

DEFENSES- OCTOBER, NOVEMBER AND DECEMBER 1944

On the 19 of October the 18th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron was relieved from assignment to the 14th Cavalry Group and attached to the 2nd Infantry Division and closed on Manderfeld, Belgium on October 21, 1944 and by the 22nd had taken up positions opposite the German held Sigfried Line 2,000 yards to the east, at the approaches to the Losheim Gap.¹ The squadron command post was established at St. Elisabeth Kloster. The building was furnished with a Victorian settee and chairs of mahogany upholstered in red plush and furniture that looked curiously out of place in Army confines. There were a great number of religious pictures about and plaster statuary of the Holy Family in various attitudes of devotion.² Their primary mission was to reinforce and improve existing positions previously held by elements of the 2nd Infantry Division located to the south of the cavalry positions. While still attached the 2nd Infantry Division the 18th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron relieved the following units: H.Q. and H.Q. Company, 612 Tank Destroyer Battalion (minus the 1st and 2nd Reconnaissance Platoons), Co. A, 741st Tank Battalion, Co. K, 9th Infantry and an unnumbered company of the Belgian Secret Army.³ Once in position the squadron and its attached units were designated as Task Force "X". The Squadron was also utilized to patrol areas between defensive positions and the Sigfried Line, to locate enemy outposts and observation posts, prepared defenses and to reduce the activity of German patrols and to capture prisoners.⁴ Located in the center of Bradley's sector, the Ardennes had been quiet since mid-September. Referred to as a "ghost front," one company commander described the sector as a "nursery and old folk's home."⁵ Repeated assurances from the 2nd Infantry Division that this was a quiet sector dominated the atmosphere. General Robertson, commanding the division had reservations that a single cavalry squadron would be able to provide an adequate defense in the Losheim Gap and centered his only divisional reserve, a reinforced infantry battalion in the vicinity of Auw to support the cavalry. To the north there existed a two mile gap between the south flank of the 99th Infantry Division and the northern extents of Task Force "X". This gap was patrolled by elements of the division's I & R Platoon on the V Corps side and cavalry troops within the VIII Corps boundary. The commanding officer of the 99th Division, Major General Walter E. Lauer was aware of his exposed southern flank and stationed his division reserve, the 3rd Battalion of the 394th Regiment near the

¹ Unit History of the 18th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, compiled by 1st Lt. Howard B. Peterson Jr. and 1st Lt. Max L. Crawford.

² Letter from Marvin Cruse of Hastings Nebraska, H.Q. Troop 18th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron to his mother and sister in 1944. Supplied courtesy of Tom Isern, Professor of History at North Dakota State University.

³ After/After Action Report, 18th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron Mecz., October 1944. National Archives

⁴ Ibid

⁵ ARDENNES-ALSACE, CMH Pub. 72-26

Buchholz railroad station.⁶ VIII Corps was still on the “aggressive defense” from the Losheim Gap through the Schnee Eifel and along the line of the Our River to the boundary with Third Army below Remich on the Moselle southeast of Luxembourg. Along the front line First Army had a wide zone of action, VII Corps had 12.6 miles, V Corps had 25.3 miles and VIII Corps was responsible for 79.9 miles for a total of 113.8 miles. The disproportionate frontages of the corps were due to the more difficult terrain on the right and to the strengthening of the left flank to launch an offensive in that sector. The American armies had typically been offensive in nature and First Army had not been accustomed to establishing a front under defensive conditions. This suspension of offensive operations was to be only for a brief period of time.

Along the First Army Front ammunition supplies had been so short that only targets of the greatest and most critical value were fired on. Massed artillery delivered at critical moments, short lived and heavy but almost simultaneous, effective in smashing German counterattacks. Self propelled 155's were especially good against German pillboxes and industrial areas. Massed artillery did not play a huge roll during the rapid pursuit across France.⁷ The VIII Corps front was extraordinarily wide. It was faced with a river line for approximately three quarters of a mile of the distance from flank to flank and this river line being on the frontier was prepared for defense as a part of the general Siegfried Line. Along VIII Corps front were the 14th Cavalry Group, 106th Infantry Division, 28th Infantry Division, 9th Armored Division (CCB) and the 4th Infantry Division. It had one infantry division and the equivalent of two armored divisions in reserve. The Ninth Army to the north had its 7th Armored Division and the 30th Infantry Division in reserve and in the south the Third Army had the 4th and 26th Infantry Divisions and the 10th Armored Division.

The width of the sector held by the 2nd Infantry Division and eventually the 106th Infantry Division along the attached cavalry group was approximately 18 air miles. The genuine ground distance was actually more than 21 miles.⁸ The 14th Cavalry Group had the mission of screening and patrolling the five mile wide gap from a point in the woods northwest of Losheim to that town and then south along the ridgeline across the headwaters of the Our River down to the edge of the wooded Schnee Eifel.⁹ This corridor is known as the Losheim Gap, heavily wooded and only slightly less rugged than the surrounding Ardennes. The harsh terrain of the Ardennes lends itself well to the defense as to the offense, but it had not been the policy of U.S. forces to prepare for a defensive phase of operations at this point. The road net within the area and to its front was quite limited and in poor condition. This was typical in the Ardennes during the winter months. The asphalt roads required constant maintenance and the dirt roads sank away when not reinforced with logs and stone, however travel by heavy vehicles was not impossible. One of the

⁶ The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge by Hugh M. Cole Center of Military History U.S. Army 1965 pg. 80.

⁷ The First Army In Europe 1943-1945, by Elbridge Colby; 1969.

⁸ Ibid pg. 138.

⁹ The First Army In Europe 1943-1945, by Elbridge Colby; 1969.

most desirable routes east and west ran right through Manderfeld, the 14th Cavalry Group command post.

The defensive positions were set up in the following manner, from north to south across the gap:

Lanzerath: Elements of Company A, 612th Tank Destroyer Battalion (Towed), 820th Tank Destroyer Battalion (Towed) after December 11, 1944

Merlscheid: Elements of Company A, 612th Tank Destroyer Battalion (Towed), 820th Tank Destroyer Battalion (Towed) after December 11, 1944

Berterath: Elements of Company A, 612th Tank Destroyer Battalion (Towed), 820th Tank Destroyer Battalion (Towed) after December 11, 1944

Afst: 1st Platoon of C Troop, 18th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron

Krewinkel: 2nd Platoon of C Troop, 18th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, elements of Company A, 820th Tank Destroyer Battalion (Towed) on December 11, 1944

Weckerath: 3rd Platoon and Headquarters of C Troop, 18th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron (The 3rd Platoon was positioned approximately one thousand yards east of Weckerath in a small patch of woods. Also known as “King’s Woods”. It was commanded by 1/Lt. Ledru L. King)

Manderfeld: Headquarters of 14th Cavalry Group and 820th Tank Destroyer Battalion. E Troop stationed to the southwest and F Company to the northwest.

Roth: 2nd Platoon and Headquarters of A Troop, 18th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, elements of Company A, 820th Tank Destroyer Battalion (Towed) on December 11, 1944

Kobscheid: 1st and 3rd Platoons of A Troop, 18th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron

The cavalry positions could be described as small islands of resistance. These were located within depressions offering protection against the raw winds which sweep through the Ardennes. Because of the area to be covered a homogenous defensive line was not possible. There also existed substantial gaps on both cavalry flanks. Faced with the mission of defending these garrisons, the cavalymen made the full use of their various automatic weapons, which in many cases had to be dismounted from the vehicles of the squadron; the initial reaction from the cavalymen was that these defensive positions limited the fighting capabilities of the unit. An average of fifteen to twenty automatic weapons were positioned in each of the strong points, where thirty to forty troopers had been positioned for defense, however it was felt that some sort of “hit and run” defense plan in which they could capitalize upon the mobility of their organic

fighting vehicles, would have been more desirable. Further criticism was voiced of the manner in which they were ordered to replace infantry troops that had preceded them in these positions. It had been specified that the cavalrymen take up the same positions that had been held by the riflemen, and the smaller number of combat personnel available to the cavalry squadron made it necessary to occupy about one half of the established positions, and with fewer men than the rifle company had. Sketches of the defensive conditions in and around each village reveal a tight circular security. Not much in the way of forward observation posts to warn of an impending approaching enemy. There were not enough troops to provide for a wide coverage of each strongpoint, basically just enough to thwart German patrols and the local harassing attack. There was no contact between outposts except for the occasional shuttle jeep and because of the wide area to be covered only a modest defensive screen could be maintained without the possible support of infantry or armor. Most of the automatic weapons were positioned in pairs and weapon pits had been dug for them. Machine gun and mortar positions were dug in and provided with overhead cover. In several of the garrisoned strong points, tunnels twenty-five to thirty yards in length had been dug from the cellars of the houses in which the troops were billeted to the various gun positions.¹⁰ There were one or two .50 caliber machine guns at each strong point, as well as two or three 60mm mortars and the addition of one or two M8 37mm armored cars with a coaxially mounted .30 caliber machine gun. All positions were wired in and anti-vehicle and anti-personal mines had been planted in the appropriate areas. All weapons positions were rearranged to provide effective fields of fire and protect main lines of resistance. Grady Davies, C Troop 18th Squadron, 2nd Platoon; "in Krewinkel we blew holes in some of the buildings and dug tunnels out for forward positions and for the forward observers. When we took over these positions from the 2nd Infantry Division they had not done much in preparing them for defense".¹¹ Clinton Meadows, a Captain at the time and the commanding officer of E Troop, 18th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron stated, "we had about nine miles to cover with one squadron. We were not trained or equipped to fight as infantry, if we were attacked we probably could not hold them for more than two hundred yards or so. We were trained to obtain intelligence, mostly by gunfire, which is what we were supposed to do. E Troop had 25 to 30 artillery registered concentrations and had computed data for approximately 100 more. Registrations were adjusted on the average of three times per day. A Troop and C Troop knew that there was something going on out in front of our positions, they could hear the vehicles running at night. Lt. Colonel Damon tried for two weeks to try and get headquarters to let us send out more foot patrols and try and capture some prisoners, which was our standard procedure. In the past we had depended on air reconnaissance to determine everything."¹²

The cavalrymen had experienced only light opposition from the Germans as they occupied and maintained these positions. Previous to the 22 of October, the Germans had engaged in extensive patrolling, both during the day and at dark. The Germans had sent in

¹⁰ The Afst garrison probably displayed the most elaborate tunnel system, see sketch.

¹¹ Interview September 6, 1999.

¹² Taped commentary from the 1998 14th Cavalry Group Reunion.

frequent combat patrols, particularly on the south flank of the Loshiem Gap near Kobescheid to gain knowledge of troop dispositions, capture prisoners and to inflict casualties on the various outposts. The Germans realized that in this sector the Americans were not planning and offensive anytime soon. They could operate patrols through the U.S. lines, just as cavalry forces regularly sent out patrols hoping to net a prisoner or two and find out more about the defense opposite them.¹³ Periodic harassing artillery fire struck the garrisons infrequently. The Germans manning the positions opposite the squadron watched closely, and brought down artillery fire whenever the troopers had to expose themselves to maintain or add to the current unit defenses. Bill Barton, C Troop, 18th Squadron, 1st Platoon; “Our defensive positions at Afst were such that infantry advisors came out to us and said that you have to put a machine gun post here, another one there and you have to dig a trench or create a blind so that you can go from one position to another without being seen. We made a dugout, and we put corn stalks in front of it so that the Germans couldn’t see us coming and going. We also mined several of the approaches to the village”.¹⁴ Minefields, both German and American were known to be in the area; however neither Task Force X nor the 2nd Infantry Division could chart their locations. On December 14 Colonel Devine requested corps for engineers and additional mines.¹⁵ The garrison had three armored cars which were never left out in the open; they were either hidden in buildings or sheds. There was not a single armored car exposed.

While preparing defensive positions in the village Bob Penrose states that Afst was a little farm community composed of several houses, barns and outbuildings. Their first orders were to “dig in”, this meant digging trenches and machine gun positions emanating from the farmhouse command post in three directions facing the German pillboxes across the valley. The first trench and pit that were dug soon filled with about a foot or two of water. A Sergeant suggested that the troopers dig a drain to release the trapped water. Six cavalrymen stood around grumbling and considering the order that they had just been given, all the while staring into the sloppy mess. One of the men said “I wonder where that sniper is that usually takes pot shots at us every day?” There happened to be a weathered outhouse a couple of yards away from the machine gun pit. Penrose and the other men sure made a beautiful target staring into that water filled gun emplacement. Suddenly as if on cue, sniper bullets began zinging around the immediate area. Two men leaped into the outhouse and the rest jumped into that water clogged pit without a second thought. Apparently enjoying the situation, the sniper fired several more rounds into the outhouse. The two men in outhouse came out on their bellies and splashed back into the water filled trench in record time. That German sniper was either a lousy shot or the men of C Troop were his entertainment for the day.

The 18th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron had immediate fire support from the 275th Armored Field Artillery Battalion under the command of Lt. Colonel Roy Udell Clay along with

¹³ Troy H. Middleton, *A Biography*, L.S.U. Press 1974. Pg. 212.

¹⁴ Interview September 6, 1999.

¹⁵ *The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge* by Hugh M. Cole Center of Military History U.S. Army 1965 pg. 138.

the 634th Anti Aircraft Artillery Battalion. This unit was attached to Task Force “X” on the 24 of October 1944 and was equipped with 18 M7 105mm self-propelled howitzers mounted on the hull of a Sherman tank. They took up positions in the vicinity of Medendorf, approximately two and one half miles west of Manderfeld. In these positions everything was plotted and surveyed and certain “checkpoints” were “zeroed in”. This meant that the battalion only had to name a checkpoint to the fire control officer and he knew the exact elevation and deflection to give the guns. These spots had been pre-fired on and hit through the survey map coordinates. Checkpoints were plotted in a 360 degree circle. If necessary the guns could be completely turned around and still hit targets. The 105mm gun had an effective range of five miles and could provide a high rate of fire. Each forward observer could either fire his battery or the entire battalion on any target of his choosing and as many times as he deemed necessary if he obtained the clearance to do so.¹⁶ From north to south the battalion manned observation posts at Lanzerath, Merlscheid, Afst, Krewinkel, Roth and Kobscheid. Upon arrival the 275th experienced a serious ammunition shortage which resulted in limited firing missions. They were given a daily allocation which they were not permitted to exceed. The ammunition leads were piled next to their respective howitzers.¹⁷ During the month that the squadron was in these positions, more than two hundred artillery call preparations had been registered. Forward observation observers from the 275th were present in every cavalry position. During this period E Troop was placed under operational control of the 275th as the troop was equipped with M8 75mm howitzers. In essence the battalion had an additional firing battery. However artillery observers were not the only ones to adjust and register artillery fire missions. Platoon leaders, platoon sergeants and at least four other members of each platoon had the chance to adjust artillery registrations, as well as squadron officers and all personal from E Troop and F Company, the squadron’s assault gun troop and light tank company.¹⁸ Both of these units were positioned just outside of Manderfeld, atop the Manderfeld Ridge as a mobile reserve. The 331st Medical Battalion had established a headquarters within the town as well. The unit had two collecting stations with one ambulance each at Manderfeld and at Winterscheid along with B Troop. The village is located atop a ridge, spreading into a draw coming eastward from the heights into the Our Valley. In addition to the 275th eight battalions of corps artillery were in position to reinforce the 2nd Infantry Division artillery when called upon. This represented the bulk of the VIII Corps artillery.

¹⁶ 275th Armored Field Artillery Battalion Journal, September 1, 1944-December 27, 1944.

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ This statement is not entirely true, during an interview with Warren Mylchreest, 3rd platoon F/18, the author was told that during the morning of Dec. 16, when F Company pulled out of Manderfeld to reinforce the reconnaissance platoons, several of his light tanks became lost on their way to the front line garrisons. They eventually corrected themselves, however most of the troopers in F Company had never been to the front line positions. One would actually have to be in these locations to accurately call and register artillery.

The squadron commander Lt. Colonel William F. Damon Jr., now in command of Task Force X had encouraged this artillery coordination among the members of his command.¹⁹ Targets of opportunity were possible forming up places for a German attack, defensive locations and basically harassing fire missions. According to daily reports generated for the month of November and early December, the artillery of E Troop and the 275th Armored Field Artillery Battalion was mainly used against German gun positions, to disperse patrols; any enemy activity that could definitely be located was usually fired upon. Additional defensive fires were prepared by supporting and organic artillery to cover dead spaces and all barrages were registered in for each position. Observation posts spotting enemy working parties and occupied or unoccupied outposts were also brought under artillery fire, making them unfit for further occupation. Additional targets were assigned organic and supporting howitzers for harassing and interdictive fire during the hours of daylight and darkness.

Task Force “X” daily and nightly patrols was effective throughout the sector during the periods 22 to 31 of October and dominated the area between friendly and enemy lines. The effectiveness of the enemy patrol activity was significantly reduced during this period. On a typical day five or six patrols would be sent out by the squadron to keep a check on enemy activity. The patrols varied in size and were given reconnaissance, counter reconnaissance and ambush missions in the hopes to capture prisoners for interrogation. These patrols were dispatched daily from Troop and Company sectors. Missions were to determine the location of German outposts and observation posts between the cavalry positions and the Siegfried Line, to attack any enemy patrols encountered, to secure prisoners and to set ambushes. Two German patrols were attacked during this time period and casualties were inflicted on both patrols. One German officer and one enlisted man were known to have been killed or seriously wounded. On October 22, a German patrol engaged units in positions in Kobescheid. The patrol was driven off and by artillery and small arms fire. On the 31 of October a U.S. patrol of three men captured a German outpost consisting of a Panzerschreck (bazooka) manned by two riflemen.

Five night ambush patrols were set during this period of October, however the Germans were not active on these nights and the ambush patrols failed to make any contact. Each of the squadron’s garrisons had been divided into ten to fifteen outpost stations, manned with double personnel during the hours of darkness. The guards were shifted on a two hour on and four hour off basis. “Battle Stations” had been assigned to every man in the garrisons, even platoon cooks had an assigned station; positions were established for each individual weapon in the event of an attack. For the period of October 22 to the 31, the 18th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron took 10 prisoners of different ethnic backgrounds, received 225 rounds of various calibers within the garrisoned villages and suffered 12 casualties and 2 men killed in action. Germans prisoners were captured from the following units:

2nd Company 18th GAF Bn.

35th Tng. and Repl. Bn.

¹⁹ Task Force X was the name applied to the 14th Cavalry Group attached to the 2nd Infantry Division and later the 106th Infantry Division for the security of the sector between the 106th Infantry Division and the 99th Infantry Division.

9th Company, 13th Paratroop Regt.
2nd Company, 454th Repl. Bn.
1st Company, 454th Repl. Bn.

Reports from various PW's indicated considerable damage to forward enemy positions and a number of casualties.

On the 28 of October, Troop D, 89th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron (Mech.) was attached to Task Force "X".

During the month of November German patrol activity increased considerably, aggressive patrolling and combat patrols probing at night for areas of resistance and open or dead spots, of which there were many, aside from the cavalry troopers taking up positions in the afore mentioned villages there was virtually nothing from keeping the Germans from patrolling the areas in between these outposts during the night. Paul Morasch, B/18 at Winterscheid," there were so many holes in that front line that at night the Germans could get a whole army through it". The 18th had a front that only a regiment should have been able to cover"²⁰. We would send information (intelligence) back to Corps that something was happening up here. All night long you could hear equipment moving in down there in the woods. And they would say "that's a static front, nothings going to happen". German combat patrols would observe what type of resistance the troopers offered. This information was passed on and enemy patrols would regularly move through these blind or unattended areas and make their way behind the strong points in a further attempt to secure additional information about the strength and depth of the defenses. Enemy patrols would often be heard moving about at night and would be taken under small arms and artillery fire by the cavalry troopers. German patrols or work parties sighted at daylight were fired on as well by E Troop with supporting fire from the 275th Armored Field Artillery Battalion.

During the early morning hours of November 1, a German patrol of undetermined strength was active near the village of Roth. After firing automatic weapons into the front line defenses, the cavalry troopers returned fire and the patrol was driven off. Again at approximately 1945 hours, a small German patrol was observed approaching Roth. An ambush patrol was dispatched and succeeded in capturing two members from the German patrol, both from the 295th Infantry Regiment, 18th Volksgrenadier Division. On the same day, a morning reconnaissance patrol dispatched from Company A, 612th Tank Destroyer Battalion (Towed), surprised a three man German patrol nine hundred yards west of the village of Losheim. After a sharp firefight, one German was killed and the other two escaped into the woods. At 2010 hours, a German patrol was observed in the vicinity of E Troop, 18th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, positioned just to the southwest of Manderfeld. The patrol was eventually driven off with hand grenades. German patrols were active again on the 2 and 3 of November in the vicinity of Roth,

²⁰ Interview on September 6, 1999.

Krewinkel and King's Woods; these same positions also received some attention from 88mm anti-tank guns.

On the 5 of November, a morning reconnaissance patrol was deployed from Company A, 612th Tank Destroyer Battalion located a German machine gun position and a working party of approximately ten men. E Troop fired on these targets with supporting fire coming from the 275th Armored Field Artillery Battalion. During the early part of the evening, enemy patrols were active in the vicinity of Manderfeld, Headquarters of Task Force "X". The patrols were eventually engaged and withdrew under small arms fire from cavalry security patrols in and around Manderfeld. Elements of A Troop garrisoned at the village of Roth lost three men from a direct hit on a position by German artillery. Intermittent artillery fire was also received in the garrison village of Afst, just north of Krewinkel. On the 7 of November, the Germans attempted another foray into the Manderfeld area. At 2140 hours a small patrol attempted to infiltrate the F Company area, they were driven off by a combination of grenades and small arms fire. As the month of November wore on, this typical scenario played out time and again, day and night patrols by both sides, harassing and interdiction fire and the probing of U.S. and German lines to capture prisoners and obtain intelligence information. On the 14 of November, the distinct sounds of motors and vehicles were heard in various areas along the cavalry front. Also encountered during the hours of darkness was the use of flares by the Germans. During the month the use of flares peaked between the 17 and 23 and tapered off by the end of November. Along with the sounds of motor vehicles and flares was the nightly increase of German work parties and patrols, which were fired on by a combination of E Troop howitzers, the dug in M7's of the 275th Armored Field Artillery Battalion and occasionally organic artillery support when available. Also during the closing weeks of November were reports from troopers opposite the Schnee Eifel of tracked vehicles and occasionally headlights off in the distance. During the hours of darkness there was little visual contact with the Germans, the hills and valleys of the Schnee Eifel provided a natural barrier, keeping the concerned cavalry troopers only guessing as to what was taking place beyond those hills.

During the month of November there was a definite increase in German artillery along the Task Force "X" front. Approximately nine hundred rounds of various caliber of artillery were recorded to have landed in the sector. Also present was the constant sound of V-1 and V-2 rockets, which passed over the sector generally heading in a northwestern direction, however two rockets did crash and explode in Manderfeld without injury to any of the troops. Four civilians were injured and some livestock was killed as well as two houses completely destroyed.

A mixed bag of prisoners had been collected up to this point, a total of fourteen German soldiers, 1 German civilian from the Cologne police force and three-escaped Russian POW's (German) were captured. As a result of enemy captured and patrolling, the following German units were identified:

454th Replacement Battalion
295th Infantry Regiment, 18th Volksgrenadier Division

H.Q. Co. 1st Battalion, 989th Infantry Regiment, 277th Volksgrenadier Division
Penal Co. 1st SS Panzer Division

POW's were interrogated and eventually transferred up to VIII Corps. Many of the prisoners related such information as a build up of troops and equipment beyond the Schnee Eifel. However, a common attitude among interrogating officers and intelligence personnel was that the prisoners would basically give any information that they thought would be helpful to their captors, the more valuable the knowledge, the better their treatment would be. So intelligence staff sections came to the conclusion that prisoners were just telling their American captors what they wanted to hear, not what was actually taking place.

The word from both VIII Corps and First Army was two-fold, first many of the sounds that the troops were hearing was phonograph recordings, the Germans were just trying to give the U.S. troops along the front a case of the "jitters". Also many of the reports were coming from the newly arrived 106th Infantry Division, green troops not used to combat or being so close to the enemy. Corps also informed the division that the Germans were attempting to "simulate" a massing of forces. It was a fact that during certain periods of the war the Germans did employ such a ruse. VIII Corps felt that these troops were just a bit nervous, after they became acclimated to front line conditions and gained more experience; these reports would probably decline in frequency. Secondly, G-2 staffs felt that what was also taking place was that various German units were moving out of the line and being replaced by other units, the vehicular noise would subside when these unit exchanges were complete. Records from the 106th Infantry Division indicate that the sounds of motor vehicles and shouting were perceived to be only intense patrol activity by the Germans.²¹ Nevertheless, a state of complacency and false security did exist in the higher echelons of the 106th Division. During this period much of it reflected the attitude of VIII Corps.²²

Upon examination of reports submitted by the 18th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron for the month of November 1944, under the category of "Results of Operations" it states that "as a result of aggressive patrol activity by units of Task Force "X", the area between our lines and those of the enemy was dominated by us and the enemy was denied access to our rear areas for purposes of observation posts during daylight". After Action Reports also state that "all attempts of the enemy to establish forward observation posts and outposts were discouraged and positions were destroyed by our artillery, mortar and small arms fire. The small enemy patrols that

²¹ 3rd Battalion, 422nd Infantry Regiment, 106th Infantry Division After Action Interview with Major F.W. Oseth, Executive Officer. National Archives

²² St. Vith- Lion in the Way, 106th Infantry Division in World War II, by Colonel R. Ernest Dupuy The Battery Press pg. 18.

managed to come into our positions at night were forced to withdraw without gaining any information as to all our strength and dispositions and without inflicting casualties".²³

However, this was not entirely true; in several instances enemy patrols were able to move through the cavalry positions, which were widely scattered, undetected and were able to obtain information on the positions, defenses and outposts.²⁴

During this period Task Force "X" patrols obtained intelligence information that indicated that the Germans had been engaged in further strengthening of certain parts of the Siegfried Line, constructing temporary fortifications and obstacles and the reorganizing of forces. Through prisoner interrogations and interviews, the quality of the troops occupying these positions had been determined to be questionable. Nonetheless it was also determined that such low quality troops would be able to perform with a fair degree of success in their mission to hold the current positions in the event of an attack. It was also revealed that the expansion of company fronts of the 294th and 295th Volksgrenadier Regiments has resulted in a withdrawal of strong points in the vicinity of Losheim and a reduction of patrol activity. Observations also indicated that the battalions of these two regiments are employing their full strength on the line and are no longer capable of retaining a counter-attack force in their battalion reserve. The increase in artillery employment by the Germans and the areas in which he was able to cover led squadron S-2 officers to believe that mobile or self-propelled artillery was being utilized in their rear areas, and were moving them around frequently, especially in the areas of Losheim, Scheid and Hallschlag.²⁵ Organic artillery of the 18th Volksgrenadier Division was known to be in the vicinity, however these units had not been located in front of Task Force "X". Known locations discovered on the 24 of November were approximately five miles south of the right flank of Task Force "X". Counter-battery fire resulted in practically complete termination of the fire, which had been harassing the south section of the task force. Visual reconnaissance during the day and patrols during the night did not indicate that the Germans were supporting their troops in this sector with any armor, at least not near their MLR.²⁶ S-2 section also established that unidentified units of the 18th Volksgrenadier Divisions 294th Infantry Regiment were replacing existing units of the 989th Infantry Regiment of the 277th Infantry Division.

As the month of December began, the conditions of the front line positions resembled the previous two months. Patrols sent out from Task Force "X" during the first week of December

²³ Action Against Enemy Reports/After Action Reports, Task Force "X", 18th Cav. Rcn. Sq., Mecz. Manderfeld (0093) Belgium, Month of November 1944. National Archives

²⁴ On the morning of December 16, 1944, the town of Manderfeld, headquarters of the 14th Cavalry Group was singled out and given quite a dose of German artillery fire.

²⁵ Action Against Enemy Reports/After Action Reports, Task Force "X", 18th Cav. Rcn. Sq., Mecz. Manderfeld (0093) Belgium, Month of November 1944. National Archives

²⁶ Main Line of Resistance

returned without any prisoners and enemy patrolling was greatly reduced during this period. By the 4 of December German artillery had ceased almost entirely, picking up again towards the end of the week. One German patrol was detected at outpost positions near Kobscheid and was engaged and driven off by small arms fire from A Troop. The Kobscheid sector was known as a “hot spot” when elements of the squadron took over the area, German patrols had been strong and numerous. On the 5 of December a German patrol was active in the vicinity of Berterath, a booby trap was set off south east of positions in the town. This patrol withdrew immediately after small arms fire was brought down on it by elements of the 612th Tank Destroyer Battalion. During this period German flare activity increased during the period from December 1 through the 7, with no less than fifty-six flares during the first week of December. Flare activity would ebb and flow, for example on the 1st of December one flare during the night was observed, when on the 6, seventeen various types of flares were observed.²⁷ On the 7 of December, German patrol activity increased during the hours of darkness. Patrol activity was encountered at Krewinkel and Berterath and a German patrol entering from the east side of Manderfeld wounded a sentry guarding the command post of Task Force “X” and set fire to one of the haltracks. After a short period of time, the patrol was driven off with small arms fire and grenades. By the second week of December outposts were reporting the sounds of tracked vehicles during the hours of darkness. Meanwhile the 32nd Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, the 18th’s sister squadron, received orders from VIII Corps on December 10th that the unit was relieved from attachment to the 28th Infantry Division and was to be immediately attached back to the 14th Cavalry Group.²⁸ The 32nd started to arrive at Vielsalm, Belgium during the evening of December 10, where it was billeted in Belgian military barracks.²⁹ Many of its officers had reconnoitered forward positions and telephone wire had been laid at several points. There had been no specific plans for the employment of the 32nd Squadron at this time. Colonel Devine and his staff had worked out an independent defensive plan providing specific routes of withdrawal and lines of defense. The plans were completed on the night of December 15; however they had not been distributed.³⁰ It had been Devine’s intention to coordinate these plans with the 106th Infantry Division as soon as they replaced the 2nd Infantry Division.

On the 11 of December at 1800 hours the 106th Infantry Division replaced the 2nd Infantry Division of the First U.S. Army. At that time Task Force “X” was relieved of the attachment to the 2nd Division and assigned to the 106th. At the same time Company “A” of the 820th Tank Destroyer Battalion (Towed) under the command of Captain Stanton H. Nash, relieved elements of “A” Company the 612th Tank Destroyer Battalion, and were also attached to existing outposts

²⁷ Action Against Enemy Reports/After Action Reports, Task Force “X”, 18th Cav. Rcn. Sq., Mecz. Manderfeld (0093) Belgium, Month of December 1944. National Archives

²⁸ H.Q. VIII Corps G-3 Section 101500A Dec. 44

²⁹ Deliver-6 Letters From The ETO, by James E. Kreisler, M.D. 1990; page 112

³⁰ The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge by Hugh M. Cole Center of Military History U.S. Army 1965 pg. 139.

of the cavalry to bolster its defenses.³¹ “B” and “C” Companies were attached to the 106th Infantry Division Artillery. “A” Company of the 820th moved into the following positions:

1st Platoon- Merlscheid, Belgium

2nd Platoon with the 2nd Reconnaissance Platoon- Lanzerath, Belgium

3rd Platoon- Berterath, Belgium

The two reconnaissance platoons were attached from the battalion to “A” Company, but the first was in turn attached to the garrison at Krewinkel, Belgium. The company was attached with elements to the 18th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron as of 2400 hours on the 11 of December 1944. Thirteen men of the 1st Platoon with two 3” guns under the command of Sergeant Joe Fiscus were attached to A Troop at Roth, Germany.³² The company command post was located in Manderfeld, Belgium. At this point the 820th spent the 12 through the 14 of December improving gun positions and getting oriented to the conditions of the current situation. Orders handed down from VIII Corps to the 106th Infantry Division described the adjustment of forces in the Schnee Eifel as follows; Elements of the 820th Tank Destroyer Battalion to relieve corresponding elements of the 612th Tank Destroyer Battalion (-A Company and 1st and 2nd Reconnaissance Platoons) attached to division artillery. 424th Infantry (with 106th Reconnaissance Troop attached) prepared to relieve the 23rd Infantry (2nd Infantry Division) in assigned sector on 12 December 1944. 23rd Infantry continued defense of sector. 14th Cavalry Group consisting of the 18th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron (less B Troop) and 32nd Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron with A Company and 1st and 2nd Reconnaissance Platoons of the 820th Tank Destroyer Battalion attached, maintained defense of sector formerly held by Task Force “X” (2nd Infantry Division). Task Force “X” formerly commanded by Commanding Officer of the 18th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron. 32nd Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron was in Group reserve at Vielsalm. Commanding General of 106th Infantry Division assumed responsibility of sector held by the 2nd Infantry Division at 111900A. The Division with elements of the 2nd Infantry Division in contact maintained defensive positions and patrolled the front and flanks.³³ From December 12 through the 15 the 106th Division commander and staff reconnoitered the area and attended a conference with Major General Troy H. Middleton, the VIII Corps commander. Discussions were held on detailed recommendations for a more adequate defense of the assigned area. It was also made known that although an extensive communications net had been prepared by the 2nd Infantry Division, with wire to almost every squad and outpost had been left to the 106th Division. Unfortunately unlike the 2nd Division the 106th had only a few sound powered telephones. Final plans were never agreed upon however General Jones did request to make adjustments to his initial deployment.

³¹ According to the After/After Action Report of the Headquarters 820th Tank Destroyer Battalion, relief actually took place on the night of December 10th.

³² Company “A” 820th Tank Destroyer Battalion A.P.O. #339 U.S. Army After/After Battle Report-December 1944

³³ Report of Action Against Enemy, 11 December 1944- H.Q. 106th Infantry Division, U.S. Army 6 January 1945.

By the summer of 1944 the War Department had stripped the 106th Infantry Division for replacements. By August the division had lost more than 60 percent of its enlisted strength to the replacement pool. The losses had been among the division's best people, over 7,000 of its 13,000 officers and men. These trained men were lost after its major unit training. When the division was deployed to Europe, its new troops had very little unit level training. After experiencing a 207-mile truck convoy through France and bivouacking in two-man tents for a week in the pouring rain the troops did not even have time to dry out before moving into the line to replace the 2nd Infantry Division "man for man" and "gun for gun". The transition took two days to accomplish. Because of this the division went into the line with troops that did not have the time to develop a sense of unity. On the German side of the Schnee Eifel the unit was a perfect division to attack.³⁴ It had two regiments on a front across the Schnee Eifel down to just above Hontheim and swept back to Bleialf. Its third regiment held a five-mile front across the Winterspelt-Winterscheid gap which leads from the southeast towards St. Vith which is located approximately 12 miles to the west of the Schnee Eifel.³⁵ To make matters worse; by December 15 a number of trench foot cases had already been reported. Particularly within the 422nd infantry regiment which had been the last regiment to be issued with overshoes.

Approximately one-week prior the German offensive, an incident took place involving a Polish soldier who had escaped from the German lines; he was picked up by the 2nd Battalion, 422 Infantry Regiment of the 106th Division. The POW gave extensive information on German tank units that were concentrated in the area to the east of the 106th division. The Pole described the attack that was to come and about the infiltration tactics which the Germans were planning. He had acknowledged that the attack would begin on the 17 of December. When this information reached Captain H. H. McKee of the 106th, he called Colonel Robert T. Stout and passed on this detailed intelligence. In addition to the information on the impending counterattack given by the Pole, Colonel Matthews, Executive Officer of the 422nd Infantry Regiment, said that there were also reports of German motor activity, which took place on the night of December 14. During that evening the sounds of many motors could be heard. These reports were not kindly received and Colonel Descheneaux, the regimental C.O. criticized one battalion S-2 for reporting the movement of what he called "German convoys" when he could only be certain that he heard motors running. The division response to the receipt of this intelligence information was that Corps had informed the division that the Germans might play phonograph records to simulate the massing of troops and equipment.³⁶

³⁴ Battle of St. Vith, Defense and Withdrawal by Encircled Forces 5th and 6th Panzer Armies Versus 7th Armored Division and Attachments 17-23 December 1944, Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, KS. Pg. 19-20.

³⁵ The First Army In Europe 1943-1945, by Elbridge Colby; 1969. pg. 120.

³⁶ Lt. Colonel Joseph C. Matthews, Ex. Off. 422nd Inf. Reg. interviewed at the Mooseburg Allied PW Camp May 3, 1945.

On the 12 of December, the 14th Cavalry Group under the command of Colonel Mark A. Devine assumed command of Task Force "X" along with the 18th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, minus its B Troop, which was located approximately four miles to the south in Winterscheid attached to the 423 Infantry Regiment of the 106th Infantry Division. Devine commanding the 14th Cavalry Group had two squadrons, his mission was screening the entire five mile Losheim Gap, and he was required to spread his units extremely thin. This was a front appropriate for a full infantry division. For this reason he was getting reports from widely scattered platoons who were being surprised by Germans wearing different types of uniforms using different techniques. These he knew could not be coincidental, isolated attacks by different German units. It had to be a plan. But much of his wire was out, and by radio he hadn't reached people who were getting the word out fast enough.³⁷ Colonel Devine had not been satisfied with the current defenses. He reconnoitered the front line positions and ordered aggressive patrolling to his immediate front. Eventually this resulted in the capture of three men from the 18th Volksgrenadier Division; however they did not reveal anything substantial in the way of intelligence. At this juncture they probably did not have anything of importance to divulge.

Seymour Kaplan of B Troop of the 18th Squadron recalls that Colonel Devine issued an order when we got to Belgium that all men would wear their helmets buckled under the chin and that we would dress in our O.D.'s, not fatigues we were to wear our ties and tuck them in properly. In other words you're going to go in here and fight as a gentleman or something like that. We all resented that and the rationale behind it according to some of our officers was that it was believed that if you got hit and you had your tie on you could use it as a tourniquet, well that's nothing but bullshit, nothing but crap.

When Colonel Devine got up to the front opposite the Siegfried Line we had already established defensive positions. We could see the German positions possibly three quarters to one mile away on the side of a hill. We had only been up there for about three or four days and we were working on building these bunkers. We had to build three bunkers, one in the center and one on each side to take care of our flanks. My squad was responsible for the one in the center of our positions. We got this thing built and we did a heck of a job on it. One guy in my squad had been a coal miner from Kentucky and he knew how to shore up the inside of this bunker. We dug into the side of this hill and had four or five feet of dirt on top of it, we had a slit in the front where we had a .50 cal machine gun and two trenches on either side and had .30 cal machine guns there.

Well one day Captain Fossland and Colonel Devine showed up and were walking down to our positions. Both of them were marching like martinets with their chests stuck out.³⁸ They came down to our defensive positions and I overheard Devine say to Fossland, "Captain look

³⁷ Clarke of St. Vith. Vith by William Donohue Ellis and Colonel Thomas J. Cunningham Jr., 1974, pg. 93.

³⁸ During these interviews many of the troopers used the word "martinet" when describing Colonel Devine and several of the officers within the 14th Cavalry Group. The word meaning spit and polish, by the book and a stickler for following orders and rules to the fullest.

down there, you have a defile and some woods and a stream running through it and now if there was a German patrol down there, how quickly could you get mortar fire on them?" We had mortars set up in positions behind us and Captain Fossland got on the phone that we had hooked up and he barked out a fire order. Pretty soon you heard three rounds coming off. All of a sudden we heard this one round coming in and it's what we used to call a short round or malfunctioned round for what ever reason it was dropping short. Those of us who were out of the trench at the time dove back into it and the Captain and Colonel Devine are still standing and this round comes down and drops about fifty feet away from where we were. A piece of that shrapnel caught Fossland in the leg and Devine literally became apoplectic. After those three rounds fell I called in and told them to cease firing. Fossland went down because he was hit and Devine had on these cavalry boots and was lying in on the captain verbally and as he was doing this he's whacking his cavalry boots with this riding crop that he was carrying. Devine was using swear words that I had never heard before and I thought that I knew them all.

Colonel Devine had been particularly proud that in the two months that his unit had been in the line the Germans had only been able to capture one prisoner. He had been impressed with his group's ability to patrol the sector, especially at night. His troopers were covering frontages which would have been in excess for units many times their strength. Devine felt that the cavalry trooper did not have an equal.

Another incident occurred on the B Troop front when machine gun posts were established at four points along the front line positions. Late one evening one of the outposts heard what sounded like footsteps crunching through the frozen snow. Several gun positions opened up into the darkness with negative results. The troopers decided to wait until daylight to see if they had hit anything. At dawn they heard women screaming and went out to check out what had happened. It was then that they realized that they had shot holes through the villager's sheets which had been hanging out on a clothes line.

A similar event occurred at the group headquarters in Manderfeld. Related by Richard Johnson at the time was the Executive Officer of F Company of the 18th Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron. German patrols had been active in this area and the signs of the coming winter were evident and the troopers continually worked to improve their positions using camouflage and overhead timbers for protection. The outposts had been connected to F Company headquarters by wire and captured German phones. On this particular evening in early December firing erupted from one of the outposts. A fusillade of fire lasting 20 to 30 minutes in duration ensued consisting of machine gun and rifle fire. The outpost had reported in by phone that it was being attacked. Headquarters alerted the other outposts, although all heard the firing that had taken place and everyone was on the alert. The outpost reported that they had killed several of the enemy. None of the positions reported seeing any activity. Following a sleepless night we were anxious for daylight to reveal what the situation was at the outpost. As we investigated cautiously we found the troopers very much alert at their stations. We didn't find any dead Germans; the only activity that we could find was a small flock of sheep some one hundred meters off the corner of a small pasture.

This being the start of winter the ground was covered with snow. The sheep had left a telltale trail. It was obvious the sheep had charged the outpost, jumped directly over their position. The firing that erupted hadn't killed one single sheep. In fact, upon examination none of the sheep had even been wounded. Needless to say the troopers of this outpost were the butt of all sorts of jokes. To put it mildly, their fellow troopers carried them high for some time. This proved to be a great cure for the tendency toward being "trigger happy". That gross waste of ammo by the outpost did wonders in settling the nerves of our men. They really wanted a live one in their sights when they pulled the trigger. They realized that ammo was too valuable to use shooting up the landscape.

Colonel Devine accompanied by his French Liaison Officer Lt. George H. Gudefin visited the 106th Infantry Division Headquarters located in the town of St. Vith immediately after the group became attached to the division. Gudefin states that Devine attempted to draw up a counterattack plan that would tie into the 106th Division's defensive plans; however he received little cooperation from the staff of the division. Several visits were made to the division prior to December 16. During these meetings Devine suggested plans for a counterattack; however none of them were ever approved by Major General Alan Jones. Gudefin recalled the strange attitude displayed by Major General Jones. Although the general had met Devine several times, he seemed to have a difficult time in recognizing him as the commander of the cavalry group that had been attached to the division. Devine was almost forced to reintroduce himself each time he met the general. In one instance, Colonel Devine and some of his staff were called to the division headquarters for a briefing one evening. The cavalry groups plans were discussed and submitted to the divisional staff and were accepted quite silently without much in the way of comments. The next morning when Devine made another visit to the division Major General Jones burst into a tirade and demanded that Devine should submit his plans in the event of a German attack. It struck Devine and Gudefin as rather odd and were not impressed with the general attitude of the division as a whole.

On December 13 the Roth garrison received five rounds of heavy caliber mortar fire between 1511 and 1618. Artillery support was requested on the suspected German positions. At approximately 0845, officers from the 32nd Squadron minus F Company made a route reconnaissance from their headquarters in Vielsalm to Manderfeld. This was carried out to familiarize officers of the travel routes between the two Squadron positions. Towards the end of December 13 at 2325, explosions occurred near the "Kings Woods" positions in front of Weckerath. The cause was a possible grenade or booby trap that had been detonated by a German patrol which was fired on and driven off by elements of the garrison.

During the early morning hours of December 14, the Weckerath garrison heard vehicles traveling north at what they determined was a high rate of speed. Soon after at roughly 0600 an observer heard vehicles possibly moving onto a bivouac area, these vehicles were an estimated two miles distant. Cavalry troopers at Krewinkel captured two Germans during an early morning patrol. Later in the day General Middleton, commanding VIII Corps arrived at the Manderfeld

headquarters at 1245 to meet with Colonel Devine and his staff and eventually departed at 1350. Middleton was not unconcerned by the current situation in the Ardennes. "On the Schnee Eifel I wanted soldiers to know that I was interested in their welfare and that I was aware of their exposed position. I regularly visited various headquarters, occasionally making suggestions about defensive alignments"³⁹. A Troop at the Roth positions again received a dose of what appeared to be large caliber mortar fire. This occurred between 1600 and 1715 as 28 rounds fell near the positions. The 3rd Platoon of C Troop at "Kings Woods" also received three rounds of the same ordnance. Just after darkness on the same day the 1st Reconnaissance Platoon of A Company, 820th Tank Destroyer Battalion had been repairing and improving their positions and slit trenches. All had been quiet until friendly flare activity revealed a German patrol of approximately eight men. Small fire as well several well placed grenades dispersed the patrol with unknown casualties.

December 15 saw a drastic decrease in the harassing mortar and artillery fire. At 0437 cavalrymen at Kobscheid detected movement and noises approximately 3,000 yards out in front of their positions. A patrol from the Roth garrison picked up a deserter from the 5th Company, 295th Volksgrenadier Regiment. Late on December 15, communications between the 32nd Squadron at Vielsalm and group headquarters at Manderfeld determined that the 32nd would send elements to the vicinity of Auw to reconnoiter possible billeting prior to relieving the 18th Squadron, which was to occur on or near December 16. Between 2300 and 2400, patrols were dispatched from the 820th Tank Destroyer Battalion as well as C and B Troops which all resulted in negative results. All seemed to be quiet opposite the cavalry's defensive positions.

The next several days passed without much incident, periodic patrolling took place and several German patrols were encountered. These patrols withdrew immediately after receiving small arms fire. Estimated enemy casualties were light. Again the sounds of motors were noted during the hours of darkness in the vicinity of Schneid, and the sounds of heavy motor traffic were heard to the south of Ormont. During the early morning hours of December 14, there were continued reports of the sounds of motors from several outpost positions. It was believed that these vehicles were on the Ormont-Hallschlag road, traveling north. All vehicular noises ceased at approximately 0600. Throughout the night of December 14 motor activity was heard behind the enemy lines, and outposts reported hearing men shouting. Artillery and mortars were called for and at this point the sounds would cease after the barrage lifted. After a period of time, the noises would begin again. This information was passed on to 106th Division command.⁴⁰ During the night of December 15, German observation aircraft were active throughout VIII Corps sector. Night patrols, while not aggressive in the south, were active along the front except in the Schnee Eifel area. Automatic weapons fire appeared to be preplanned harassing fire. Vehicular movement was heard along the entire front during the hours of darkness.⁴¹Also on

³⁹ Troy H. Middleton, *A Biography*, L.S.U. Press 1974. Pg. 210.

⁴⁰ Major J.F. O'Sullivan interview with Major Frederick W. Oseth, Exec. Officer, 3rd Batt. 422 Inf. Reg. 106th Inf. Div., 11 May 1945.

⁴¹ G-2 Periodic Report H.Q. 106th Inf. Div. 152400A December 1944.

December 15 a liaison aircraft from the 275th Armored Field Artillery Battalion was fired on by three German machine gun positions. The aircraft observer called in artillery and adjusted it on all three positions and silenced them. E Troop of the 18th Squadron also fired approximately 137 rounds on harassing missions.⁴² On the same day the 16th Field Artillery Observation Battalion obtained and located five sound locations from German artillery batteries.⁴³

According to squadron records and after action reports, on the night of December 15, 1944, 1st platoon, C Troop positioned at the village of Afst was given a patrol mission. The patrol was to be led by T/4 David Herzog, other members of the patrol were Pvt. Robert L. Hickie, Pvt. Richard H. King, Cpl. John R. Banister, Pvt. Harold G. Crister, T/4 William I. Barton and Pvt. Roderck L. Diem. The eight-man patrol was ordered by the squadron S-2, Captain Gies to go to a certain house among a small group of buildings shown on a 1/25,000 map as the village of Allmuthen. Infiltrating patrols of Germans had often held the area and the possession of the village-changed hands several times between the Germans and the cavalrymen.

The patrol left Afst at approximately 1830 with the dark night as cover. It had originally been planned to give the patrol only a reconnaissance mission, however late in the afternoon the squadron S-2 designated that it should be an ambush mission and attempt to bring back prisoners. This change in plans persuaded Lt. Crawford, the commander of the 1st platoon to lead the mission himself in place of Herzog. The patrol circled around the village once, to make certain that it was clear of any Germans. Then it moved on to a trail junction where a shed and haystack was opposite a barn and a house. The haystack was built around the shed and had a door that faced the trail. At this intersection the patrol deployed in such a fashion so that it would be able to ambush any Germans that would pass this particular area. Crawford had instructed his men not to fire on any enemy groups that were larger than ten to twelve men, he did not believe that the firepower of the eight man patrol could take care of a larger group. The patrol investigated the haystack and realized that it was empty. Crawford and Banister crossed the road and positioned themselves in the shadow of the barn. They could hear people talking inside and heard a stifled cough; obviously there were Germans inside.

At approximately 2200, or shortly before, a group was heard approaching into the area from the north. The night was dark and Lt. Crawford was not accurately able to judge the size of the enemy group.⁴⁴ The Germans were dressed in regular combat gear and were bunched together and conversing with each other. The ambush patrol was so stunned by the appearance of such a superior enemy force that they just froze and stood still. Privates King, Diem and T/4 Herzog were positioned in front of the haystack, the Germans paused right in the center of the road junction and several began to approach this area. At that point Private King let out a burst

⁴² VIII Corps Artillery, Summary of Operations Headquarters.

⁴³ VIII Corps Headquarters Corps Artillery Summary of Operations, December 15, 1944.

⁴⁴ Afterwards most of the men in the patrol agreed that there were approximately 20 to 30 Germans.

from his Thompson sub-machine gun when an unsuspecting German “bumped into the muzzle of my gun”. Instantly, the whole patrol began to fire into the group of Germans.

The patrol slowly made their way back to the Afst positions; however Crawford and Bannister became separated. Cautiously picking their steps as the snow made a crunching sound under their boots as they moved, were able to move east towards the back of the house. As they progressed they saw two sentries posted near the rear of the house and were able to slip by them. The two men arrived back at the Afst garrison at approximately 0045 on the 16 of December. The rest of the patrol had given them up as “missing”. At this point it was realized that Private Hickle had not made it back and had possibly been captured by the Germans, this as well as the encounter with the large enemy force was reported to squadron headquarters by Lt. Crawford.⁴⁵ It was unusual for this patrol to encounter such a large enemy group; most German patrols consisted of one non-commissioned officer and eight men, as did the cavalry arrangement. This allowed for smaller forces to slip through each other’s lines and gain access to important intelligence information without being detected. The confrontation with this superior enemy force carried more significance than the small ambush patrol was able to comprehend.

At this juncture it must be pointed out that a discrepancy exists between squadron records and a member of the Allmuthen patrol, William Barton. For the most part the details of the occurrence are agreeable; however Barton believes that this encounter with the Germans took place several days before December 15. Barton’s version goes into more detail and should be taken into account; these are the events as he recalls them;

In late October of 1944, the 1st platoon of C Troop of the 18th Reconnaissance Squadron took up positions in Afst, Belgium, which we inherited, from the 2nd Infantry Division after their remarkable race to the German border. It was, as we were assured a quiet section of the front, ideally suited for advanced training for the green troops that we were. Lt. Crawford, who read our letters home admonished me one day for being so gloomy and reminded me that we were lucky to be in such a quiet area where routine night patrols were the main action on both sides, German and American. Some weeks later Lt. Crawford urged me to go out on patrol, reminding me that the other members of the platoon would think better of me if I volunteered. There was no shortage of volunteers, however a few days later; probably the evening of the 12 of December, I was a radioman for Crawford along with Sgt. Banister, Sgt. Herzog, PFC King and PFC Bristow, heading off to a German observation post, which was about a mile from our location. There was about four inches of snow on the ground. The German observation post was plainly visible on a clear day and I was able to discern the reflection of binocular lenses as they gleaned in the sun, the temptation was to call in artillery; however the latter was reserved for the infrequent visits of brass because such behavior resulted in a similar response from the Germans.

⁴⁵ 14th Cavalry Group Interviews conducted by Lt. Jack Shea, 2 Info. and Hist. Sv. H.Q. U.S. First Army, January – February, 1945.

Our approach avoided a road and a wide field as we moved next to a tree line, perhaps a quarter mile to the left of the German outpost. We now began to move through very tall grass as we approached the house until we were perhaps only thirty feet away with a clearing or path between the house and us. Only recently have I thought that the grass, which was higher than our heads, might be harvested for thatch, which was the prevailing roofing material in the area. Lt. Crawford stationed Sgt. Herzog, PFC King and PFC Bristow and myself where we were all concealed and took Sgt. Banister with him to check out the house. Within a few minutes we began to hear muffled voices and coughing, and in no time perhaps twenty or more black booted Germans pulling a farm sled arrived between the house and us. The German soldier on the end of the sled's towrope bumped into PFC King, who fired one shot and the soldier fell at his feet. There was suddenly a great deal of shouting back and forth among the Germans and we thought that Lt Crawford and Sgt. Banister would certainly hear the commotion and get out of the building. Very soon, Sgt. Herzog who was in charge of us called out "lets get the hell out of here". As soon as I caught my breath I called down to our garrison to report what had happened. It also became clear that PFC Bristow had not heard Herzog's order, so there were three men left behind. By the time we got back there was more confusion and Captain Walker arrived from Weckerath, which was the troop command post, he wanted to form up a rescue party. Just as the party was about to head back up to the German outpost, Lt. Crawford and Sgt. Banister returned. Sgt. Banister had waited in the tall grass while Lt. Crawford went inside the house, which was occupied by an elderly man. But the warning and noise outside gave Crawford only enough time to exit the house and dive into some grass, which separated a walkway and the foundation of the house. While lying absolutely still, the Germans walked within inches of him and from that position he watched while PFC Bristow was taken prisoner. He assured us that he was treated properly. After things quieted down both Crawford and Banister made a run for it, if they had not it would have been a very costly rescue party indeed. In the morning I was sent to Weckerath to be questioned by Captain Walker. He was upset that I had not fired my carbine until I reminded him that we were under orders not to engage a group larger than ourselves. Some weeks before he had congratulated me for figuring out a way to toss a grenade at a group of Germans who were attacking our positions. We also learned that PFC Bristow had a serious hearing loss problem and should not have been assigned to a combat unit.⁴⁶

On the night of December 15, the garrison at Kobscheid garrison also set up an ambush patrol on the trail that led into the village from the east. The patrol led by Sergeant Kenneth Potts; did not come into contact with any enemy patrols nor did they hear a sound. Upon returning they were careful to avoid their own minefields. By December 15 Task Force X was aware that the 18th and 62nd Volksgrenadier Divisions were opposite their positions. An ominous silence from enemy positions enveloped the entire front in the Task Force X sector for two nights

⁴⁶ Letter from William I. Barton to the author dated March 29, 2000. Squadron records indicate that Pvt. Robert L. Hickle was listed as MIA on December 15, 1944. However Barton's account of the Allmuthen patrol excludes Hickle and includes Cpl. John W. Bristow, squadron records indicate that Bristow was listed as LWA on December 18, 1944. It is possible that Barton confused the identities of these two men; records indicate that Hickle was returned to military control on active duty status on May 10, 1945. Barton also recalls that this patrol was sent out on the night of the 13th or 14th of December, however 14th Cavalry Group Journal entries record it as occurring on the 15th as well as available Squadron records.

prior to the attack. The only real commotion on the past two nights was the detonation of anti-personnel mines by cattle that had wandered through a fence and into the mine fields. The usual flare activity became strangely nonexistent. The flares had been predominately amber, green and white being the most prevalent. The colors usually appeared in various combinations and from many different sectors of the front. Major James Worthington, S-2 of the 14th Cavalry Group stated that no real previous warning of enemy troop concentrations in this sector came to him from higher headquarters. However B Troop of the 18th Squadron to the south of the main task force had received information from an S-2 of 423rd Infantry Regiment that an attack could be expected. This information came from a German deserter.