

HEADQUARTERS
703RD TANK DESTROYER BATTALION
APO 230

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31 January 1945

OPERATIONS OF "A" COMPANY 1 JAN 45 - 31 JAN 45.

On 2 Jan 45 this battalion was detached from the 82nd Airborne Division and attached to the 3rd Armored Division preparatory to making an attack from an area between Manhay (P533902) - VILLETES (P598944) southeast to secure the towns of Vaux (P657-769), Cherain (P664775), Sterpigny (P678778), and block the enemy's routes of withdrawal to the east. "A" Company was attached to Combat Command "A", and the platoons were further attached, 3rd Platoon to TF "X", 2nd Platoon to TF "Y", and 1st Platoon in Reserve. "A" Company moved on 2 Jan 45 to the assembly area of Combat Command "A", and on 3 Jan 45 the attack started. The following narrative relates to the actions of "A" Company during this drive:

- 1st PLATOON -

The first platoon remained in C Comd "A" Reserve during the initial stages of the attack, staying with the Company C.P. and moving forward slowly as the attack gained ground. On 3 Jan they moved to Bra (P575935), and on 6 Jan to Lierneux (P618890).

During this period C Comd "A" had pushed forward through Lierneux, Verloutmont (P630878), Grand Sart (P657877), and had cleared the left flank of the Division Sector as far as Provedroux (P690-855), where the forward elements were emplaced. On 13 Jan, C Comd "A" was designated as Division Reserve and the platoon remained at Lierneux until 15 Jan 45.

On 12 Jan TF YEOMANS, consisting of the 83rd Armd Ren Bn, a company of tanks, and the 1st Platoon of "C" Company, had pushed forward on the right flank of the Division, and by 15 Jan had cut the main road south of Mont Le Ban (P645785), and had troops in the woods on the high ground east of Sommeraine (P633755). His armor, however, had been somewhat depleted during his attack, and the 1st platoon of "A" Co was sent forward on 15 Jan to reinforce his positions. One gun of the platoon was operating with the 2nd platoon at that time, and only three destroyers went forward.

The platoon moved to Hebronval (P631860), met a guide from TF YEOMANS, and were taken to the forward C.P. of the Task Force in the woods just northwest of RJ at (P639761). TF YEOMANS had a road block at that road junction, and needed the additional TD's not only to cover the road leading from Sommeraine but also to cover the secondary route out of Sommeraine, running southeast to Brisly (P655-750). Lieut Henderson moved his destroyers across the road to the high ground east of Sommeraine, and placed his destroyers in position, two facing west and northwest, one facing south, to cover both of the roads.

This patch of woods was under direct observation of the enemy from Sommeraine and the high ground to the south, and received constant small arms, mortar, and artillery fire throughout the night. On the morning of 16 Jan, T/5 Goldberg was wounded while delivering a message to one of the destroyers, and was evacuated.

On 16 Jan TF KANE passed through their positions attacking toward Brisly, but was unable to make any headway across the open ground

because of direct fire from the town and high ground behind it. At noon TF YEOMANS attacked Sommeraine, the TD's remaining on the high ground, and succeeded in securing the village.

The following day the platoon was returned to C Comd "A", and moved back to Hebronval, again in Reserve. On 19 Dec the platoon moved to Baclain (P665791) in road block positions, and on 22 Jan moved to its present location in rest areas.

- 2nd PLATOON -

On 3 Jan, when the attack started, the 2nd Platoon moved to Vaux-Chevanne (P545917), prepared to move out on order of TF "X", to which it was attached. One destroyer was unoperational, and to make up the deficiency it had attached to it one from the 1st Platoon.

By the afternoon of 4 Jan TF "Y" had advanced as far as Lamsival (P604904), and Col Richardson, the task force commander, called up the platoon to place road blocks in the town of Jevigny (P595-904) to protect his flank. The platoon moved up to the town, arriving after dark, and found that there were no other troops there, although units had passed through prior to that time. At about midnight, elements of TF "X" moved into the town and gave the destroyers some badly needed security for the rest of the night.

The following day the platoon left the town and moved only as far as the bridge at (P605894) where it spent the night waiting for the town of Lierneux (P618890) to be cleared.

Combat Command "A" succeeded in clearing Lierneux on the morning of 6 Jan, but the enemy held on to the high ground south of the town and the TD's moved to positions just north, in order to cover the hill during its assault. When it was taken, the destroyers moved through to the south edge and remained there during the night. While Lt Ferchaud and his Platoon Sgt were forward on a foot reconnaissance, Sgt Lehman, a destroyer commander, was killed when his vehicle ran over a mine. The destroyer was backing into a position off the road, with Sgt Lehman on foot guiding the driver, when the mine exploded. Sgt Lehman was instantly killed by flying metal and earth which struck him in the chest, and T/4 Langbecker and Cpl Benkowski were wounded in the destroyer. Sgt Shutt, in the destroyer behind, took immediate charge of the situation, and he, along with Pfc Altman, removed the wounded men from the vehicle and administered first aid.

The attack continued the next morning and the platoon advanced as far as Verleumont (P630878), setting up road blocks while the Task Force continued its attack toward Sart (P654874). This town was cleared by the morning of 8 Jan, and the TD's continued through Sart and into Joubieval (P654862) where they remained for two days, protecting the north flank of the Task Force as it swung its attack east toward Provedroux (P690855). Although shelling had been severe all along the route up to that point, it was particularly heavy while the platoon remained at Joubieval. Fortunately, however, there were no casualties either in men or vehicles.

On 10 Jan, the platoon moved into the woods southeast of Joubieval and remained there for two more days, acting as mobile reserve. When the enemy had been cleared from Provedroux the platoon returned to Joubieval and spent the following two nights there.

On 12 Jan, C Comd HOWZE was committed on the right of C Comd "B", and C Comd "A" was designated as Division Reserve. However, on 14 Jan additional help was needed in the attack and the platoon moved with TF "Y" to positions in the woods just north of Baclain (P665791) where it remained until 16 Jan 45.

By this time Baclain and Cherain (P665775) had been cleared and on the morning of 16 Jan the platoon moved into Cherain, taking up positions covering southwest while the Task Force attacked Sterpigny (P678778). At dusk the destroyers moved into Sterpigny as the town was cleared, and remained there while TF "Y" pushed on the following morning to the edge of the woods at (P700785).

On 18 Jan new orders were issued preparatory to securing the towns of Rettigny (P674760), and Renglez (P679760) including the high ground to the south, and C Comd "A" (minus TF "Y") was given that mission. TF "Y" remained in position during this attack and the objective was taken on 19 Jan and held until 20 Jan preparatory to further movement.

On 20 Jan TF "Y" was attached to the 84th Inf Div to assist in securing the towns of Gouvy (P719778) and Ourthe (P746781), and the attack started the morning of 21 Jan. Up until this time the 2nd Platoon had remained at Sterpigny, and when the attack started it moved up to road block positions in the vicinity of (P700785), relieving the 3rd Platoon destroyers at that point. Late that afternoon they again moved forward until they reached Gouvy, establishing road blocks to the south and southeast.

On 22 Jan the 84th Inf Div attacked Ourthe, and the platoon moved out to the east edge of Gouvy, taking up positions behind or beside houses on the road leading to Belio (P761816).

The two leading destroyers covered the area to the northeast while the two destroyers nearest the town covered the area towards Ourthe. After a short while the lead destroyer commander observed movement in the woods near Giesbour (P755799), and fired two rounds of HE, range 2400 yards, which fell short. Immediately after firing he backed the destroyer behind the house near him, and in no more than a few moments fire was returned. However, as this destroyer was no longer visible to the enemy the fire was not directed at his position, but at a tank sitting beside the next house. The tank was hit on the first round, and the two occupants seriously wounded, although they both climbed out and ran towards cover. One of the men gained the corner of the house, but the other man fell on the open ground under direct observation. Lt Ferchaud retrieved the fallen soldier and administered first aid to both of them until the medical aid men evacuated them.

Shortly after this incident a 1-1/2 ton truck was destroyed as it moved up the road from Gouvy, and again a 1/4 ton truck towing a trailer loaded with mortar ammunition was hit. This vehicle was not more than 2 yards from one of the destroyers and when the ammunition began to explode the crew of the destroyer left. However, even though the ammunition continued to explode beside the TD, they returned and manned the vehicle. The crew of this destroyer was Sgt Olsen, T/4 Long, Cpl Moriarty, and Pvt Weishapel.

Once more the hidden gun claimed a victim, this time a 57mm AT gun being towed by a 1-1/2 ton truck, and a member of one of the destroyer crews who had been observing the terrain from one of the houses thought he picked up the muzzle flash of the enemy gun. This location was pointed out to the lead destroyer commander and it was approximately the same vicinity where the gunner had originally fired the two rounds of HE. Two more rounds of HE were fired

this time at a range of 3000 yards, and there was no more return fire. Whether the enemy gun was knocked out or scared away is unknown.

Lieut Ferchaud cites this episode as a perfect example of "fire and move". Had the destroyer remained in position after firing the original two rounds it would undoubtedly have received return fire.

That ended the action of the platoon, and the following day, 23 Jan, they returned with the Task Force to their present rest area.

- 3rd PLATOON -

The Third Platoon, attached to TF "X" remained in assembly area when the attack started, and did not move forward until 5 Jan to set up a road block just north of La Vaux (P625897). The area was heavily shelled throughout the night, and one M-20 crew had an extremely fortunate escape. The M-20 was parked in a field alongside the road, with CPL Brown sitting in the drivers seat, and S/Sgt Thornhill reclining in the assistant drivers' seat leaning over the gear shift levers trying to sleep. He was rudely awakened by a sharp blow on the shoulder which turned out to be part of the hatch cover. This cover had been struck by a heavy object which knocked a hole through it and bent it inward, but it was too dark to find the object that had done the damage.

Later in the evening Lt Balmes, the platoon leader, slept in the vehicle, and on awakening in the morning found that he had been sleeping on top of a mortar dud.

The Platoon moved the following day through La Vaux and on to the high ground northeast of Verleumont (P630878). Elements of the infantry were in front of them, and that night one Mk IV tank was destroyed by bazooka fire from a few hundred yards in front of the destroyers.

On 7 Jan, late in the afternoon, the platoon moved into Grand-Sart, again establishing a road block covering the approaches from the south. The Task Force attacked east to Provodroux (P690855) the next morning, and the TD's moved to Sart, covering the flank of the attacking forces. That night approximately 1900 hours they were relieved by 57mm AT guns and moved in a blinding snowstorm to Provodroux. Although the distance travelled was only a bit more than three miles it was 0500 hours the next morning before they were able to reach the town.

On arrival the TD's moved into position facing the river to the east, and remained there until the Task Force was relieved on 12 Jan by the 75th Inf Div. During this period the shelling was almost continuous and two members of the platoon were slightly wounded. Sgt Ericson and Pvt Katana were chopping wood between two of the buildings when a mortar round landed about 10 yards away, knocking both of the men to the ground. Neither man was badly hurt and they were not evacuated.

The only firing done by the platoon while at Provodroux consisted of a burst from one of the machine guns on a destroyer. One morning three Germans came walking up the road, apparently unaware that the Americans were in front of them, when an infantryman in front of the TD's called for them to surrender they immediately jumped into the bushes alongside the road, and the destroyer sprayed the bushes with the machine gun fire. The Germans got away.

On 12 Jan C Comd "A" was designated as Division Reserve, and the TD's pulled back to Grand-Sart with TF "X", remaining there until the 14th. On 14 Jan the platoon moved to the vicinity of Pisserote (P610817) with a platoon of infantry to protect the division's right flank until the 2nd Armored Division moved abreast. They were relieved that night by a platoon of light tanks and rejoined TF "X" which had moved to Mont Le Ban to aid C Comd "B" in their attack.

Until 18 Jan the platoon maintained positions covering the main road to the south, and on that date were relieved to regroup with TF "X" for an attack on the towns of Rettigny (P674760) and Renglez (P679760).

On 19 Jan the attack started, and the TD's moved through Baclain, Cherain, Sterpigny, east along the main road to (P697784), and south and east along the trail into Renglez. When they reached Renglez they established road blocks covering south and west, and remained that night. The following morning they moved through Sterpigny to the edge of the woods at (P)00785), and remained there on road block until relieved by the 2nd Platoon on 21 Jan. When relief was completed they moved back into the woods to the southwest to regroup with TF "X", and on 22 Jan moved to their present rest area.

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