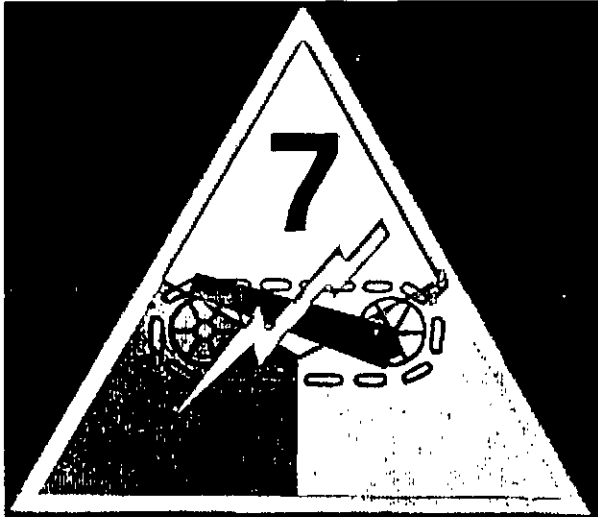


87th Cavalry Squadron (Recon)

The 7th Armored Division in World War II

by

Walt Cross, Master Sergeant, U.S. Army (Retired)



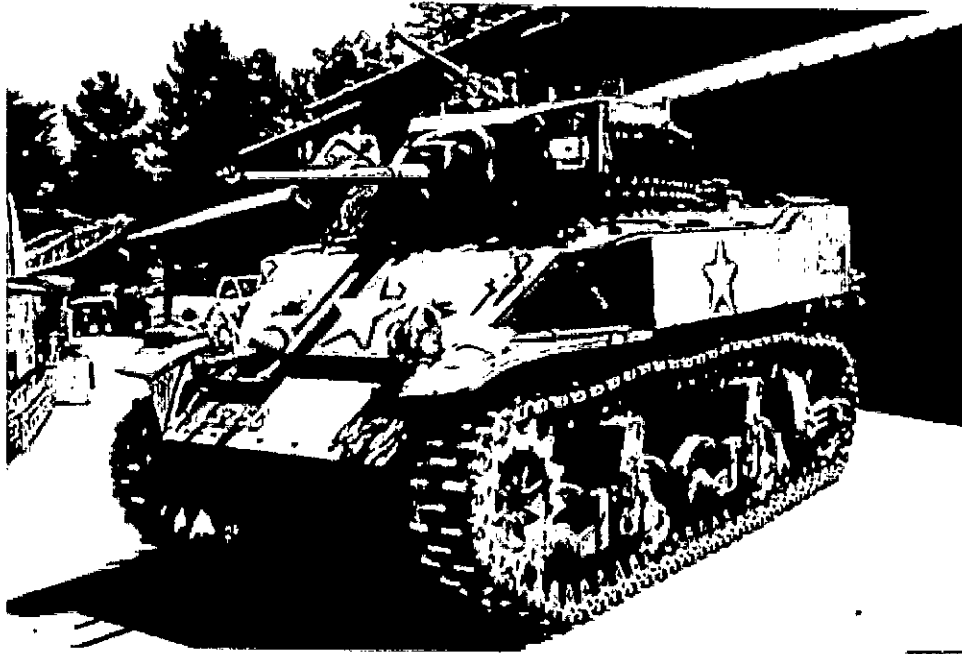
Division Patch, 7th Armored Division. Unit Crest, 87th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron (Mechanized)



This is the story of my father, Corporal Earl L. Cross, in the greatest land battle of the Western Front during World War II, the Battle of the Bulge.

Armored cavalry consists of troops that ride in armored vehicles. In this case the 87th Cavalry was the reconnaissance battalion for the 7th Armored Division, a part of the XXth "Ghost" Corps. Because of its quick movement and hard hitting style the division was known by various nicknames. The press called it "the rattlesnake division", while the Germans themselves called it "the ghost division". The 87th cavalry served as the eyes and ears of the division. Their distinctive unit insignia is a silver shield divided down the middle and the right side (as the bearer of the shield would see it) colored green. It is charged with a trotting boar hog, tusks exposed with the shield colors again divided but reversed on the boar. The unit's motto is "Poking Around" which is exactly what the 87th's job was, to poke around and find the enemy. The tusks indicate that although small, (the 87th consisted of armored cars and light tanks), the unit was dangerous none the less. My father served in Company F of the 87th, which was the only tank company, the rest of the unit being comprised of armored cars troops. Dad was gunner and assistant driver of the M5A1 "Stuart" light tank. This small but fast tank was armed with a 37mm main gun, a coaxle (moves in the turret with the main gun) .30 caliber machine gun,

and a .50 caliber turret mounted machine gun.

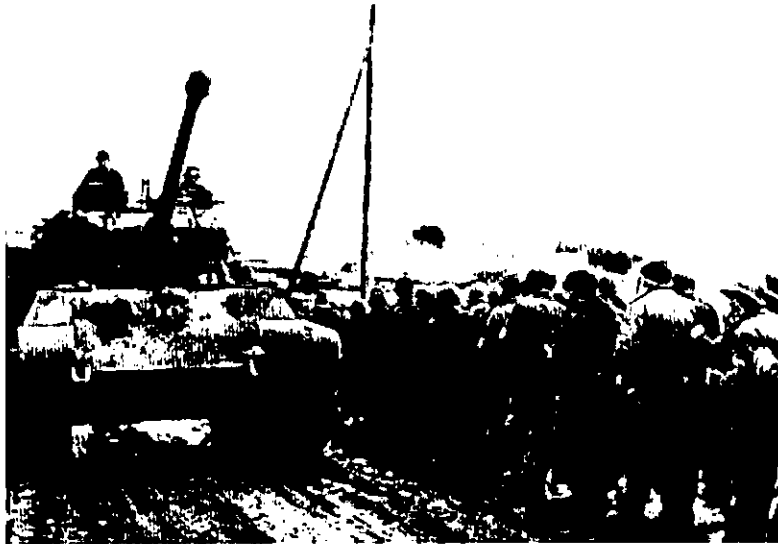


M5A1 Stuart Light Tank

On the 16th of December, 1944 Corporal Cross had just come off a tour of guard duty and was looking forward to a meal and some sleep. It was not to be. The unit, which was just inside the Dutch border from Germany near the town of Heerlen, was alerted for a move south, toward the small but strategic Belgian village of St. Vith (pronounced Zankt Vit). This town straddled several crossroads just outside the Ardienne Forest. In the coming struggle, the defenders of this hamlet would play a pivotal role in the defeat of German forces trying desperately to reach the Belgian port of Antwerp. Corporal Cross had joined the unit a scant two weeks earlier from England. Prior to that he had crossed the Atlantic with 10,000 other troops aboard the British liner Aquatania. He had been trained at Fort Knox, Kentucky on the M7 105 self propelled howitzer, and had then spent twelve weeks learning to be an infantryman in England. He was surprised when he reached the continent and was assigned to a tank squadron. As an infantryman he had been issued an M1 rifle, which he kept throughout the war even though tankers were supposed to carry the lighter weight and shorter ranged M1 carbine.

At Castle Rimburg, just inside the German border near the battered town of Ubach, General Hasbrouck, commander of the 7th Armored Division, paced the walls of the ancient fortress. Something was in the wind besides the bitter cold. Intelligence had earlier reported small attacks along the Western Front, but rumor had it they were more than "small". Then the order came, they were to strike south and attempt to rescue the 106th Infantry Division which was under heavy assault by enemy units of unknown strength. No one knew how powerful the German assault was, no one but the German commander.

On that bleak and cold December morning, well before the break of day, the troops of the Fifth Panzer Army under command of Field Marshall Gerd Von Rundstedt struck through the Ardenne Forest and smashed the 106th Infantry Division. It was the 7th's task to try and save the remnants of the 106th.



American prisoners taken during the opening phase of the battle.

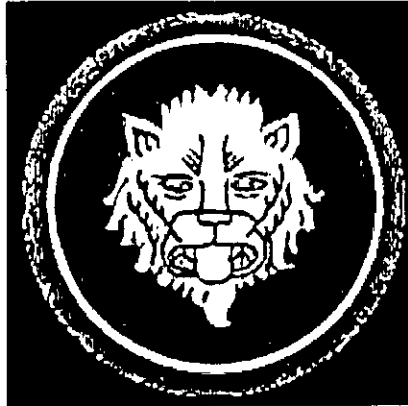
The weather conditions were bad, overcast; penetratingly cold; snow flurries mixed with rain; poor visibility with roads both muddy when it rained and slick when it froze. The terrain between the Schnee Eifel and St. Vith was rugged, forested, and rock strewn. It was across this ground the men of the 106th would have to retreat to reach the safety of St. Vith and the oncoming 7th Armored. Few of them made it. It was also across this rough stretch the Germans would have to attack, not a small task in itself. Historically they had done it three times before, a demonstrative case where the Americans had failed to learn from history.

General Hasbrouck split his division into two commands and moved them over two separate routes known as "west" and "east". The west route, followed by the bulk of the division, was led by the 87th Cavalry, while the division reserve consisting of the headquarters, division artillery, and the 203rd Antiaircraft Artillery Battalion, took the east route. The east route was later cut off by the enemy, forcing the artillery to turn back and take the west road, delaying its arrival at St. Vith. Travel along the west route went fairly smooth until noon on December 17th, when retreating American units slowed, and then completely stopped the advance by evening. The 106th was doomed unless the division continued its march. Finally, after struggling to clear all vehicles heading away from the front, the 7th arrived at St. Vith, with Corporal Cross in one of the lead tanks. But it was too late for the 106th. As darkness fell the 7th's units began to spread out into a defensive horseshoe shaped perimeter to the east, north, and south of the town. The fight was about to begin in earnest.



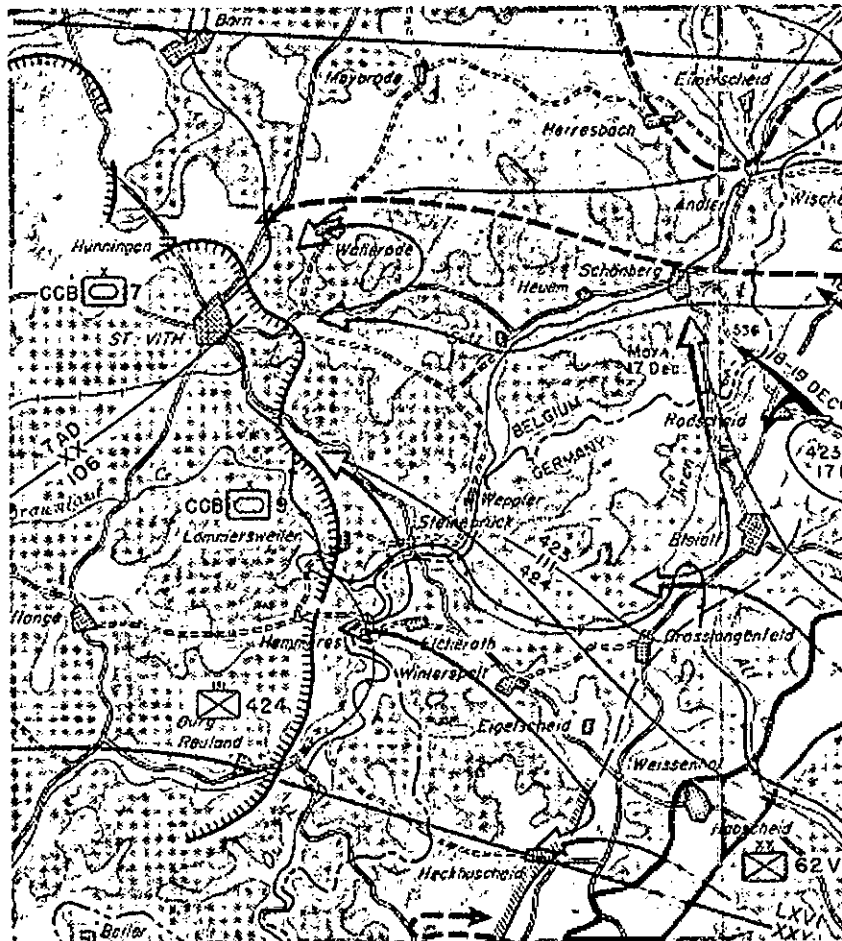
German troops advancing upon St. Vith.

Death of a Division



Shoulder Patch, 106th Infantry Division

Just to the East of St. Vith on a ridge known as the Shnee Eifel was the 106th Infantry Division. This hastily thrown together unit was a hodge podge of troops taken from such diverse areas as pilot training classes, officer candidate school, and the leftovers of training cadres as well as any unassigned troops that happened to be handy. It was placed in an area considered "quiet" to complete its training in an on-the-job situation. Two of this division's three brigades would be annihilated or captured by the crack troops spear heading the German thrust code named "Autumn Fog". Many of the troops atop the Shnee Eifel would be captured and interned for the remainder of the war. The remnants of the two decimated brigades would escape through the corridor being held open by the 7th Armored.



The LXVI Corps Attacks 106th Infantry Division 16-19 December 1944

The Battle for St. Vith

The Situation: December 17, 1944.

The situation was approaching critical. The Germans desperately needed the strategic town of St. Vith with its road and railway center to continue their assault, and they were striking hard to accomplish the task. To the north of the town the 14th Cavalry Group had been driven back in confusion. To the east the 422nd and 423rd regimental combat teams of the 106th were surrounded by the enemy and would soon be killed or captured. To the south of the town the 9th Armored was attacking toward the town of Winterspelt in support of the 424th, the last remaining brigade sized element of the 106th Infantry. Each command was standing alone, with only sparse communications with surrounding units. It was obvious that the plan to attack east of St. Vith to Schonberg and the rescue of the 106th could not be done. The Germans already held Schonberg in strength. The remaining troops of the 106th in St. Vith, consisted of the 81st Engineers, 168th Engineer Battalion, a platoon of infantry (1st platoon, Co F, 423rd Infantry), and the most welcome of all, the 275th Armored Field Artillery Battalion. This unit would provide the only artillery for the defense until the arrival of the 7th's division artillery. The buildup of the defensive perimeter was piecemeal, and units would be shifted about in the coming days to forestall enemy attacks in strength upon different points. Dad and his unit found themselves south of the town, maintaining the vital but tenuous link to the 9th Armored. During the remainder of the 17th, despite strengthening enemy probes, plans were in development for a counter attack, as it was still thought this was a local and limited move by German forces. The extent of the axis operation was still unknown to the allied powers.

Opposing the St. Vith defenders was no less than five German Panzer divisions with more than 500 hundred tanks, three Volksgrenadier (infantry) divisions, and the Grosse Deutschland Brigade. During the course of the six day battle for St. Vith the Germans would bring over 100,000 troops against the 7th Armored. The Germans employed a "bouncing ball" technique to probe for weak points in the defence. With each "bounce" the American's limited reserves within the horseshoe were shifted to the perimeter where the German attack was strongest. These were crack German units, many of them veterans of the Eastern Front, they were aggressive, fanatical, and determined to destroy the 7th as they had the 106th.

The Events of 18th December:

In the early morning hours of the 18th of December the Germans began a series of assaults on the American forces holding St. Vith. First came a bitter night attack to the north spear headed by the 1st SS Panzer Division using flares fired by their tanks to silhouette American armor and blind our gunners. The tactic worked, and the Germans took the hamlet of Recht before being stopped by the 17th Tank Battalion supported by Company C of the 38th Armored Infantry. A second attack on the east side of the horseshoe followed by a renewal of the north attack saw the capture of Hunningen by German forces, only to be pushed back out by counterattacking American armor. The Americans knocked out eight German armored vehicles and killed a hundred enemy infantry. However, to the west of St. Vith, enemy forces were taking the town of Poteau, threatening to cut off the 7th's supply lines. These were the same German units that had taken Recht in the early morning hours. Recognizing the value of holding the crossroads, the Germans dug their tanks and infantry in along the woodline overlooking the village. The first American assault was repelled and they fell back. A message from the division commander read: "Imperative you seize Poteau this p.m. and hold it!" Just as night fell Combat Command "A" launched a second determined attack and the Germans could not hold their position. The fighting was bitter house to house night time combat by infantryman against infantryman and the men of the 1st SS Panzer (Adolph Hitler) division lost.

Von Rundstedt had not taken St. Vith in accordance with the time table called for in his operations order, but he was determined to capture the town regardless. His entire offensive was based upon using the Belgian town as an advanced rail depot for deploying his panzer armies. He now had armored spearheads bypass to the north and south of St.

Vith with the intention of driving behind the American defenders and cutting them off, as his troops would succeed in doing at Bastogne to the 101st Airborne Division. The mission was now clear, the 7th Armored was to deny St. Vith and its transportation routes to the enemy while insuring the Germans did not cut them off to the rear. To accomplish this mission, General Hasbrouck ordered the high ground to the east of St. Vith held against all German attempts to advance. At the end of the 18th, the 7th had destroyed 10 tanks, 3 assault guns, 8 armored cars, and killed 339 of the enemy. But the heaviest fighting was yet to come.

The Events of December 19th:

During the night the Germans had pounded road junctions with mortar and artillery fire while patrols from both sides kept up a running firefight. Two night time assaults were launched to the north in another German bid to capture Hunningen, but both failed due to stubborn resistance by the tanks of the 31st Tank Battalion as well as assault guns and units of the 87th Cavalry. The enemy then continued the entire day assaulting the entire defensive perimeter of the 7th Armored. Tank assaults with supporting infantry charged the dug in American positions, only to withdraw bloodied and defeated, leaving the fight to supporting artillery barrages. Another attack developed to the north, the fourth attempt to take Hunningen. Once again the enemy withdrew, leaving twisted vehicles and their dead behind. Next, they massed for a large assault only to be caught in the open by American artillery.

Now the Germans changed their direction of attack, and Dad's unit came under attack by a reinforced infantry company supported by armor and assault guns. Reinforced by a tank destroyer section as well as a company of infantry, Dad's unit destroyed the advancing armor and decimated the ranks of the enemy infantry who had closed to within 50 yards. The German left sixty dead in the attack. Dad remembers the crack of a German "88s" passing overhead, the bitter cold compounded by a fear so palpable you could almost smell it. He speaks of the chaos of combat and the suddenly dead men. They all were cold, hungry, and lonely, but determined to defeat the Germans.

Welcome assistance came to the defenders on the afternoon of the 19th, when the 434th Armored Field Artillery Battalion and the 965th Field Artillery Battalion arrived and joined with the 275th to create a group fire direction center. The additional fire power would greatly aid the 7th in their mission. Additionally, a part of the 112th Regimental Combat Team of the 28th Infantry Division was brought into St. Vith. They had lost all contact with their own command and were lost until a 7th Armored patrol found and brought them in. Thus reinforced, General Hasbrouck readied his command for the assaults the Germans would launch with renewed vigor and determination.

The Events of December 20th:

By the morning of the 20th, it was apparent this was not a local attack, but a general German offensive stretched over a seventy mile front. Intelligence reports confirmed that the 7th Armored was up against the very best of the German military. German prisoners had been taken from the following units: 1st SS Panzer Division; Grosse Deutschland Brigade; 18th, 62nd and 560th Volk's Grenadier Divisions; and the 116th Panzer Division. Additional troops from the 5th and Sixth Panzer Armies had also been committed. The Germans were strangely quiet on the 20th, with report after report indicating they were by-passing the 7th's positions in and around St. Vith both to the north and the southeast. The 40th Tank Battalion, sent to outpost the village of Gouvy, came across an entire army ration dump containing 50,000 individual rations. They quickly secured the needed provisions and had them issued to the entire division. The 87th Cavalry continued to patrol and screen the flanks of the division. That night tanks and other enemy vehicles could be heard massing to the north, east, and south of St. Vith. Unknown to the 7th's men, elements of the II SS Panzer Corps was moving into position. The defenders did know that with the morning would come their greatest test.

The Events of 21 December 1944:

A Crescendo of Combat

The Germans realized that their failure to capture St. Vith and thus gain control of the vital road and railways centered there, was destroying any chance of success in capturing Antwerp and bringing the allies to their knees in the west. It was, in fact, now or never. The morning of December 21st dawned gray and cold, but quiet. As that worn out line of "B" rate war movies always said: "Its too quiet." This time it was true. The Germans were quiet most of the morning, and then at 1100 hours (11am) they struck.

The assault began with the crash of heavy artillery falling into the American positions followed by the horrendous howling of the "screaming meemie" rockets that came in their hundreds. This noisy weapon, whose squall was a mixture of scream and deep throated howl, did as much psychological as physical damage to the GIs of the 7th Armored. Behind the rain of hot steel came the cream of German infantry and the best of their armor. From the opening shot of the assault on the 21st to the withdrawal of the division across the Salm River two days later, the attacks all along the front did not let up. From 11am on the 21st to 10pm that night the American line held against continuous infantry and armor attacks. The zip of small arms, clatter of machine guns, crack of assault guns and bang of howitzers echoed across the snowy fields and off the trunks of the great forest. The crump of mortars punctuated by the crisper clang of tank fire drowned the cries of wounded and dying men. Animal-like screams followed by the thudding explosion of a handgrenade and the clunk of rifle butts marked where hand to hand combat raged along the line. Patches of dark and hot blood on the snow soon cooled and then hardened in the wintery air. Afternoon came and the fighting continued, evening came, and the fighting continued, night fell and the fighting continued. Wounded men cry for two people in their agony and death. The medic and their mother. Those words were spoken many times that day and night, in German and English. Finally, at 10pm, exhausted and fought out, gunfire on both sides slowed and then ceased. The din of battle died away, only to be replaced by the cries of men and the distant sound of engines as the German armor withdrew. They would be back. General Clarke ordered the evacuation of St. Vith and a repositioning on the high ground west of the town. Dad said of the withdrawal "I was in one of the last tanks to leave the town, it was burning. The gun on our tank had been caved in from an enemy round."

All through the night remnants of American units that had been overrun east of St. Vith came in. At 2pm in the morning on December 22nd, the Germans renewed their attack.

The events of 22 December 1944:

The Germans continued their attacks with infantry and armor. The 928th Genadier Battalion attacked U.S. forces at Rodt. By 11:30am they had captured the town after nine hours of combat. At Rodt cooks, drivers, radiomen, anyone, was pulled forward to augment the infantry. This German advance split the 7th Armored into two halves, forcing the withdrawal of some units. All vehicles not essential to the defense were ordered west. To the south, the 9th Armored fought desperately to maintain contact with the 7th. Enemy pressure increased all along the line as the 7th regrouped and shortened its defensive perimeter. Units were strung out and lost contact Dad said:

"We formed into the old wagon circle, our weapons pointed outward. It was bitterly cold, and two German patrols passed by us at different times and on either side of us. They came by firing machine guns as they walked and yelling. We later heard they were hopped up on shnapps or dope of some kind."

The division now came under intense artillery fire. All units including the 9th Armored to the south, the 14th Cavalry Group, the remainder of the 106th Infantry Division and the organic units of the 7th were short on supplies and ammunition. The Germans were pushing past the division's north and south flanks and threatening to cut them off. There was but one thing to do, to withdraw fighting a rearguard action. British Field Marshall Montgomery, in overall command of the northern army sent a message to General Hasbrouck: "You have accomplished your mission, a mission well done. It is time to withdraw."

The Events of December 23, 1944:

The enemy's pressure from the east eased slightly toward dawn, and the H-hour for withdrawal was set at 0600 hours (6:00 am). The 7th continued to hold the line as units of the 9th Armored began to withdraw behind their screen. The roads had frozen solid the night before, providing good traction for all vehicles. The battle for St. Vith was over, as the 7th Armored withdrew into the lines of the 82nd Airborne. One month later, the 7th Armored would return, and take St. Vith back from the Germans. Hitler's great gamble had failed. The 7th's capture of St. Vith marked the end of Von Rundstedt's "Autumn Fog" offensive.