

RESTRICTED

OPERATIONS OF THE 701ST TANK DESTROYER BATTALION AT SIDI BOU ZID-SSEITLA
FROM FEBRUARY 14 TO FEBRUARY 18, 1943

After the operation at Sened the Battalion had withdrawn to the Bou Chebka area under orders from II Corps Headquarters. On February 9th Combat Command "D" (of which the Battalion was a part) was ordered to move from Bou Chebka to the Thelepte area, attached to the 26th Combat Team. But on the 11th of February the Battalion was relieved from assignment to CC "D" and was assigned to CC "C" under command of Colonel Stack of the 6th Armored Infantry. The Combat Command Headquarters was at Hadjeb El Aieum. "C" Company, 701st TD Battalion was assigned to the Kern force (12 miles from Sseitla on the Faid road). This left the Battalion with Headquarters Company, Reconnaissance Company, and "B" Company ("A" Company having been previously assigned to CC "A" at Sseitla). The Battalion moved and arrived at Hadjeb El Aieum on the 12th where it was rejoined by "B" Company for the first time since October of 1942, N.I. ("C" Company dropped en route to the Kern force). The Battalion took positions opposite German positions at Fendeuk el Okbi and OP's were established. On the evening of February 13th, word arrived that a German attack was to be expected the following day at either Pichen, Fendeuk, or Faid. Thus, the Battalion was alerted to meet any attack across the valley from Fendeuk. No attack materialized. Around 1300 hours, however, reports arrived of a German attack against CC "A" in the vicinity of Faid Pass and Sidi Bou Zid. This attack was a definite success, and CC "A" was decisively defeated. Many American infantrymen and tankers had been surrounded on Dj. Lasseuda. It was expected that the Germans would continue their drive in the direction of Sseitla to further press the retreating CC "A". Thus, CC "C" was alerted and was ordered to attack from the north to flank the Germans at Sidi Bou Zid. CC "C" moved from Hadjeb El Aieum and arrived at an assembly position two miles north of Dj. Ilza from whence they expected to launch their attack the following day. Reconnaissance Company, 701st TD Battalion,

RESTRICTED

29

RESTRICTED

furnished night patrols surrounding the Combat Command bivouac area. At 0700 hours the Combat Command column, with Reconnaissance Company of the 701st TD Battalion in the lead, moved out in the direction of Sidi Bou Zid (Reconnaissance Company had the mission of providing reconnaissance for the entire Combat Command - an impossible mission). "B" Company was ordered to follow the attack of our tanks closely. Lt. Col. King and elements of the staff moved forward to establish an OP to follow the battle. The Germans had not pressed their tactical advantage of the previous day, but had withdrawn and remained in the Sidi Bou Zid area, presumably to annihilate the American forces trapped on Dj. Lasseuda and Dj. Ksaira. Thus, the attack was launched by CC "C" directly east across the plains towards Sidi Bou Zid. The attack was launched at 1300 hours with Reconnaissance platoons of the 701st TD Battalion protecting the right and left flanks of the Combat Command. In the vicinity of Sidi Bou Zid our armor was taken under extremely heavy artillery and anti-tank fire, and could not advance. Thus, during the afternoon, the situation was static, with our troops under continual heavy fire.

At 1700 hours the Germans counter attacked from three directions (from the north around Lasseuda, from the south in the direction of Makassy, and from Faid Pass) and forced a withdrawal of the entire Combat Command. The German attack gathered momentum and a large portion of the forces withdrew without regard for order or discipline. By Combat Command order a defensive position was established about 12 miles east of Sbeitla in the vicinity of Dj. Hamra. The defensive line held here, and by dark the Sidi Bou Zid area was "No Man's Land", shelled by the artillery of both forces. The entire area was lighted by the fires of many, many burning tanks. One "B" Company 37mm M/P and one Reconnaissance Company half-track had been lost in the day's activities. The day of February 16th was spent in organizing and correlating the defenses of the position. "A" Company rejoined the Battalion, and with the re-assignment of "C" Company (all due to the ab-

RESTRICTED

RESTRICTED

serption of CC "C" by elements of CC "A", General McQuillan in command) the Battalion was again to operate as a complete unit. The Battalion was assigned the mission of the protection of 7 miles of right flank of the Combat Command in the vicinity of Dj. Hamra (again an impossible mission for with the number of guns remaining in the Battalion at this time, it was impossible to adequately protect such an area). "A", "B", "C", and Reconnaissance Companies moved out and took positions around 1800 hours. At 1205 hours, "B" Company reported the approach of enemy tanks, and took the necessary action - the tanks withdrew. In the afternoon, the command group moved from the bivouac area northwest of Sidi Bou Zid to Dj. Hamra. The Column was strafed en route but there were no casualties. About 1900 hours German columns again began to attack. One armored unit attacked from the northeast and another straight from Sidi Bou Zid towards Sbaitla, into the mouth of the valley below Dj. Hamra (another enemy armored group moved forward on the right flank of the 701st TD Battalion, was observed, and the platoon of Lt. Ronani, "C" Company, was sent forward to engage armor which had turned from the column toward the Battalion area. These tanks withdrew, but the large enemy column moved into the hills to the south). The enemy was engaged in the fire of our tanks and artillery, but continued to advance. Lt. Col. King reported to CC "A" for orders. The Battalion had not yet engaged the enemy from this position and darkness soon closed cutting down all observation. Seen machine gun fire (identified to be German) was heard in the valley, and the tempo of the artillery fire increased. By now the 105 Hows. were laying direct fire on the advancing enemy tanks. The attack was a success and our units in the valley were driven to the rear. The 701st TD Battalion had received no orders, and the situation had now become obscured that it was not possible for the Battalion to engage the enemy. Spottists, Murphy and Baat, Battalion guides on the Sidi Bou Zid-Sbaitla road, returned on foot at 2200 hours and told of the advance of German tanks up the valley - their cycles had been overrun and they had escaped and made their way back to the Battalion area and reported. Thus German troops were on three sides of the Battalion, and on the left flank had penetrated

RESTRICTED

RESTRICTED

many miles past the Italian area up the valley in the direction of Sbeitla. Lt. Col. King had not returned from the Combat Command Headquarters (and it was now impossible for him to do so), and therefore Major Tardy, Battalion Executive, took charge and upon his orders units were ordered to move separately in a general northwesterly direction, avoiding the tank battle now in progress between our tanks and the enemy to our rear, in the direction of Sbeitla. As the night was so dark, and the situation so obscure, Major Tardy felt that it would be impossible for the Battalion at that time to assist in the battle, and he deemed it necessary to get the remaining guns safely behind our own lines. "B" Company could not be contacted by radio and "A" Company column was ordered to warn "B" Company patrols of the withdrawal. It was necessary for "A" Company to destroy one half-track, which was minus a track. At 2250 hours a last attempt was made to warn "B" Company by radio, but without success. Command Group moved out with Lt. Morrison in the lead, and the column proceeded some miles in a westerly direction avoiding the tank battle on the right flank. The S-3 half-track, with Lt. Waters, led the second column, following the "A" Company column. This group skirted the foothills following an almost due north direction with enemy action and movements about 1000 yards to the right. A third group, led by Lt. Smith of Reconnaissance Company, approached even closer to the battle ground. The S-3 half-track became inoperative and was destroyed, with files transferred to the Chaplain's vehicle. The "A" Company column reached Sbeitla as the enemy began shelling the town. There was much confusion on the road, and Major Tardy and enlisted men of the Battalion attempted to establish order among the retreating vehicles as they passed through the town. Then, Major Tardy and Capt. Gray went on through the town to select a Battalion assembly area for the re-grouping of the elements. "A" column pulled into this assembly area at 0110 hours on February 17th, and a thin line of tanks and 75mm S/P's were strung across the valley for a last ditch fight, should the enemy break through Sbeitla. At this time the ammunition dump in Sbeitla was on fire. Lt. Col. King reported to CC "A" for orders.

RESTRICTED

RESTRICTED

"A" and "B" Companies guns under Captains Gray and [redacted] sit with Lt. Col. King and Major Tardy re-entered Sbeitla at 0215 hours, and took up defensive positions on the right flank.

In the meantime the column under Lt. Morrison had joined with the "C" Company column under Captain Redding. This group reached a point some three miles south and east of Sbeitla. There the column halted in order to attempt to contact friendly units (the column commanders knew nothing of the situation, they were out of radio contact which had not been regained, and did not wish to endanger the column by entering Sbeitla until it had been ascertained whether the town belonged to the Americans or the Germans. Also, this column was for all purposes still in the rear of enemy lines, and as the night was dark, and as they had no contact with friendly units, it was felt that taking the column further in the direction of friendly troops would result in bringing them under fire of friendly guns). Lt. Morrison and Capt. Redding attempted to contact Division Headquarters offering the services of the remaining six guns (75mm S/P's), but were told to "get off the net". They then contacted Combat Command Headquarters and received orders to take up defensive positions on the far side of the valley (it was impossible for the guns to assume these positions for it would necessitate the entire group passing directly through the German positions). Thus, it was decided to set up a static defense in the present position and await the developments of the morning. With dawn the column again moved in the direction of Sbeitla, and entered the town, finding it deserted. There, the group contacted Lt. Col. King and was led into the Battalion assembly area.

On the morning of the 17th, CC "B" of the 1st Armored Division moved up to cover the defenses of Sbeitla, and CC "A" went into a defensive position some three miles west of the town. 701st TD Battalion was again attached to CC "C" to cover the withdrawal of the Division. By 1600 hours an artillery duel was in progress. Enemy aircraft bombed and strafed the American positions and traffic on the main Kasserine-Sbeitla road was strafed throughout

RESTRICTED

RESTRICTED

the morning. By 1200 hours enemy artillery was firing at water-battery on American positions in the vicinity and a general withdrawal was ordered. 701st TD Battalion was assigned the rear guard mission. At 1345 hours the last of the Battalion withdrawal columns of the night before (Lt. Smith's and Sumner's platoons of Reconnaissance Company) were reported safe. Throughout the afternoon CC "C" withdrew. The guns of the 701st covering the withdrawal by leap-frogging. The Combat Command withdrew to positions some 12 miles west of Sbeitla, but at 1840 hours orders were issued for a further withdrawal (the town of Sbeitla was now in the possession of the enemy and German Reconnaissance patrols had pushed forward some nine miles out of Sbeitla). CC "C" began further withdrawal at 1930 hours with the 701st again in rear guard. At 2400 hours the Battalion went into bivouac 10 miles north of Kasserine. Further move was made at 0615 hours on February 18th when the Battalion left the bivouac area heading north toward Ghala in a slow moving column, and thence southwest to Tobessa and into bivouac 15 miles south of Tobessa on the Feriana road. This day Lt. Cox's platoon of "A" Company, believed lost in the first day of fighting at Sidi Bou Zid, returned to the Battalion after hiking 40 miles (platoon suffered complete loss of equipment).

Thus, ended the Sbeitla affair.

* * * * *

RESTRICTED