

Five A/40 Tank Deaths 23 Dec 1944

by Wesley Johnston – Historian, 7th Armored Division Association – 27-28 Dec 2011

Situation and Objective

Five men of Company A, 40th Tank Battalion, 7th Armored Division, were killed in action 23 December 1944. In alphabetical order, they were:

1. Cpl. Frank Aldrich (31 447 982) of Washington County, RI – gunner
2. Pvt. Qulles V. Bissell (35 926 915) of Summit County, OH – gunner
3. Pvt. Raymond C. Hennigan (32 840 204) of Erie County, NY – cannoneer
4. Tec 4 Louie A. Johnson (34 272 646) of Orleans Parish, LA – driver
5. S/Sgt. Ernest A. Link (37 032 105) of Wilkin County, MN – tank commander

At the beginning of this investigation, the location and circumstances of their deaths are unknown. The A/40 Morning Report showed the following for 23 Dec 1944:

Company moved from area in vicinity of Rencheux, Belgium to present location. Traveled approx 25 miles. Weather, Fair and Cold. Morale, Good.

So the men had been carried on the web page of 40th Tank Battalion dead as having died in the vicinity of Rencheux, Belgium. However, upon examination of the location of Rencheux, Belgium, west across the Salm River from Vielsalm, it seems highly unlikely that their tank was hit there, since this area was under American control, especially after the bridge over the Salm River was destroyed.

Thus this investigation seeks to determine where and how these men died.

Gathering the Evidence

A/40 Morning Reports Give Trains Location Only

The A/40 Morning Reports for the period 16-23 December 1944, the period of the trip to and the defense of the St. Vith perimeter, have the following locations and Record of Events entries. Battalion Headquarters and Headquarters Company MRs are included, so that the similarities can be seen.

Date	<u>Bn HQ</u>	<u>HQ Co</u>	<u>Co A</u>
1944-Dec-16	Scherpenseel, Germany VK8361 / Remained in present location. Performing necessary maintenance of vehicles and personnel. Weather, Cloudy and Cold. Morale, Good.	Scherpenseel, Germany VK8361 / Remained in present location. Performing necessary maintenance of vehicles and personnel. Weather, Cloudy and Cold. Morale, Good.	Scherpenseel, Germany VK8061 / Company remained in present location. Followed Daily training schedule. Weather, Cloudy and Cold. Morale, Excellent.

1944-Dec-17	<u>2 miles W Beho, Belgium VP7582 / Company left Scherpenseel, Germany at 1000. Arrived in present location at 1800. Distance marched 60 miles. No enemy contact. Weather, Partly Cloudy. Morale, Fair</u>	<u>2 miles W Beho, Belgium VP7582 / Left Scherpenseel, Germany at 1000. Arrived in present location at 1800. Distance marched 80 miles. No enemy contact. Weather, Partly Cloudy. Morale, Fair.</u>	<u>2 miles W Beho, Belgium VP7382 / Company moved from Scherpenseel, Germany at 0900, arrived in present location at 1800. Weather, Rain & Cold. Morale, Excellent.</u>
1944-Dec-18	<u>Beho, Belgium VP7582 / Left area 2 miles West of present location at 1000. Contacted the enemy. Weather, Rain. Morale, Fair</u>	<u>Beho, Belgium VP7582 / Left area 2 miles W of Beho, Belgium at 1000. Tank section went forward with attacking elements in support of Co "D" this Bn. Contacted the enemy. Weather, Rain. Morale, Fair.</u>	<u>Beho, Belgium VP7582 / Company moved from West of Beho to Beho, Belgium. Weather, Fair. Morale, Good.</u>
1944-Dec-19	<u>Beho, Belgium VP7582 / Remained in present location. Meeting strong enemy resistance. Weather, Cloudy and rain. Morale, Fair.</u>	<u>Beho, Belgium VP7582 / Remained in present location. Tank and Mortar Platoon forward with attacking elements. Meeting strong resistance. Weather, Cloudy & Rain. Morale, Fair</u>	<u>Beho, Belgium VP7582 / Company remained in present location. Weather, Cloudy & Rain. Morale, Excellent</u>
1944-Dec-20	<u>Beho, Belgium VP7582 / Remained in present location. Meeting strong enemy counter-attacks. Holding our own. Weather, Cloudy. Morale, Fair.</u>	<u>Beho, Belgium VP7582 / Remained in present location. Tank and Mortar Platoons and Rcn Platoon forward with attacking elements. Meeting strong enemy counter-attacks. Holding our own. Weather, Cloudy. Morale, Fair.</u>	<u>Beho, Belgium VP7582 / Remained in present location. Weather, Good. Morale, Excellent.</u>
1944-Dec-21	<u>Beho, Belgium VP7582 / Remained in present location. Meeting strong enemy resistance. Weather, Cloudy. Morale, Fair.</u>	<u>Beho, Belgium VP7582 / Remained in present location. Tank, Mortar and Rcn Platoons forward with attacking elements. Meeting strong enemy resistance. Weather, Cloudy. Morale, Fair.</u>	<u>Beho, Belgium VP7582 / Company remained in present location. Weather, Good. Morale, Excellent.</u>
1944-Dec-22	<u>Rencheux, Belgium VP7089 / Left Beho, Belgium at 0900 with Co and Bn half tracks. Marched to present area. Arrived at 1030. Morale, Fair. Weather, Cold and Snow.</u>	<u>Rencheux, Belgium VP7089 / Left Beho, Belgium at 0900 with Co and Bn half tracks. Marched to present location. Arrived at 1030. Tank, mortar and rcn platoons forward with fighting elements. Meeting strong resistance. Morale, Fair. Weather, Cold and Snow.</u>	<u>Rencheux, Belgium VP7089 / Company remained in attack. Company trains moved to present location. Morale, Good. Weather, Cold and Snow.</u>
1944-Dec-23	<u>Les Baty, Belgium VK5007 / Left area at Rencheux, Belgium at approx 1330. Arrived in present location 1730. Distance traveled 25 miles. Company withdrawing to Div Assembly area. Weather, Clear. Morale, Fair</u>	<u>Les Baty, Belgium VK5007 / Company departed from area at Rencheux, Belgium at 1330. Arrived at present location at 1730. Distance traveled 25 miles. Withdrawing to Div Assembly area. Weather, Clear. Morale, Fair.</u>	<u>Xhoris, Belgium VP4807 / Company moved from area in vicinity of Rencheux, Belgium to present location. Traveled approx 25 miles. Weather, Fair and Cold. Morale, Good.</u>

What is clear here is that the Trains (the supply vehicles) of Company A moved to Rencheux, apparently while the combat elements of the company remained in the attack. In fact, looking at the earlier A/40 MRs, it seems that they mostly reflected the location of the company trains and not of the combat elements. So additional records are needed.

Task Force Jones Did Not Include A/40

Since the A/40 Morning Reports show the company location at Beho, which was in the general area of Task Force Jones, was A/40 an element of Task Force Jones. Task Force Jones was established under the command of Lt. Col. Robert B. Jones, commanding officer of the 814th Tank Destroyer Battalion, a non-divisional unit that was attached to 7th Armored Division for most of the months of combat. Thus the

composition of Task Force Jones is found in the After Action Reports of the 814th TD Bn, which gives the composition explicitly as follows.

7. On 20 December Task Force JONES was formed under the command of Lt Col JONES of the Battalion to cover the south flank of the 7th Armd Div sector from Deified - Ourth - Gouvey - Cherum. The CP was set up in Bovigny. TF JONES consisted of the following units:

Hq 814th TD Bn
Co C 814th TD Bn (-)
Rcn Co (-) 814th TD Bn
One Rcn Troop Co C 18th Cav
F Co 18 Cav
Five assault guns 18th Cav
Six Med Tks, 31st Tk Bn
17th Tk Bn (- 1 Med Co)
440th FA Bn
D Co 40th Tk Bn
Mortar Plt Co D 40th Tk Bn
2 Platoons Co A 33rd Engr Bn
Co G 112th Inf Regt.

Thus while D/40 was an element of Task Force Jones, it was the only element of 40th Tank Battalion that was included in TF Jones. So A/40 was not a part of Task Force Jones.

40th Tank Battalion After Action Report

The events of the defense of the St. Vith perimeter from 17-23 December caused elements of 40th Tank Battalion to be separated from the Battalion Headquarters. This resulted in the After Action Report not being fully aware of what happened for all elements of the Division, although a separate section did record D/40's actions.

17 December

On 17 December, 40 Tank marched south as an element of Combat Command "A", and A/40's strength was recorded as 13 tanks.

18 December

On 18 December, "At 1015 The Liaison Officer brought instructions from the Battalion Commander at "CCA" Headquarters for Company C to move to the BEHO crossroads to receive further instructions. Company B, Assault Gun Platoon and Company A, in that order, followed." and "The main body consisted of the 40th Tank Battalion less Company C and the 48th Infantry Battalion less Company C. The Combat Command had a mission of attack northwest from ST VITH astride the road to POTEAU, to clear the enemy from that area."

So while the 40 Tank Bn HQ and HQ Company HQ and A/40 Trains remained at Beho, the combat elements of the Battalion (less D/40 and C/40 which were attached elsewhere) were attacking northwest from St. Vith at Poteau – far from Beho.

However, later in the day 18 December, there is the following entry: "A platoon of Company A protected "CCA" Headquarters and another platoon formed a roadblock north of [SART-LEZ-ST. VOTH also known as RODT]. About 1230 Company D called for assistance, reporting that enemy reconnaissance vehicles had approached [GOUVY] and fired on the town. The Mortar Platoon went to

Captain HUGHES'S assistance and Lieutenant DAVID of Company A, 40th Tank Battalion took one tank that had been left behind for maintenance and the dozer of Companies B and C into CHEVAN to outpost the town. (For further details Task Force HUGHES see Part II)." D/40, as noted above, was at Gouvy and on 20 December became part of Task Force Jones. It is possible that the 814TD Bn After Action Report that listed the composition of TF Jones did not distinguish the tanks of 40 Tank Bn that were with D/40, so that these three tanks (A/40 combat tank, B/40 and C/40 tank dozers) were actually part of Task Force Jones. This will be explored when the consideration of that section of the 40 Tank A/AR is taken up below.

Regarding the situation at Poteau at the end of the day on 18 December: **"At night, Company B pulled into a close leaguer for its own protection, and at the same time covered an approach from the northeast. Likewise, Company A, less two platoons, and the Assault Gun Platoon, covered roads from the south and southwest."**

So by the end of the day 18 December, A/40 was split into four separate sections, with most in the Poteau-Rodt area but with one tank at Gouvy.

19 December

The report made no specific mention of A/40: **"The mission of "CCA" was to hold the sector it occupied. The situation continued critical."**

20 December

This was the day that Task Force Jones was set up, and the report notes: **"Company D with the Mortar Platoon in support, passed to Division control in the afternoon."** This presumably included the A/40 tank and the B/40 and C/40 tank dozers, although none of these are mentioned.

The main force of 40 Tank remained in the Poteau-Rodt area, with this entry specific to A/40: **"Engineers laid mines to strengthen the roadblocks set up by Companies A and C."** and **"At night, Company A dozer went to Company C and was used to dig in positions for the tanks."** This further confirms that the C/40 tank dozer (and probably also the A/40 tank and the B/40 tank dozer) was still at Gouvy with TF Jones, since C/40 had to borrow A/40's tank dozer in order to dig in their tanks.

21 December

There is no specific mention of A/40. Action remained focused on Poteau. However, a strong German patrol did cut the road between the main part of the Battalion and the aid station – and also CCA tactical HQ. A B/40 force was sent to clear out the Germans.

22 December

Company A makes up most of the first part of this day's report.

Shortly after midnight a **section of Company A** on a road block, put in on the trail where the eight ¼ ton trucks had been found on 21 December 44, opened fire on an enemy patrol moving from south to north. After the patrol had been broken up, three of the officers and seven enlisted men who had been captured during the morning ambush, escaped, and reported to the tanks. They were evacuated by a medical corps ¼ ton truck to the aid station. They reported that they had been held prisoner by the patrol,

described as 300 strong, on the south side of the ST VITH-POTEAU road, and were being escorted through our lines to the north when the tanks opened fire.

At 0930 **Lieutenant BORCHERS of Company A**, who had his platoon on a road block at (809897), reported a strong infantry attack. About the same time, tanks and infantry were reported attacking the half-tracks of Company B, 48th Armored Infantry Battalion, in the town of [RODT]. Lieutenant RIDER'S platoon, Company B, 40th Tank Battalion, was dispatched to help protect the vehicles. He reported seven enemy tanks moving toward the village. **Company A sent Lieutenant FIELDER'S platoon** to help, and later the Assault Gun Platoon was ordered out of its indirect fire position to lend assistance. At 1100, the medical detachment reported they could not flee toward the Battalion Headquarters because they would come under direct fire. Our tanks took the offensive and the enemy tanks pulled back. Then the medical aid station was able to escape. **Lieutenant BORCHER'S platoon** could not be contacted by radio after 1300.

...

The combat command gave orders for its elements to withdraw through POTEAU to PETIT THIER, while holding at POTEAU. In the late afternoon, the move began, with "CCA" Headquarters leading, followed by the infantry, less Company C; **Company A**; Assault Gun Platoon and finally Company B, 40th Tank Battalion. Company B, 40th Tank Battalion withdrew after a smoke screen had been laid. Company C, 40th Tank Battalion and Company C, 48th Armored Infantry Battalion continued to hold at the POTEAU crossroads, with Company B, 48th Armored Infantry Battalion on the north of the defensive line, Company A, 48th Armored Infantry Battalion in reserve; Company B, 40th Tank Battalion covering the northeast approaches and **Company A, 40th Tank Battalion** covering the southeast approaches.

The loss of contact with Lt. Borchers' platoon must be explored further, if other sources exist to explain what happened.

23 December

The day when 7th Armored Division withdrew from the salient, the Germans sent ten tanks to attack Poteau.

When the withdrawal began, the infantry pulled out first, followed by Company C tanks, **Company A** tanks ... The Battalion did not suffer any losses during the withdrawal, despite heavy enemy tank and infantry pressure at POTEAU.

The losses from the prior action were then tallied.

Tank losses during the action east of VIELSLAM 18 December 44 - 23 December 44 totaled: **Company A (4)**, Company B (2), Company C (3), Company D (7). Personnel losses were **Company A (6 MIA)**, Company D (6 MIA) and Service Company (1 MIA).

A/40 suffered no casualties other than 6 men missing in action east of Vielsalm. Going back to the A/40 Morning Reports, there are only 6 men shown MIA in the period. The 26 Dec MR shows the five men who are the focus of this investigation, along with **Pvt. Stewart S. Register (20 420 172)**, whose MOS 604 was ammunition handler. There is no record in the remaining Dec 1944 nor all of the Jan 1945 MRs of Register returning to duty. However, the National Archives' WWII POW Database shows him captured 23 Dec 1944 and taken by the Germans to Stalag IV-A. Thus he was apparently the only member of the crew to survive. The NARA Enlistment Database shows that Register enlisted at Lake City, FL. (The others

in the crew were all draftees.) He entered as a Corporal, having been a member of the Florida National Guard. So at some point, he was busted in rank to a buck Private. A quick check of Whitepages.com finds no Stewart Register anywhere in the US.

It is very significant that the only six men MIA from A/40 were also the six men reported in the After Action Report as having been lost in the action east of Vielsalm. This does not rule out the tank that was Gouvy however, since that tank was also east of Vielsalm.

Company D – 17-23 December

Recall from the above that one A/40 tank and the tank dozers from B/40 and C/40 were sent to aid D/40 at Gouvy on 18 December. The 40 Tank A/AR has a separate section covering the actions of D/40 and Mortar/HQ/40 from 17-23 December. There is no specific mention of these three tanks during the time at Gouvy. On 20 December, there is this: **“Late in the afternoon Company D reinforced by the Mortar Platoon came under command of Task Force JONES, 7th Armored Division.”**

The three tanks are finally mentioned during the 23 December withdrawal: **“At 1400 Captain HUGHES and the 3rd Platoon commanded by Staff Sergeant SWADER and the 3 medium tanks moved toward the cross road at BEHO.”**

There is no specific mention of these tanks in the following account, which does specifically refer to the 3rd Platoon, to which the three tanks were apparently attached at that time.

The 3rd Platoon, commanded by Staff Sergeant SWADER was ordered to move to the head of the column and establish a road block between BOVIGNY and SALMCHATEAU (overlay). During this time, Germans were reported at SALMCHATREAU and Lieutenant PERKINS was ordered up front to investigate. After some discussion, the order was given to Lieutenant PERKINS and Staff Sergeant SWADER to run the road block that the Germans had at SALMCHATEAU. This attempt was made by Lieutenant PERKINS and Staff Sergeant SWADER. The attempt was stopped by direct fire from enemy tanks and heavy machine gun fire. There being no cover to take and Lieutenant PERKINS being knocked out and tanks burned, Staff Sergeant SWADER ordered his tank crews over the bank and ordered the crew to leave. Staff Sergeant SWADER was then wounded in the hand. After being pinned down by heavy machine gun fire for five (5) hours in the river we again reached our Company. A search was made for Lieutenant PERKINS and his crew but they could not be found.

It is not clear if the burned tanks were solely those of D/40 or if they included the three attached tanks, but it seems certain that all the tanks were lost, as the men dismounted and crossed the Salm River on foot. (The river was small there and is now apparently no longer in existence there, as it has been dammed further north, at Vielsalm.)

The D/40 Morning Reports show only Lt. Perkins and two enlisted men MIA as of 23 Dec 1944. So whatever damage the Germans did to the tanks, it does not appear that there were any deaths.

Conclusions

It seems most likely that the six A/40 men were not in the lone A/40 tank with Task Force Jones, since the men of that column apparently all dismounted and made their way across the Vielsalm River. The

primary candidate for the tank of these six men seems to be one of the tanks of Lt. Borchers' platoon at Rodt.

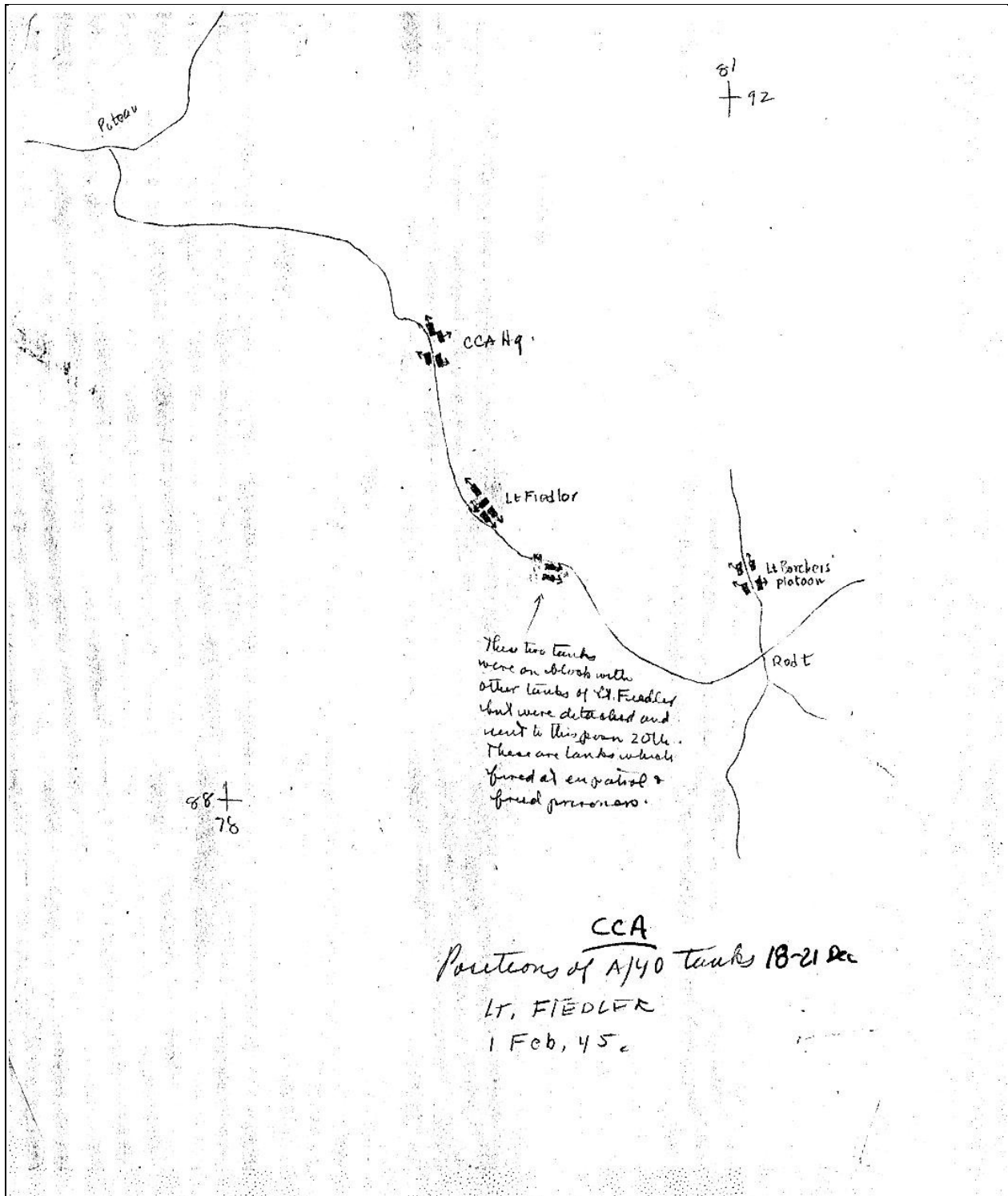
A/40 and B/40 Combat Interviews

Fortunately, interviews were done of two A/40 platoon leaders after the event. These were conducted by members of the Information and Historical section of the Army. Teams of I&H men were assigned to many divisions to interview officers and enlisted men after significant actions, in order to gain a more complete understanding of events.

1st Lt. Harold I. Fiedler

One of the interviewees was Lt. Harold I. Fiedler. While the text relates only to the period from 24 December onward, regarding the action of A/40 at Manhay, there is an attached map showing the positions of A/40 tanks at Rodt from 18-21 December. The interview also explains why A/40 commanding officer was not the one doing the interview, since he was wounded in the action at Manhay, although he was in command for the 18-23 December action.

The map of the A/40 positions at Rodt, the roadblocks referenced in the After Action Report, is shown on the next page. In particular, note the location of the four tanks in Lt. Borchers' platoon. This is just north of the town of Rodt on the road that now goes to the Bier Museum and the huge beer-barrel traffic circle on the highway that is just below the crest of the ridge. I know that Company C of 38th Armored Infantry Battalion was dug in along this ridge at this point, since I visited this location in May 2007 with Ed Burke who was one of the members of C/38 who was dug in there. So the combat interview of C/38's Lt. Schoonover must also be examined.



2nd Lt. Herbert J. Borchers

The interviewer T/3 Linnell Jones had previously interviewed B/40 and B/48, so that he references the B/48 interview maps. So that interview will be considered below, which makes it a bit hard to follow Borchers' interview first.

Here is the text of Lt. Borchers' interview. Note that this interview was conducted in February 1945, more than a month after the events. As will be seen from other accounts, his undated account is actually a description of the events of 22 December 1944.

Lt. Borchers' account follows the assault of Company B's in most details. He is inclined to think that the enemy action began a little earlier - probably around 0300. The four tanks arranged in general as in the B/48 sketch but shifting frequently to alter their firing positions. One tank went a bit further east of the road and, according to the lieutenant, "must have taken care of a platoon."

One of the four tanks was damaged by AT fire about 1430. It could move very slowly and its turret was damaged.

When the first prisoners were taken into town, the two tanks were withdrawn, one going with the prisoners. The tanks threw HE into the houses and the number of prisoners grew rapidly. About 40 came from one house, the Germans sending out an engineer they had captured to arrange for their surrender. It was here that the Lieutenant-Colonel was captured. He asked the Americans to assault the house and take out several wounded men.

One of the two tanks returned. The prisoners were lined up and marched into Rodt. As they passed the houses, other Germans voluntarily joined the column. Lt Brochers' tank was the one accompanying the column.

The prisoners were to be turned over to service elements of the 48th in Rodt. The lieutenant parked his tank next to a high bank and was with the column when he heard somebody shout that German tanks were approaching. He ran back to his tank to hurry back to the other tanks. As he got up in the turret, he saw an enemy tank coming down the road into town (from the west). At the same time, the crippled tank limped into town with Lt Smart on it.

He tried to pull his own tank out, circle around and get position to fire at the enemy tank, then a second enemy tank approached. He was unable to fire at it because of the bank, and started out into the road. The first enemy tank opened up on him but missed. He backed into the bank again.

*Then German infantry came in from the north with bazookas. He ordered his tank and the crippled tank evacuated. He and the men made their way south. **One man from the crippled tank was lost - MIA.***

***One of the two other tanks was never heard of and its crew is MIA.** The other fired at the enemy tanks. It hit them, but did no damage to two of them. The third may have been disabled. The crew of the tank got away safely.*

Unfortunately, Lt. Borchers' interview is not clear about which tanks were which. There were only four tanks in his platoon. They were placed north of Rodt, according to Lt. Fiedler's map, along the slope moving up to the ridge line where C/38 troops were dug in, as the front line of defense.

1. One tank was crippled by anti-tank fire at 1430. ("It could move very slowly and its turret was damaged.") One man from this tank was lost, MIA. So presumably this was Stewart Register, who was thus not part of the same crew as the men who were killed. It would seem likely, though it is not stated in the account, that one of the two tanks that were withdrawn would have been this crippled tank. When Lt. Borchers ordered an evacuation of the crippled tank, his own tank was in the town of Rodt, so that the crippled tank had also apparently already been moved to the town from the front line north of the town. It is also clear from the account that German infantry had infiltrated around the front line defenses and into the houses of the town.

2. The other tank that was withdrawn appears to have been that of Lt. Borchers. This was the tank that returned and then took prisoners in a column into Rodt. This tank was in the town when the German tanks attacked.
3. The final paragraph of the interview is very confusing. It refers to three tanks, presumably the three other tanks of the platoon besides Lt. Borchers' own tank. Two of the tanks had been left on the front line. One of those was never heard from again, and – even in February – the crew of that tank were all MIA. These were clearly the five men, other than Stewart Register, listed as MIA on the A/40 Morning Report. The mention of a third tank is probably another reference to the crippled tank, whose crew got away safely – apparently with the exception of Stewart Register.
4. The fourth tank was the other one that had been on the front line. Apparently, this tank somehow made it back to American lines, since the tank crew was able to give an account of them firing on and hitting but not damaging two enemy tanks.

So, it is the third tank in the above list that was the one that was never heard from again and which, more than a month after the action, still had five men MIA.

Capt. Emerson J. Wolfe, CO B/40

The initial reference to “Company B” appears to refer to B/40 and not B/48. And the interview of Capt. Emerson J. Wolfe, CO B/40, confirms this. Here is his account of the B/40 events of 18-22 December.

18 December

B/40 moved to an assembly area vicinity SCHLOMMEFURTH in conjunction with attack of CCA on POTEAU. No action that evening.

19 December

Two road blocks were established one with two tanks, an anti-tank (infantry) platoon, and a squad of engineers, and the other with 2 tanks and no infantry (796899). At the first block a mine field was laid and booby traps planted.

20 or 21 December

A platoon of three tanks was sent to outpost in the edge of the woods at 800894 after a number of peeps and their occupants had been lost thru german infiltration of the woods to that point.

22 December

Company moved to immediate W of RODT at the time of the enemy attack on that town. **A/40 was to the left of the road to fire into the town**, and B/40 was to the right of the road to tie in with CCB units to the S of town. The Bn AG's, under the control of Captain Wolfe, were dispatched to firing positions along the edge of the woods 800894.

A fire fight was carried on with german armored vehicles moving into RODT, but no hits were observed. One B/40 tank was hit.

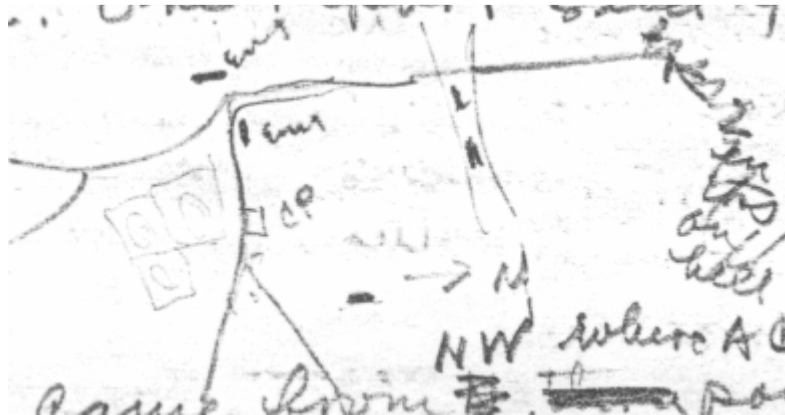
That night the B/40 tanks were withdrawn to vic PETIT THIER.

Conclusions

The only MIA men for A/40 for the last half of December were those accounted for as MIA in the account of Lt. Borchers. No other account has A/40 men MIA, and the Morning Reports list only the six men noted earlier in the After Action Report. So it seems almost certain that the six men who appeared MIA on the A/40 Morning Reports, five of whom were later found to have been killed, were from Lt. Borchers' platoon at Rodt. So we do have the location of the deaths of these men. It is also clear that they were actually missing as of 22 December, although the later Morning Report shows them MIA as of 23 December.

B/48 Combat Interview

The interview of Lt. Borchers mentions the B/48 interview map that showed the position of Lt. Borchers' four tanks. Here is the map from that interview, of Lt. Lewis M. Millican Jr.



B/48 were set up in a defensive position in the town of Rodt and thus south of the front line that was on the ridge line north of Rodt. The map is very inconclusive about the position of tanks, nor whether they were Lt. Borchers' A/40 tanks. In fact, Lt. Borchers' account makes it clear that his tanks were not in the town of Rodt, since he talks about taking prisoners back into Rodt from his position, which is consistent with the location shown on Lt. Fiedler's map. Thus I cannot give any weight to the B/48 combat interview as to the circumstances in which one of Lt. Borchers' tanks was lost north of Rodt.

C/38 Combat Interview

As noted above in relation to Lt. Fiedler's interview map, Ed Burke of C/38 was dug in along the ridge line north of Rodt, further up the slope from Lt. Borchers' tanks, which were out of sight behind the men on the ridge (Ed Burke did not see any tanks behind his position.)

They expected the Germans to attack from the northeast, but instead the attack came from the northwest, from the direction of Poteau. About 15 American tanks had pulled back to the C/38 position at that point and were only 5 feet away from the C/38 men, who mounted the tanks which pulled back down the hill towards Rodt and then turned right to Hinderhausen. The tanks had to drive over the fields between the two towns, since the Germans had the road zeroed in. The 38 AIB Combat Interview, Ed Burke noted to me, stated that there were no 38 AIB casualties in this action, but Ed said that he knew of one C/38 man whose head was blown off and another who he saw laying on his back in the snow with what was left of one of his legs sticking up in the air, with the bone fully exposed.

The C/38 interviewee was 2nd Lt. Walter M. Schonour, CO of 1st Platoon, C/38. He was interviewed 1 Jan 1945. Here is his account of 22 December:

Friday, 22 Dec

In the morning I inspected the lines which were in very good shape. We made a couple of adjustments on the left flank to tie in more closely with the 23rd.

Between 0900 and 1000, the CO of A/17 received a report that the positions we were holding were untenable and that we were to withdraw to the other side of Rodt for Ober Emmels, and this the only road the tracks could use. Word was sent to the right flank to withdraw to the tracks in the rear of the cleared space. They got about half the way in when the left flank units began to come in with the news that the enemy had broken through the 23rd positions, and that enemy tanks had come up and were firing at the six tracks and cutting the only road.

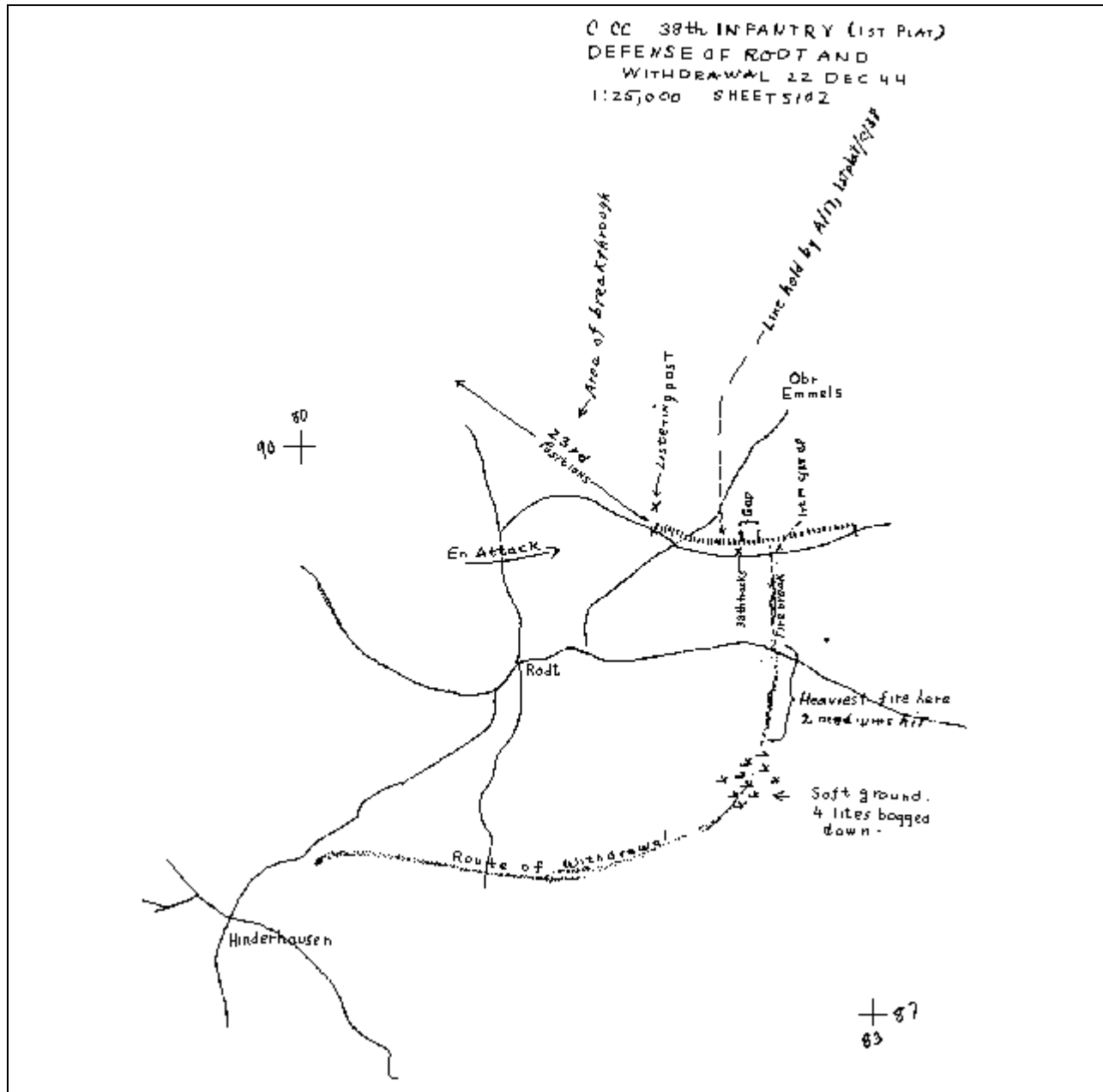
The tracks had to be abandoned. The infantry had to hang on to the A Company tanks which went down through a fire break and circled the town of Rodt while under constant fire. The infantry on the tanks fired constantly to keep enemy small arms fire down to a minimum. (Lt. Schonover has the highest praise for the way in which Lt Wilson of the 17th managed the withdrawal and credits him with saving both tanks and infantry.

The hardest fighting was east of Rodt (see map) where at least two of the tanks were hit. The infantry had to get out as best they could. They went from tank to tank. There were light tanks in the line, and when a marsh was reached, they couldn't get through the soft ground and had to be abandoned. Some vehicles belonging to other units also had to be abandoned.

The column circled Rodt and went on to Hinderhausen. Every man of the 38th was gotten out safely, although equipment losses were heavy. Men lost their weapons and some of their clothing. They had to go as light as possible.

At Hinderhausen, 17th tanks outposted the town. The men of the 38th were pretty well split up, but most of them were rounded up and again were split into impromptu squads to outpost the tanks. In this way, four medium tanks of A/17 were outposted. Stragglers from other outfits were rounded up and helped out. We had about 70 men in all. Friday night was spent there.

Here is the map referenced in the text.



Thus the tanks the C/38 men rode out on were from A/17, which had been positioned along the road to Poteau and had fallen back as the Germans moved from Poteau toward Rodt. In addition, the positions of C/38 were actually east of the location of the Bier Museum. However, Ed Burke recalls the forest road that led north from his position to where the Bier Museum now is.

Regardless of the C/38 location, the bottom line for this interview is that it sheds no light on the A/40 tanks.

Führer Begleit Brigade (Foreign Military Studies Manuscript B-592) Account of Gen. Maj. Otto Ernst Remer

After the end of the war, the U. S. Army had many German commanders either write up their own accounts of the actions of their units or else interviewed them about these actions or both. These were gathered together in different lettered and numbered series of manuscripts, known as Foreign Military Studies. The force that overran the American positions at Rodt was the Führer Begleit Brigade, commanded by Gen. Maj. Otto Ernst Remer. He wrote two accounts (B-592 and B-838) of the actions of his command. The first of those accounts (B-592) includes the actions of 22 December 1944.

Here is Gen. Remer's account of 22 December 1944.

The armored group (the II Battalion, two armored companies and two assault gun companies) was assembled at ???¹ 2400 in the area of Nieder-Emmelse-Heide. The III Battalion reported completed assembly in the vicinity of Tomberg at about 0100. I led the armored group myself. I set out a powerful reconnaissance along the road from Ober-Emmels to Sard-Lez-St Vith at once, which reported the northern edge of the patch of woods south of Ober-Emmels was rather heavily occupied and that enemy armored cars had been sighted. It was further reported that the terrain off of the road was not passable at night and that several tanks had already stuck fast.

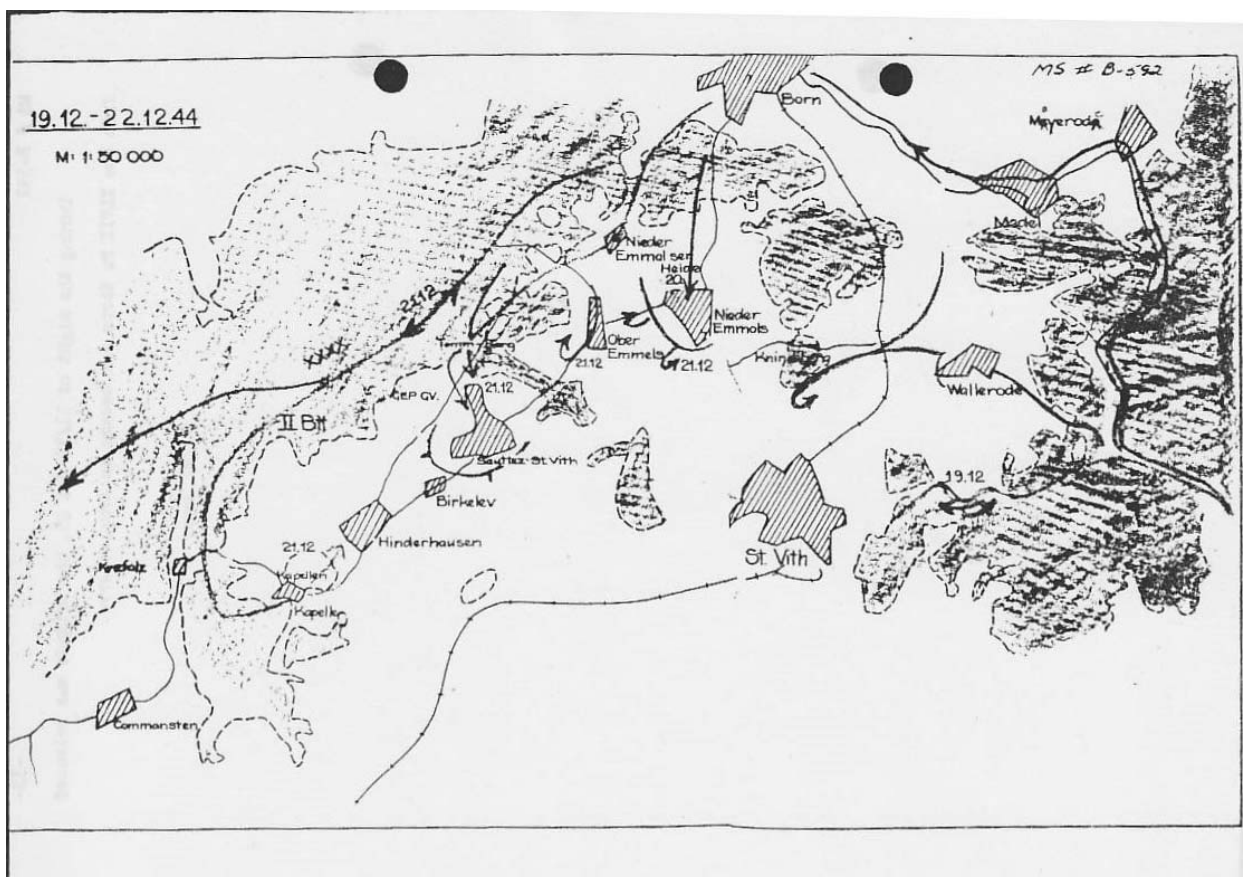
I therefore led the armored group through the bare places in the woods in the direction of Tomberg. Up until daylight, I moved it forward to the southern edge of the forest north of Sard-Lez-St Vith with a tedious effort. This was a very difficult undertaking because tanks were sticking fast at every moment in the softened terrain and because the woods were very thick in parts. At times, one tank after another had to be guided in by scouts on foot.

As a result of the continuous noise of the motors, the element of surprise was lost. During the night, the artillery battalion shelled the enemy artillery positions spotted west of Sard-Lez-St Vith with artillery fire observed by forward observers of the III Battalion. By taking advantage of the darkness and the snow storm, the III Battalion worked its way even closer to the locality. The moving forward of the armored group during the dawn was delayed by the fact that the four tanks ran onto mines along the edge of the woods which first had to be cleared. In the meantime, the III Battalion broke into the locality and fought ahead from house to house. **The locality was stubbornly defended by enemy tanks. Individual combat teams were then stopped by enemy tanks and were temporarily taken into captivity, even the battalion commander. It was not until the attack lunging from the edge**

¹ There is probably a word here that is completely off the left side of the copy.

of the woods on a broad front [was made] that the locality was taken and the situation restored. The III Battalion had considerable losses, especially inasmuch as enemy tanks concentrated fire at close range on the many wounded men who were in several cellars. At about noon, Sard-Lez-St Vith was fully cleared and in our firm possession. In toto, about 20 American tanks were put out of action or captured, a number was abandoned and was still completely intact [and] about 50 prisoners were taken. During the day, and during the following night, the locality itself was under constant enemy artillery fire. In the direction of St Vith, contact was made with the 18 and 62 VGD.

Here is the relevant map for this action.



Clearly, the red-highlighted text above in Gen. Remer's account matches Lt. Borchers' account of taking German prisoners, including an officer. Thus while Remer's account does not identify the units of the tanks involved, it is clear that it was Lt. Borchers' platoon that was putting up the stubborn defense of Rodt. And it is also clear that these tanks were overrun by a large force that had moved up through the woods and then attacked "on a broad front".

Conclusions

The five men who were killed were in the lost tank of 2nd Lt. Borchers' platoon of A/40. They were killed when the German Führer Begleit Brigade launched a "broad front" attack from the woods to the north of the A/40 tanks north of Rodt, Belgium and moved on to take the town. It is also clear that this happened on 22 December 1944 and not 23 December 1944, which was the date as of which the men were later retroactively listed as being Missing in Action.

I have ordered the Individual Deceased Personnel Files of S/Sgt. Link and Pvt. Aldrich. Since the area was not under American control again until late January 1945, there should be an account of the recovery of their remains that confirms their location and may even give the identification numbers on their tank.