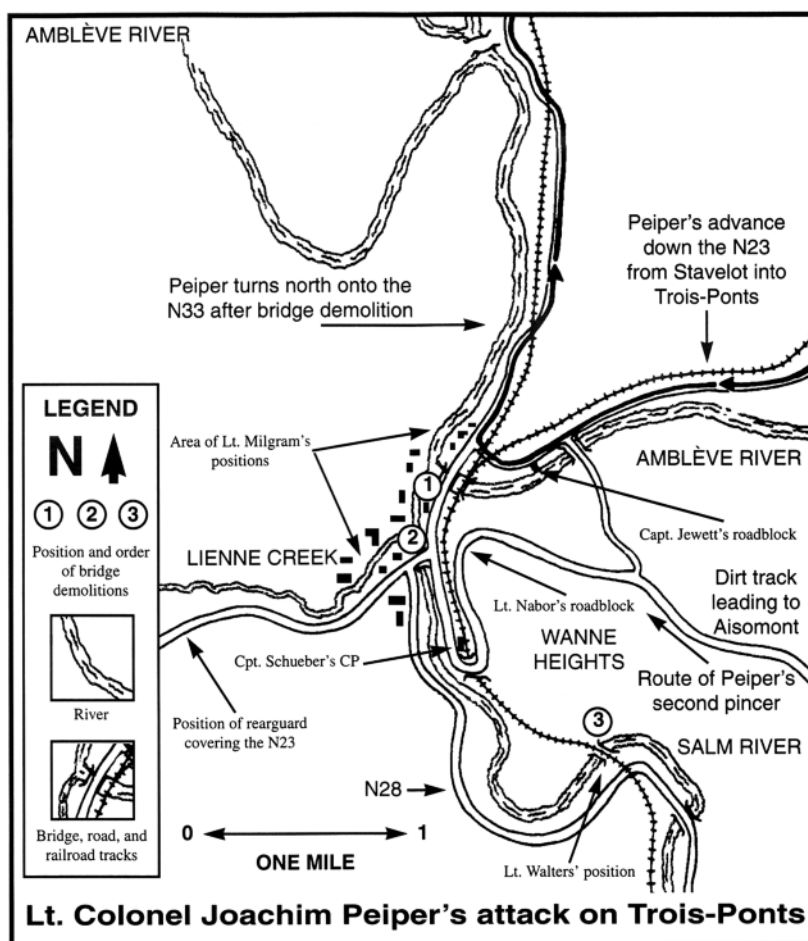
The opening stage of the Battle of the Bulge saw widespread confusion and panics amongst the Americans. To shore up the collapsing front, rear echelon and support personnel were ordered into the line. Engineer Combat Battalions (ECBs), engaged in road building and lumber milling, were hurriedly parceled into squad and platoon-sized roadblocks, then thrown in front of onrushing panzers. One such blocking action was fought by Company C of the 51st ECB from December 19th through the 21st at the village of Trois-Ponts.

The Terrain

Anyone having driven the Pennsylvania Turnpike is familiar with Ardennes' terrain. Both the Ardennes and Appalachian regions share characteristic low-slung mountains flanked with steep and thickly forested slopes. Valleys in the Ardennes, however, are much narrower and cut by looping of rivers and streams. In places these rivers are mere ribbons of water measuring no more than thirty feet across and a few feet deep. Water, however, is not the principal tactical obstacle. Erosion over the eons has cut stream beds some 20–30 feet below the valley floor, thus forming a perfect system of natural anti-tank ditches.

The Defense

Heading the assault of 1st SS Panzer Division was a Kampfgruppe commanded by Lt. Col. Joachim Peiper. Peiper's Kampfgruppe was an ad hoc organization, specially organized and equipped to rip open the defenses in front of 1st SS Panzer Division. On December 17, Peiper successfully stormed the Ambleve River at Stavelot and turned south toward the hamlet of Trois-Ponts. Trois-



Ponts' strategic importance lay in its three namesake bridges crossing the junction of the Salm and Ambleve Rivers. Trois-Ponts also headquartered the 111th Engineer Combat Group, an operational grouping with three ECBs under the overall command of Col. W Willis Anderson. With his headquarters now threatened with direct assault, Anderson started moving his staff to Modave. Company C of the 51st ECB, with an attached squad from the 291st ECB, was ordered to defend Trois-Ponts and wire the bridges for demolition.

Capt. Sam Scheuber, commander Company C, had a difficult time gathering his men. Scattered about the sector in small lumberjacking details, the company painfully assembled through a road network choked with retreating Americans and advancing Germans; several of Scheuber's engineers were captured en route to Trois-Ponts. By 11:30, on the night of the 17th, 75 of Company C's 175 men had arrived. Stragglers trickled in throughout the night.

From his CP in the railroad station Scheuber rapidly formulated a battleplan. His defensive preparations were aided by his intimate knowledge of the local terrain. Company C had rebuilt several bridges in this sector, including one at Trois-Ponts.

To defend the town Scheuber had his company (minus 21 men), eight bazookas, plus six .50 caliber and four .30 caliber truck-mounted machineguns. On the Stavelot Road, just beyond the railroad viaduct, stood a 57mm anti-tank gun of the 526th Armored Infantry Battalion. This gun, stranded when its M2 prime mover slipped a track, was dragooned into a roadblock detail commanded by the 111th's S-4 Capt. Robert Jewett.

As the bridges were wired for demolition, tanks of the 7th Armored Division rumbled over them en route to St. Vith. As the final column passed, a trailing M7 slid down the embankment into the Salm River. As its crew abandoned the vehicle, they ignited it with a thermite grenade. This hulk, fully loaded with gasoline and ammunition burned for the following day and night.

The final defensive dispositions were as follows:

1. Lt. Fred Nabors' 2nd Platoon (+ two 2.36 bazookas) positioned on the commanding Wanne Heights to the southeast, covered the narrow approach from Aisomont.
2. Capt. Jewett's roadblock was reinforced by a truck-mounted squad of engineers led by 3rd Platoon commander, Lt. Richard Green. Green, under Jewett's command, deployed his squad across the road from the 57mm anti-tank gun.
3. The southern bridge was wired for demolition and defended by the attached squad from the 291st, commanded by Lt. Albert Walters.
4. A rearguard with a bazooka and .50 caliber machinegun covered the N23 running to the southwest.
5. Lt. Joseph Milgram's 1st Platoon and the remainder of Green's 3rd Platoon, after preparing the northern two spans for demolition, occupied strongpoints in the town proper along the western bank of the Salm and Ambleve Rivers.

The Attack

Peiper organized a two-prong assault. The bulk of the Kampfgruppe ran along the N23 out of Stavelot and hit the town from the northeast. The second prong, consisting of 3 Kompanie of SS-Panzer-Pionier Bataillon I, and 6 Kompanie of SS-Panzer-Regiment I, was to capture the high ground to the southwest. Captain Jewett made first contact. He had positioned two soldiers with a daisy chain 250 yards ahead of his roadblock. (A daisy chain is a number of mines roped together at two-foot intervals.) At the first sight of tanks, these soldiers were to drag the daisy chain across the road and return to the roadblock. At noon on the 18th, the first Panther clanked into view. The mine detail deployed the daisy chain and then buttoned up the Panther with rifle fire before returning to the roadblock. As the German tankers removed the mines, the anti-tank gunner, unsure if his target was friend or foe, hesitated for a critical instant. His hesitation allowed the Germans four quick shots before the 57mm fired back. While the Germans fired first, the American shot rang true; the round slewed into the lead Panther's running gear and disabled it. As the loader slammed the second shell into the breech, it was discovered there was only another five AT rounds in the M2's ammo bins—an unfortunate oversight, to say the least. Ammunition was run out to greens' squad which, now cut off from Jewett by a curtain of vehicular machinegun fire, rolled the AT shells across the road to the gun crew.

This one-sided gun duel continued until the 57mm and its crew were obliterated by a direct hit. Observing the roadblock's destruction through binoculars, Col. Anderson immediately ordered the two northern bridges blown up; the time was 1:00 pm. Cut off from their comrades on the far bank, the roadblock survivors beat a hasty retreat. All eventually made the safety of American lines by circuitous routes.

During Jewett's battle with the Panthers, the second German pincer made contact with Lt. Nabors. While German engineers swarmed directly down the tree covered slopes, their armored support, consisting of three Mk IVs, remained confined to the road. Forced to snake their way down the Aisomont road, the Mk IVs looped south and lost contact with their infantry. Nabors was well positioned to exploit this opportunity. The road was laced with a daisy chain and the first panzer was allowed to pass into the mines. As the second Mk IV rolled by the Americans fired a bazooka rocket into it without effect. All hell then broke loose. One bazooka malfunctioned, the other was shot out of its gunner's hands, and the daisy chain detonated under a hail of vehicular machinegun fire. Stripped of anti-tank weapons, Nabors retired into Trois-

Ponts. The German armor, without direct infantry support, did not follow. With Nabors safely across, Col. Anderson gave the order and the final span dropped into the Salm with a thunderclap. After personally witnessing the destruction of all three bridges (the Stavelot bridge demolition was rumored sabotaged), Col. Relinquished command to the 51st's executive officer, Major Robert Yates. Yates deployed Company C along a 500-yard front on the western bank of the Salm to repel an expected assault crossing.

The bridge demolition ended Peiper's interest in Trois-Ponts. As the northern bridges erupted before him, Peiper uttered his *kampfgruppe's* epithet, "those damned engineers!" The assault crossing never materialized. Although Yates now faced just a holding force, gunfire exchanges across the river convinced him he was at a severe disadvantage. After repulsing several aggressive enemy patrols, Yates tightened his perimeter at dusk for an anticipated final stand. Fortunately, ammunition in the

smoldering M7 was periodically cooking off, convincing the Germans Yates had some sort of artillery. To further deceive the enemy, Yates had his vehicles driven into a continuous loop with the truckers flashing their lights as they turned towards the German positions.

It mattered not. Gen Dwight Eisenhower had turned command of the Allied northern flank over to Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery. In characteristic fashion, "Monty" set about tidying up the battlefield. He ordered a withdrawal back to a line anchored by the Meuse River. Ignoring the fact that, in the Trois-Ponts sector, at least, the Germans were stopped and hard-pressed to hold their guns. In actuality, Company C had been reinforced by a paratroop regiment and was counterattacking. Monty's order arrived during bitter fighting and compelled the hard-pressed paratroopers to abandon their wounded on the east bank of the Salm. With bitter acrimony, Trois-Ponts was evacuated on December 21, 1944.

This article and scenario originally appeared in the Summer/Fall 1993 issue of Tac News.

Micro Armour and Terrain Maker Scenario #2

Ardennes, December 18, 1944

At dusk on December 17, Kampfgruppe Peiper barreled into a squad-sized roadblock guarding the crest of Stavelot Heights. Unaware they were opposed by just 15-odd American combat engineers, the Germans opted to consolidate their forces before attacking and bivouacked for the night. The American used this respite to reinforce Stavelot. At 3:00 am Major Paul Solid, the exec of the 526th Armored Infantry Battalion, entered town with a mixed force of armored infantry and towed anti-tank guns. Solis' orders were vague. He considered his primary defensive responsibility the huge fuel dump located just north of Stavelot and deployed his forces accordingly. To defend the town proper, Solis deployed two squads into the town square, plus one 57mm and two 3-inch AT guns into the now-vacant engineer roadblock across the river. The AT detail was slow

to deploy. By 6:30am it was only halfway up the steep slopes of Stavelot Heights.

With the first glint of morning light, the American column was bracketed by 150mm artillery shells. As the anti-tank crews desperately attempted to reverse their M2 halftracks back into town, the armored German vanguard appeared on the ridgeline. A quick volley of tank fire shattered the column, leaving the dazed survivors to flee back across the bridge on foot.

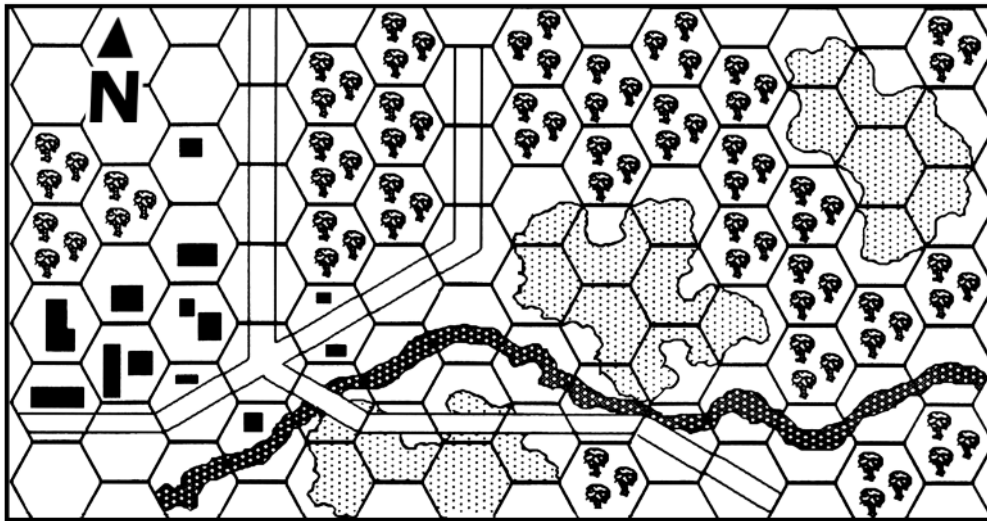


Suggested Victory Conditions

The Germans achieve a strategic victory if they take the town in one hour or less and hold it until the game's end. If this takes an hour and a half, they have a tactical victory. Two hours is a draw; more time than that is a big-time loss.

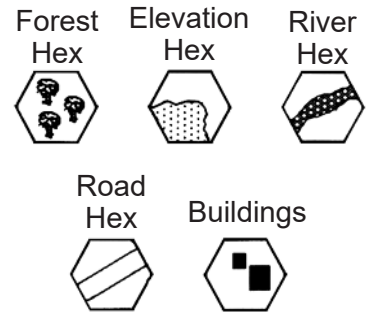
Time Chart: The battle runs from 0630 to 0900.

Ardennes scenario



Map Key

Each hex is 4 inches from top to bottom.



Vanguard Element, Kampfgruppe Peiper						
 Command Stand 2	Infantry Stand 8	Light MG 8	Schwimmwagen 2	Sd Kfz 251/1 D 8	PzKpfw IV H 4	Panther Ausf A 4

Elements of: 526th Armored Infantry Battalion 825th Tank Destroyer Battalion 467th AAA Auto-Weapons Battalion				
 Command Stand 1	Infantry Stand 2	Bazooka 2.36-in 2	M2 with 3-in ATG 4	M2 with 57mm ATG 3
Jeep 1	M3A1 2	M16 2	M15A1 2	

Suggested Special Rules

1. American convoys, either in retreat or in route to another objective, crisscrossed the Stavelot area throughout the battle. Some of these convoys contained German commandos driving captured vehicles. There is speculation that the attempt to blow up the Stavelot bridge was sabotaged by just such a commando detail.



2. The German moves first. Peiper enters along the road on the southern edge of the board.

3. The anti-tank detail starts the game two road hexes from the bridge on the southern riverbank.

4. All elevation hexes are also forested hexes.

Aftermath

The German attack was slow to develop, giving Solis time to pull in his remaining two 3-inch AT guns to cover Stavelot Bridge. These guns picked off the two lead panzers as they snaked their way forward. As the Germans stopped to push the disabled Mk IVs aside, the Americans heated the far bank with a fusillade of shot and shell. The bridge, although wired for demolition, was not blown (sabotage?).

As the first panzer crossed the bridge it was hit by a cone of quadruple .50 caliber fire from a 7th Armored AAA section that was transiting Stavelot by happenstance. Blinded by a hail of bullets, the panzer halted. Again, the German assault stalled, in column, presenting a string of sitting ducks. The opportunity, however, was lost; the AAA halftracks bugged out. With the withering AAA suppression fire now lifted, the Germans raced into Stavelot's narrow streets. Threatened with encirclement, Solis ordered a retreat north to cover a huge fuel dump located just two miles up the road. Kampfgruppe Peiper's pre-assigned route, however, pointed south. The two forces parted, ending the Battle of Stavelot's first phase.