

## 116 PANZER DIVISION IN THE HUERTGEN FOREST

An interview with Genmaj Rudolf von Gersdorff – C of S, 7 Army  
Genmaj Siegfried von Waldenburg – Cmdr 116 Pz Div

1. Q : What was the mission of 116 Pz Div when it was committed in the Vossenack – Schmidt area?

A : (Waldenburg) The immediate task was to halt your attack and then counterattack with the mission of clearing the American penetration.

(Gersdorff) At Army level, we felt that the effort should divide itself in two phases. First, we wanted to cut off and destroy your troops southeast of the Kall, using principally 89 Inf Div. and the tank regiment of 116 Pz Div. Secondly, by using the remainder of 116 Pz Div., we hoped to drive you off the heights at Vossenack and eventually re-establish the front in the woods west of Germeter. For us, it was advantageous to fix the battle line in the forest as it limited the use of your air power and your tanks.

2. Q : Was our attack a surprise in timing and / or direction?

A : (Gersdorff) We knew, generally, that an attack was forming. Our agents in Roetgen reported the presence of numerous reserves and artillery observation planes, but we did not know the specific date. We believed the main thrust would be headed northeast through Huertgen onto Dueren. At the same time, we believed you would send a force through Schmidt and go for the Dams. The tremendous artillery preparation, of course, showed your hand and we know the attack was on. (Interviewers' Note: See Gersdorff's account of "Kriegsspiel of Model.")

3. Q : (Interviewers' Note: The account of 116 Pz Div's action is contained in ML – 1039) When your reconnaissance battalion drove from Mestringer Muehle, did 89 Inf Div launch an attack from the south to join them?

A : (Waldenburg) I believe so. Our elements did make contact, but 89 Inf Div was very weak at the time and no strong link was formed. A patrol from my reconnaissance battalion, consisting of an officer and 4 or 5 with a radio, made its way to this point of woods south of Vossenack (Ed: coordinates 0232). From here, they could easily observe movement from Germeter to Vossenack and adjust artillery fire.

4. Q : Our troops in Vossenack, having been shelled almost continually for four days, were unnerved by the quiet on the morning of 6 Nov 44. Was the absence of an artillery preparation a planned tactic?

A : (Waldenburg) Yes. We hoped to gain surprise.

5. Q : Did your troops find stiff resistance from our forces in Vossenack?

A : (Waldenburg) Yes. There was hand – to – hand combat. We did get many prisoners, but the farther we went, the more resistance stiffened.

During the attack, we smoked the Germeter area. Finally, when your armour and reinforcements arrived, we could not get beyond the church.

6. Q : Did you plan to renew the attack on 7 Nov 44?

A : (Waldenburg) Yes. As a matter of fact, I believe the artillery preparation for our attack caught your troops as they were getting ready to attack us. Your troops (Interviewers' Note: 146 Engr C. Bn) that retook Vossenack with those tanks did an excellent job.

7. Q : After we had repulsed your second effort to take Vossenack on 7 Nov 44, we brought up an infantry battalion to replace the engineers. The relief was made hurriedly and the infantry, on 8 Nov 44, was not ready for action. Did you plan another attack for that day?

A : (Waldenburg) Unfortunately, you didn't notify me of this situation. No, our troops were very tired and had suffered heavy casualties.

A : (Gersdorff) You must remember this Vossenack fight was considered the second phase of our action, so most of our concern was across the Kall; then too, we could not move tanks up to Vossenack.

A : (Waldenburg) I tried to build a road from Huertgen through the woods towards Vossenack, but it was not suitable. A couple of assault guns got through, but the heavier, bigger tanks became stuck in the mud.

8. Q : At this time, we committed a new regiment (Interviewers' Note: 12 Inf Regt of 4 Inf Div (US)) in the woods above Germeter. They were to attack towards Huertgen. Was this area under your control?

A : (Waldenburg) Initially, my zone was south and east of there, but on 6 or 7 Nov 44, this area also became my responsibility. On 10 Nov 44, while you were attacking west to clip off the Weisser Weh salient, I launched an attack. Following a heavy artillery preparation, elements of both 156 and 60 Pz Gren Regts, followed by some engineers, were committed and cut off your troops. They passed through the engineer battalions who were holding the line.

9. Q : On 13 Nov 44, after two unsuccessful efforts to improve the situation of the isolated force, we made a withdrawal. Not a shot was fired. Were you aware of this?

A : (Waldenburg) Yes. We got a report on what you were doing, but the local commanders said the woods were so thick and the debris so prohibitive that they could not stop you.

10. Q : Having failed to cut off the Wiesser Weh salient at its base, we finally began on 14 Nov 44 to attack directly up it. How strongly was it defended at that time?

A : (Waldenburg) We merely maintained patrols behind the wire obstacles and mine fields. All this time I was making daily requests to be relieved from this sector. It was not suitable for the employment of a panzer division.

A : (Gersdorff) We also wanted to withdraw the unit so that it could be refitted for the Ardennes Offensive, but we had no one to fill the hole. Finally, we managed to relieve a battalion at a time. The Division Artillery stayed on an extra three or four days so that you would not notice a slackening in the fire and realize what we had done.

11. Q : On what date did your troops leave the Vossenack area?

A : (Ed: probably answered by Waldenburg.) Approximately 13 Nov 44.

12. Q : What do you estimate as your casualties in the battle for Schmidt and Vossenack and in the fighting between Germeter and Huertgen and between Huertgen and Kleinhau?

A : (Waldenburg) Without data of any kind, it is, unfortunately, impossible for me to give a detailed description of the losses suffered by the Division in the fighting in the Huertgen Forest and at Schmidt. The casualties in personnel, especially of officers and non-commissioned officers, were heavy. The two panzer grenadier regiments were particularly hard hit and the reconnaissance battalion to a lesser degree. The panzer regiment, as far as I remember, suffered only small losses in the Schmidt area, with only three or four tanks being put out of action. The artillery had hardly any casualties or any losses in material. The antiaircraft battalion lost two guns through air attacks.

Even though the losses in personnel of the Division could be made up on the whole by fresh replacements before the Ardennes Offensive, the casualties in officers and non-commissioned officers and enlisted men with battle experience could no longer be replaced. This lack of experienced personnel made itself felt considerably in the Ardennes campaign. Weapons lost or put out of action generally could be completely replaced. The motor vehicle situation, however, had further deteriorated and the Division moved into the Ardennes Offensive with only about 60% of the vehicles it should have had.

13. Q : How seriously did your engagement in the Huertgen Forest affect your efficiency and strength for the Ardennes Offensive?

A : The loss of experienced leaders and battle – hardened veterans was certainly felt. Our losses in material were replenished, except in trucks. In that category, we went into the Ardennes at only 60% of our T/O strength.

Source: Foreign Military Studies – Ethint -56 (Headquarters United States Army Europe - 15 Dec 1945)