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WAGENER, Carl
Generalmajor

Fifth Panzer Army - Special Questions
(Ardennes)

Alfred Zerbel

Koenigstein, 3 July 1950

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Fifth Panzer Army, ARDENNES. Special questions.

(Alfred Zerbel)

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INTERVIEW W/Carl Wagner, Gen Maj
Chief of Staff, 5 Panzer Army

INTERVIEWER: M/Sgt Leonard Beck (on basis of written questions)

PLACE: Hersfeld, Germany, 18 October 1945.

I am thoroughly ready to cooperate in writing the history of this war. However, before I answer the questionnaire given me, I must declare that my health and physical condition since my imprisonment have fallen so low and present conditions of lodging and rations are of such a nature, that I can answer only with reserve and piece meal, and that a scientific exhaustive deposition is possible only in suitable circumstances.

1a) The mission of the 5 Panzer Army was to penetrate the enemy positions in the Olzheim-Gemuend sector, and to thrust forward over the Meuse on both sides of Namur to brussels.

First attack objective: Bridgeheads over the Meuse.

For this:

66 Corps (18 and 62 VG Divs) to encircle from both sides the enemy in the Schnee Eifel, and then echeloned in depth to push forward to and over the Meuse or to be drawn into the left wing of the Army. 58 Panzer Corps (116 Panzer Div and 560 VG Div) to force a crossing on a wide front on both sides of Ouren, then to proceed over Houffalize to and over the Meuse and to win bridgeheads there. 47 Panzer Corps (2 Pz Div and 26 VG Div) to compell a crossing over the Our in the Dasburg-Gemuend sector on a wide front, to cross over the Clerf sector, and after taking Bastogne

to thrust forward to and over the Meuse near and south of Namur echeloned in depth. Panzer Lehr Div and Fuehrer Escort Brigade to be prepared first as Army reserves, to exploit the first successful penetration made by one of the Corps, and to be employed for a quick thrust to the Meuse.

The main effort of the operation was with the 6 Panzer Army, the right wing of the Army Group. The troops first provided could not be made ready for the operation. The units reserved for the auxiliary thrust on Maastricht were brought up later, in the course of the operation, when 9 Pz Div, 3 and 15 Pz Gren Div were given to 5 Panzer Army.

The entire operation was built up on surprise and speed, and consequently the first attack was to be made on a broad front, in order to break through enemy positions quickly, and armored units were held in reserve for a quick forward thrust. Ideally, sufficient infantry divisions and sufficient armored divisions exploit this penetration and for a further quick thrust would have been made available. Reserves were lacking, and consequently, the necessary depth of the operation. After a successful penetration, the attack was to be made past any enemy resistance, without halt to the West and the Meuse.

The enemy picture in front of 5 Panzer Army was clear and confirmed throughout the operation. We counted upon finding no enemy operational reserves in the area of attack. Changes in the enemy order of battle were made known to us during the course of the battle by the interception of enemy MP - traffic regulation - radio net works.

To 1b) (Question of new orders issued)

To exploit preliminary success, the Fuehrer Escort Brigade was brought up and assigned to the 66 Corps and the Panzer Lehr Div to the 47 Corps very early in the attack.

Parts of 58 Panzer Corps (116 Pz Div) were withdrawn from their sector on 17 Dec, and drawn up over the earlier made penetration hole in the sector of the 47 Panzer Corps and the earlier made war bridge at Dashburg in the direction of Heinerscheid.

66 and 47 Corps received the order, if necessary to take St Vith and Bastogne with their rear elements, and to let the spearheads bypass these places. When the right wing of the army (66 Corps) lay before St Vith, parts of the SS Panzer Corps were turned off from the North (direction Salmchateau) and west, to thrust into the enemy's rear in the St Vith area, and thus help the 66 Corps forward.

When, at the end of December, it was recognized that the 6 Panzer Army and 7 Army had not reached their goals, and were being contained in enemy counter attacks, the thrust over the Meuse was given up. The 5 Panzer Army received the mission of thrusting forward to the Meuse and then to turn off to the North.

The "small solution" which had been considered before the beginning of the operation, that is, the battle east of the Meuse, was again discussed. Since the entire operation of Army Group B had come to a standstill, it was again considered to attack with Army Group G frontally, and to support

this attack with thrusts to the South by parts of 5 Panzer Army.

For 1c) See 1a. (Location of reserves)

For 1d) Artillery preparations on the entire front were not uniformly conducted. To insure surprise, and not to "wake up" the enemy, a unified, all out artillery preparation in the 5 Panzer Army sector was abandoned. The artillery was told to be ready to fire on request from the infantry, if the "still" attack did not progress.

The attack was to begin at dark, to ensure surprise. It was known that the enemy, especially his weak security guards, rested at night in the little villages. In addition, the 5 Panzer Army considered a night attack, in which the cooperation of all weapons was not so necessary and important, as easier for its own troops. Searchlights were ready for the illumination of the attack terrain. The experience with searchlights was evaluated differently by the troops.

To build bridges over the Our and the Clerf, bridge columns and already assembled bridging material were available. In places the employment of these bridges was delayed by the few, bad, and heavily jammed roads.
A sharp limitation on the pack to be carried was placed on all troops. Motorized units were ordered to select only really sturdy "Eifel capable" vehicles.

Large MP forces were used to govern traffic on the much travelled, narrow, mountain roads. Any passing was forbidden. There was no priority right. The march order was rigidly adhered to. The division into numerous

march columns and into small groups within the march columns proved its' worth again.

To 1e) Composition of Kampfgruppe) The attack troops were divided into small, select assault troops, and especially organized attack companies and reserves. Parts of the panzer divisions were already mounted, mobile, in the rear areas, ready for a quick penetration after a successful breakthrough by the infantry.

To 1f) The main effort of the 5 Panzer Army lay with the 47 Panzer Corps, and remained there during the entire attack.

To 1g) (Units on the flanks) 6 Panzer Army on the right was to attack towards Antwerp from the Monschau-Losheim area over the line Liege-Namur.

7 Army on the left had the mission of attacks over the line Vianden-Echternach to the West, and thereby to protect the flank of the 5 Panzer Army on the south.

15 Army on the right of 6 Panzer Army was to launch another attack later to encircle the forces contained in the Maastricht area.

Army Group H, in the event of the success of this operation, would attack to the South frontally.

To 1h and i) These questions need an elaborate preparation, which is not possible here. (h - jumping off points and objectives for each day and (i) road net used).

To 1j) (Opposition met, type) Enemy resistance from their positions was not uniform and differed greatly in strength, though it was strongest in front of 58 Corps. In many places the artillery was noticably weak and

employed very late. The enemy seemed completely surprised. However, deployment in depth was deeper than we had anticipated, and consequently the time required for the breakthrough and penetration was greater than expected. Yet we did succeed in getting several bridges intact.

The enemy's surprise continued in the first few days of the attack. Resistance was so splintered that for our own troops it was a matter in the entire attack zone only of a quick pursuit. Any local resistance was by-passed. See the answer to question 7 for the wide ranging and decisive effects of the resistance of St Vith and Bastogne.

In the further course of events, the enemy reacted operatively quicker than expected. We had not believed that he would so quickly give up his offensives on other fronts. As a result of the pressure from the North resulting from this discontinuance, any further possibility for progress by 6 Panzer Army disappeared, and 5 Panzer Army was pushed further to the South than was desirable.

Later, there was the additional enemy pressure from the south flank, so that the current enemy operative intention had to be presumed to be: Defense east of and on the Meuse, counter attacks from the North and South.

The enemy air force began to make itself strongly felt with the better weather, and daily increasingly forbade any day traffic.