

Action at Stavelot: 17 - 18 December 1944

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This is a report of Company "A" – 526th Armored Infantry Battalion's actions at Stavelot, Belgium during the Battle of the Bulge on the 17th and 18th of December 1944. This was our first hand, direct, face-to-face encounter with the enemy.

Capt Charles A.
MITCHELL

17 December 1944

On the 17th of December we were billeted in Chateau de Grimonster, which is south of Liege, Belgium. On the afternoon of that day I was called to Battalion Headquarters at Harze for an urgent meeting with the other officers of the Battalion.

Lieutenant Colonel Carlisle B. Irwin, battalion commander, informed us that the Germans had started an offensive in our area. The 526th was to be sent to help secure the first line of defense. My company was to move out within the hour. I returned to the chateau and ordered the troops to prepare for immediate departure.

"A" Company

526th Armored Infantry
Battalion

18 December 1944

We joined the rest of the battalion on the road near Aywaille. The column proceeded with few setbacks to Spa where we had another meeting conducted by Major Paul Solis, Executive Officer of the 526th. It was here that I met Lieutenant Jack Doherty of 1st Platoon; Company "A" – 825th Tank Destroyer Battalion. Our orders were to continue with the rest of the battalion toward Malmedy until we reached the junction of roads 23 and 32 near the small town of Meiz. There Captain Sheetz of the 291st Engineer Battalion, which was stationed in Stavelot, Belgium, met us. The task force, consisting of Company "A" of the 526th Armored Infantry Battalion and the 1st Platoon, Company "A" of the 825th Tank Destroyer Battalion was placed under the command of Major Solis and was guided by Captain Sheetz into Stavelot. Our mission there was to establish roads blocks east and southeast of Stavelot. The half-tracks were

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parked in and near the town square, the Place du Marché.

Major Solis, Captain Sheetz, Lieutenant Doherty, and I proceeded by jeep to Captain Sheetz' command post near the bridge crossing the Ambleve River. We discussed the situation and Major Solis ordered my company to defend the bridge. I therefore placed the 1st Platoon under the command of Lieutenant Charles F. Beardslee on the north side of the river and north of the Street Rue Gustave Dewalque. Lieutenant Harry A. Willyard and the 2nd Platoon was deployed on the north side of the river and the south side of Rue Dewalque near a tannery. The 3rd Platoon commanded by Lieutenant James J. Evans was held in reserve at the square. One gun of the antitank platoon commanded by Lieutenant Maynard L. Rogers was placed near the bridge; another, farther up the street; and the third gun in reserve near the square. I had no responsibility for the deployment of the 825th T. D. Platoon.

Later in the evening Major Solis ordered me to establish a roadblock on the south side of the river. (This was the last time I saw Major Solis until the arrival of the 30th Infantry Division.) Two squads in their two half-tracks of Lieutenant Willyard's 2nd Platoon were sent across the river to establish the roadblock. (I was not informed, nor was I aware that the bridge was supposed to have been mined for demolition). The pitch-black night and the unfamiliar terrain in a strange town made strategy and communication exceedingly difficult. The two squads crossed the river as ordered and proceeded up the other side about one half mile. At that point they stopped and radioed that movement could be heard in the distance, which they believed to be tanks and other vehicles. I therefore ordered them to return to the bridge. I was not aware that any other units might have been sent across the bridge.

One of my half-tracks returned safely across the bridge. I learned later from some of my men that Germans had occupied the houses on the south side of the river before our arrival and wrecked the second by stretching a cable across the road!

Shortly after this incident the German attack started in earnest with mortars and other artillery pelting the town. Then German infantry began coming across the bridge. They were repulsed several times with our rifle, mortar and machine gun fire and fell back. Then German tanks began to come down the hill (I understand from information obtained later, that several of these tanks were disabled by fire from the 825th T. D. Platoon).

Noticing a tank approaching the bridge, I alerted Sergeant Smith of the antitank squad. We watched as it slowly crossed the bridge. Just as it left the bridge, my antitank gun fired, but unfortunately caused no damage. The tank overran our gun crew position and the German infantry followed close behind.

Now the Germans were in Stavelot and my company was in trouble. How I wished my company had the explosives capable of destroying the Ambleve River Bridge. At least we could have slowed the German advance more effectively! My troops did their best as we fought street by street. Private Lee Galloway hit one of the German tanks with a bazooka, and so badly frightened the driver that he backed his tank into a building, causing bricks and stones to come crushing down upon the tank, stopping it and blocking the street. Lieutenant James, commander of the 3rd Platoon came up with a squad of his men to assist us and was killed by a fragment of shrapnel. Lieutenant Wheelwright was appointed to command the platoon.

Upon receiving a message from battalion headquarters to evacuate Stavelot and set up a new position on high ground near the road to Spa, I began to try to gather my troops for departure. The confusion was tremendous; we were under constant shelling. I ran all over the area as I tried to get information to all units by radio and/or word of mouth that we were to leave Stavelot and proceed toward Spa.

Those men, who could, returned to their half-tracks and proceeded in orderly fashion to retreat as ordered. However, many of the vehicles missed the road to Spa and proceeded instead toward Malmedy. Two half-tracks, one of which was an antitank half-track, and their men, including Lieutenant Wheelwright, and I in my jeep, driven by Sergeant Jack Mocnick proceeded toward Spa up the Francorchamps road.

We had progressed approximately a mile when we came to a huge gasoline dump. Realizing the additional fuel would be a boon to the German troops, Lieutenant Wheelwright and I decided to try to destroy it by igniting it. Since two German tanks, which we could hear slowly laboring up the hill behind us, had followed us out of town we needed to take immediate action.

We first deployed the men on either side of the road and set up the 57mm AT gun in the woods. We then fired a machine gun into the gasoline, which was stacked in five-gallon containers on the left side of the road as far as the eye could see. It did not ignite. The German tanks were now in sight. One of the men

then ran to the dump, quickly opened a can of the fuel and ran with it to our position, spilling it out as he ran. A lighted match provided the necessary spark to set the dump on fire. The first tank saw the fire and turned around; the second tank followed.

Sometime later, hearing activity in the woods behind us, we feared we were surrounded by German troops. Frantically we tried to change our position until one of the men shouted: "American troops"! It was the 1st Battalion, 117th Regiment of the 30th Infantry Division under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Robert E. Frankland. Major Solis was accompanying these troops.

Since I was there, I know that this unit, Company "A" of the 526th Armored Infantry Battalion, conducted itself in a most courageous and fearless manner. I feel the men's attention to orders and their actions as a result of those orders were exemplary. These brave men performed above and beyond the line of duty. They disregarded the risk of injury and death in order to accomplish their purpose. For those who died we can only say to their families that they died in a most courageous effort to fulfill their duties as American soldiers.

To those people who live to tell the tale, I would like to express my great admiration for the individual and collective courage of each man of this organization, which was baptized by fire and emerged with a record enviable by any seasoned group of troops.

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