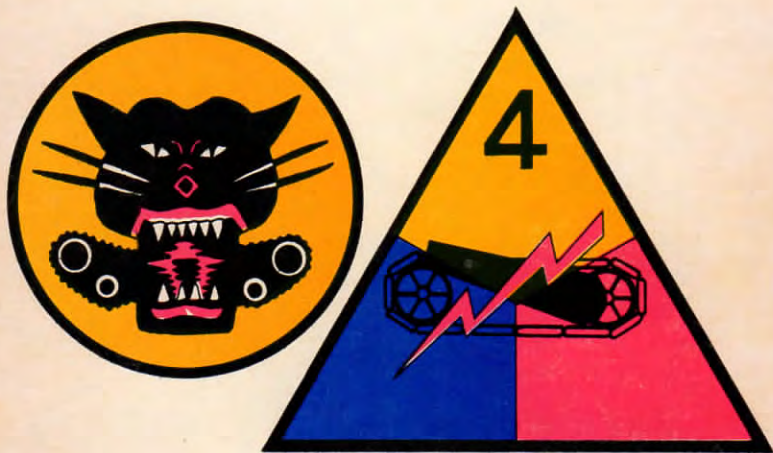


CODE NAME:

HARPOON



**THE COMBAT HISTORY OF THE
704th TANK DESTROYER
BATTALION (SELF-PROPELLED)**

EDITED BY LONNIE GILL



The principal combat vehicle used by the 704th Tank Destroyer Battalion was the 76mm Gun Motor Carriage M18, popularly known as the "Hellcat". The vehicle in this photo is from an unknown battalion and was photo'ed at Brest, France on September 12, 1944. Note the unusual stencil "USA" number and nickname "BIG GEE", as well as the Cullin hedgerow cutter fastened to the hull front. US Army Photo SC 194418

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INTRODUCTION

Several years ago, a subscriber of **AFV-G2** magazine requested information about U.S. Army tank "aces." It was soon evident that very little has been published about the exploits of U.S. armor. American military historians have concentrated on the actions of infantrymen and paratroopers, almost ignoring the achievements of American armor. This is most unfortunate as our tank and tank destroyer crews forged a proud and courageous record during World War II, combating the heavily-armored German tanks with inferior equipment. So, the present work is a start at redressing the balance. It is to be hoped that it is only a beginning.

American units generally used code names while in combat as a security measure. The 704th Tank Destroyer Battalion's was "Harpoon," hence the title of this book. The 704th was in many ways a typical American unit. It's ranks contained both the brave and the foolish, the dedicated and the "eight-ball." But, the 704th was more than just typical. Fighting alongside the fast-moving 4th Armored Division, it had considerably more contact with enemy armor than most other units. The men in the Battalion were always equal to the challenge. The 704th built up the highest score of destroyed enemy armor of any M18 battalion.

In order to provide as much information as possible in a reasonably-priced format, I've divided the 704th's story into three parts. Part I, *Combat Operations*, described the actions of the 704th, along with the units it supported, and their place in the overall picture. It is based on the 704th's After Action Reports, the official U.S. Army history of World War II, and other recognized sources. Part II, *D + 36 to VE Day*, is an exact reprint of the 704th's informal history, originally printed privately for its members just after the war. Although it contains some small errors and sometimes transposes dates and places, it is a unique account written while the memories were still fresh. The author, T/Sgt. Albert G. Bologna, has a fresh, vivid style which makes for exciting reading and provides details unavailable elsewhere. You'll note that the M18s are sometimes referred to as "Tanks" (technically they were Gun Motor Carriages) and jeeps are called "peeps" – a term preferred by armored units. Naturally, there is some duplication with Part I, but I felt that you would rather not have constant interruptions in the form of explanatory passages and footnotes. The final section is a series of appendices covering some of the technical aspects of the 704th and its equipment. All opinions and errors in Part I and the Appendices are my responsibility.

Finally, let me preface the 704th's story with a few underlying concepts. When World War II began, the U.S. Army considered Germany's "Blitzkrieg" tank attack to be its number one problem. After considerable thought, its reply was a typically American solution, a whole new type of special unit — the Tank Destroyer battalion — whose primary task was stopping German *Panzer* attacks. American tanks were to be preserved for exploiting breakthroughs and used against enemy infantry and artillery. After a shaky start in North Africa due to misuse and inadequate equipment, Tank Destroyer battalions went on to develop into a most effective counter to the *Panzers*. Although the self-propelled tank destroyers looked like tanks, they were not. Unlike tanks, they were only lightly armored and had open-topped turrets for maximum visibility. Their primary feature was a better gun. While the basic U.S. tank, the M4 Sherman, was armed with a 75mm gun, tank destroyers had powerful 3-inch and 76mm weapons on their M10s and M18s. When these proved ineffective against the heavily armored Panthers and Tigers encountered after D-Day, special HVAP ammunition was developed and many tank destroyer units were re-equipped with the 90mm gun on the M36. Unable to slug it out, tank destroyer crews defeated their heavily armored opponents through ambush and superior tactics. Tank destroyers also developed secondary missions as assault guns and as artillery.

In spite of their fine record, however, the tank destroyer branch was disbanded shortly after the war. By then, the Army considered tanks more cost effective as they could perform tank destroyer missions in addition to their own. Conceived from the maelstrom of battle, the Tank Destroyer story was short and violent, but many of the tactics and concepts survive in the modern Army, almost forty years later.

I'd like to especially thank Mr. William Hansen of the Armor School Library at Fort Knox for his unstinting help. Without his assistance, literally none of this would have been possible. Thanks are also due to Norman Macomber and Walter Righton of the 704th Tank Destroyer Battalion who provided valuable assistance in the form of pictures and historical details. Also, thanks to my wife for her patience and typing, and to Jim and Lorraine for their suggestions.

Anaheim, California

PART I – COMBAT OPERATIONS

A month after D-Day, the Allies held a narrow beachhead, liberated at a heavy cost, along the Normandy coast of Hitler's *Festungs Europa*. Fierce fighting raged as the advance slowly continued inland with the Germans battling stubbornly for each field in the easily defended *bocage* country. A steady stream of reinforcing units arrived in the congested beachhead during July to sustain the Allied build-up, among them the 4th Armored Division and Lieutenant Colonel Delk M. Oden's 704th Tank Destroyer Battalion (SP). Alongside their comrades of the 4th, with whom they had trained for so long, the men of the 704th set up camp in the dry, dusty homeland of William the Conqueror.

The Battalion's initial combat tasks were indirect fire missions for the 4th Armored Division's "Combat Command B" (CCB) as it took up positions on July 18th, 1944 half a mile behind the armored infantry. "C" Company suffered the first casualty that day, graphically demonstrating the ugly reality of war. During the next week, the members of the 704th learned fast. Concealment was vital. You didn't stray too far from a foxhole, and you didn't drive vehicles very fast during the hot dry summer days. Dust was a sure invitation to German artillery and mortars. During the evening hours, German aerial intruders often droned overhead, killing sleep and looking for stray lights.

Then came Tuesday, July 25th. The men stood in groups, that morning watching while more than 3,000 planes of the Allied airforces filled the skies about 1100 hours. The massive armada was the opening round in General Bradley's "Operation Cobra," destined to break out of the easily-defended *bocage* country. More than 3,500 tons of bombs were dropped on the German troops in front of the American VII. Corps positions in front of St. Lo. The unprecedented bombardment shattered the defenders and the G.I.s of the VII. Corps soon tore a gaping hole in the Axis defense. By Friday, the 4th Armored Division, with the 704th attached, was unleashed on the right in the VII. Corps zone-of-action and it plunged through the remnants of the German LX-XXIV. *Armee-Korps* towards the vital road junction at Avranches. This junction contained the only good road to the south in the area.

The 4th Armored Division was part of Lieutenant General George S. Patton's new Third Army. The fiery Patton soon made his presence felt, chiding his Commanding Officers to keep going and to forget about

their flanks. Pockets of resistance were to be bypassed and left to be cleared by the infantry divisions which were following. The 704th Tank Destroyer Battalion's "B" Company and the 2nd Platoon of the Reconnaissance Company supporting CCB's attack were soon in the thick of the fighting, destroying two anti-tank guns and hitting a *Panther* tank in Countances. Things were moving too fast to get confirmation for the tank, so it was listed as a "probable." Five days later, Lieutenant Addison's 1st Platoon of "A" Company, attached to CCA's 51st Armored Infantry Battalion, clashed with German armor in Avranches, getting four tanks and another "probable" for the Battalion's first confirmed kills.* Unfortunately, the platoon leader was caught in the crossfire and killed. By this time, the 4th Armored Division, commanded by Major General John S. Woods, had taken over 3,000 prisoners. Once through the Avranches bottleneck, the way was open to strike across the neck of the vital Brest peninsula. The St. Lo Breakthrough soon became the Avranches Breakout.

General Woods' next objective was Rennes, midway across the peninsula, when ten major roads met. Although the Allies had command of the air, the *Luftwaffe* was not entirely absent, as "B" Company found out on August 2nd when its column was strafed. The next day, the 4th Armored Division bypassed Rennes after its initial assault was repulsed. The 8th Infantry Division's 13th Regimental Combat Team (RCT) took over and launched a hasty attack at 1730 hours, with the 704th's "A" Company supporting the lead battalion while "C" Company aided the second battalion. "A" Company lost the first "Harpoon" M18 "Hellcat" when the attack stalled in the face of direct fire from German-manned anti-aircraft guns.† Rennes fell to the infantry the next day, while the "Harpoon" vehicles hurried on to rejoin the 4th Armored Division on the outskirts of Lorient. On Monday, August 7th, the commander of "B" Company and his liaison officer were killed when CCB's head-quarters three miles south of Pont Scorff was hit by intense enemy artillery fire. Lieutenant Wilson took over command of the company, whose 1st Platoon captured the town on Tuesday while the attached 2nd Platoon of the Reconnaissance Company reduced two strong points, capturing eighty defenders. Artillery continued to fall in the area, destroying a 704th M20 Armored Utility Car the following day.

In only twelve days, "Harpoon" and the 4th Armored Division columns had reached the outskirts of the coastal cities of Lorient, St. Nazaire and Nantes, cutting off all the German forces in the Brest

* These were also the first confirmed kills for the 4th Armored Division.

† 'Harpoon' was the 704th Tank Destroyer Battalion's codename. 'Olympic' was the codename for the 4th Armored Division.

Peninsula. Leaving the reduction of these ports to the VIII. Corps infantry divisions moving in their wake, the 4th Armored Division's columns wheeled east to join Patton's XII. Corps in the liberation of France. When the American divisions broke out, the German commanders realized they had suffered a grievous defeat. In a desperate attempt to retrieve the situation, Hitler personally ordered a counterattack at Mortain to cut off the narrow Avranches corridor which formed the rampaging Patton's supply line. But, by the time the counterattack could be organized, it was too late. Twelve American divisions had passed through the dangerously narrow corridor in incredible time and were fanning out, outflanking and nearly trapping the entire Axis defense in Normandy, while their British Allies hammered away at Falaise. After the counterattack failed, there was no choice but flight. The "rat race" was on as the *Wehrmacht* troops fled for the West Wall defenses, in order to try and establish a new line along the borders of the *Reich*.

The miles sped by, ground beneath the wheels and tracks of the 704th's vehicles as they roared along the picturesque tree-lined roads of rural France, cows dozing nearby in the warm summer sun. A bolsterous reception greeted them in village after village. Old men and boys waved small French and American flags, yelling "*Vive Les Americans*" while the village women wept for joy. It was "*La Liberation*." The tank destroyer crews were showered with flowers, wine and fruit as the long 4th Armored Division columns wound their way through the narrow, twisting streets. Rumors quickly made the rounds in the holliday atmosphere. The "krauts" were running for the Rhine. Beaten. The war would be over by Christmas. "Keep 'em Rolling" was the order of the day as the 4th Armored Division spearheaded the XII. Corps drive forming the southern flank of the entire Allied advance. So, the red-eyed crews kept their vehicles moving through landscape that had delighted countless tourists. But, they had no time for the sights. Sleep became more valuable than money, with the crews snatching a few minutes here and there — whenever there was a momentary pause in the relentless pursuit. But there was danger, too. The columns occasionally met brief, but savage resistance from Germans and Nazi sympathizers who stood and fought. For the men of the 704th Headquarters & Headquarters Company and the support elements, there were also hazards. Following the spearheads through "indian country," they were likely to be ambushed at every bend in the road by cut-off *Wehrmacht* detachments bypassed in the confusion. The truck drivers soon found it was safer to travel alone than with the 4th Armored Division's supply train. *Me-109s* would ignore an individual truck to strafe a convoy. Just finding their way along the poorly marked unfamiliar roads provided the drivers a constant challenge. When they had finished replenishing the Hellcats with fuel and ammunition, they were likely to be thanked by the destroyer crews with, "get the hell away from us with that bomb."

August 15th, 1944 found "Harpoon's" Lieutenant Colonel Oden commanding the northern column of CCA's attack on the city of Orleans, where centuries before, a medieval French maid had made history. About 1800 hours on the 16th, Lieutenant Minogue of the 704th intercepted and destroyed three *Wehrmacht* vehicles with his M20 armored utility car, as the Battalion bivouaced in nearby Cercottes. A colonel carrying dispatches for the German commander at Orleans was among those captured. The following day, Lieutenant Colonel Oden and four other "Harpoon" officers were transferred to the 4th Armored Division's 35th Tank Battalion and another Southerner, Lieutenant Colonel Bill A. Bailey of the 35th, took command of the 704th Tank Destroyer Battalion. "B" Company also rejoined the Battalion after an epic two day, 232 mile road march from Lorient. Headlong Pursuit carried "Harpoon" vehicles along the banks of the Loire and then across the Seine near Troyes. The next day, they crossed the Marne where a preceding generation had suffered and died thirty years before. Past half forgotten trenches and weed grown shell craters, they sped on ever eastward. But, on September 2nd, the advance ground to a halt just short of the Moselle River. The Third Army was out of gas!

In their rapid pursuit towards the heart of Hitler's Germany, the Allied spearheads had outrun their supply system, still based in Normandy. Amidst vigorous politicking between the Allied commanders, General Eisenhower directed that the bulk of the limited supplies available be given to General Montgomery's Twenty-First Army Group whose goal was Germany's vital Ruhr industry. Patton's Third Army, on the southern flank of the Allied advance, would only get supplies when and if they could be spared. So, the 704th spent the first week of September 1944 doing outpost duty for the 4th Armored Division and catching up on long overdue maintenance and sleep. The respite also gave the Germans a chance to halt their reeling, shattered battlegroups and form a defensive line strengthened by new units hastily formed in the *Reich*. The easy days were over.

Meanwhile, thousands of gliders which could have flown the gas directly to the Allied columns to keep them moving sat idle on English airfields, their pilots bored by endless rounds of guard duty. Had they been used to maintain the momentum, the Allies might well have crossed the Rhine before the Germans could have established a viable defense line. In retrospect, it remains a fascinating possibility; but, it was never seriously considered.* The field commanders in France knew little of glider capabilities and Airborne commanders were concerned only with planning combat missions for their troops. Eventually, they got their wish. The Airborne Divisions made combat drops three weeks later

* Glider towing aircraft were busy flying gas to French airfields in the rear, but the gliders could have delivered gas right to the American armor columns to keep them moving.

as part of Operation "Market Garden" — since made famous in the book and motion picture, "A Bridge Too Far."

LORRAINE

When enough gasoline arrived to resume a limited attack, the 4th Armored Division was given the task of breaking-out of the newly-established XII. Corps bridgeheads on the east bank of the Moselle River, and encircling the city of Nancy, historic capital of Lorraine. "Harpoon's" "A" Company crossed the Moselle with CCB on September 12th, near Vilecourt. CCB flanked Nancy from the south and moved towards the Marne-Rhine canal against stiffening resistance from the 553. *Volks-Grenadier-Division* and the 15. *Panzer-Grenadier-Division* which had just arrived from Italy. "C" Company marched with CCA, crossing the Moselle via the 80th Infantry Division's bridgehead north of Nancy. Corporal Carl Dill of the 2nd Platoon destroyed a *Panther* on the 13th, and other "C" Company crews accounted for an 88mm gun and another armored vehicle in Preney. CCA continued east, completing the ring around Nancy, which fell on the 15th. "C" Company destroyed three more enemy vehicles at Fresnes en Saulnois two days later, and continued on to Arracourt, arriving there at 1800 hours on the 18th. There CCA paused to let other XII. Corps units mop up enemy pockets along the Moselle. Meanwhile, "B" Company, with the rest of the Battalion, had moved to nearby Luneville with CCR on the 16th, and had set-up defensive positions on the high ground northwest of the city, which was being cleared by Cavalry troops.

While Patton's troops resumed the attack, the Nazis were busy assembling a counterstroke of their own. Defense of Germany's vital industrial areas was key to her continued survival. The Ruhr was screened by a mighty river barrier, the Rhine, but further south, the Saar — next in importance to the German war machine — was less fortunate. It was situated well to the west of the Rhine, protected only by the defenses of the West Wall. Time would be needed to refurbish and man these neglected fortifications. Seeing the right wing of his defense stiffening and holding in Holland and around Aachen, Hitler decided to use several of his new *Panzer-Brigaden* — his only armored reserve — to end the crisis in the south and destroy Patton's spearheads. The 5. *Panzer-Armee*, commanded by East Front hero *Generalleutnant* Hasso von Manteufel, would coordinate the attack. The 111. *Panzer-Brigade* and part of the depleted 11. *Panzer-Division* were to attack north and retake Luneville on September 18th, while the 113. *Panzer-Brigade* struck west, through Arracourt on the 19th, and eliminated the XII. Corps bridgeheads across the Moselle.* The stage was thus set for one of the few head-on clashes between major

* All these German units are erroneously referred to as the 11. *Panzer* in Part II.

American and German armored units to occur in the ETO. The firm ground and gently rolling hills of the farmland of the Moselle made for ideal "tank country." Light rain and the early morning fogs, common in the valleys and along the rivers, would provide the *Wehrmacht* armor the needed cover from the dreaded American fighter-bombers. †

The 111. *Panzer-Brigade's* attack started the operation on Monday, the 18th, when it pushed the 42nd Cavalry Squadron, deployed south of Luneville, back into the city where heavy fighting raged. The light tanks and armored cars of the 42nd were no match for *Panther* tanks. "B" Company of the 704th was ordered to send its 3rd Platoon into Luneville to aid the American defenders. Arriving amidst heavy artillery fire, the platoon destroyed three *Panthers* along the edge of the city. Fighting continued throughout Monday night. On Tuesday, the platoon destroyed another *Panther* and a *Ferdinand* self-propelled (SP) gun. About noon, Lieutenant Colonel Bailey, the Battalion Commander, was killed by mortar fire while directing the tank destroyers. "C" Company's 2nd Platoon, sent from Arracourt as part of a CCA task force to provide additional help, also destroyed a *Panther* during the day. A combat command of the 6th Armored Division relieved the 4th Armored Division's CCR at Luneville during the night so that it could reinforce the beleaguered CCA at Arracourt.

September 19th saw the commencement of the second stage of the German attack as the 113. *Panzer-Brigade* started its thrust towards Arracourt with infantry of *Panzer-Grenadier-Regiment 2113* and forty-two brand new *Panthers* of its Mark V battalion in the lead. The unsuspecting GIs of the 4th Armored Division's CCA were spread over a wide area from Chambrey south almost to the Marne-Rhine Canal preparing to resume their advance towards Morhange. Captain Evan's "C" Company of the 704th had two platoons in outposts backing up the 51st Armored Infantry Battalion's positions east of Moyenvic. Lieutenant Leiper's 3rd Platoon had just been rotated to CCA headquarters in Arracourt the night before. After several tense days and nights on the line, the 3rd Platoon crewmen were looking forward to a rest.

Early that Tuesday morning, Captain William Dwight, a liaison officer from the 37th Tank Battalion, was driving his peep along a country lane in the thick morning fog when he stumbled on the massive outlines of one of the 113. *Panzer-Brigade's* tank columns. Escaping in the poor visibility, Captain Dwight raced back to Arracourt. About 0730, Lieutenant Leiper was alerted to get his platoon ready to move. The situation was hazy, but something was definitely up! Colonel Bruce Clark,

† See pp.209-244 of Cole's *Lorraine Campaign in the U.S. Army in World War II* series for a thorough account of the September battles, and pp.313-320 of von Mellenthin's *Panzer Battles* for the German viewpoint.

the CCA commander, arrived and ordered the Tank Destroyer Platoon to follow the captain to Hill 279 to provide support for one of the CCA outposts. After hearing gunfire in the fog, the platoon left the road just west of Bezange le Petite, and started cross-country towards the woods in front of Hill 279, led by Lieutenant Leiper in his peep. Light rain was falling. As they neared the woods, the platoon encountered enemy armor as described in Part II. Another account, based on interviews with Lieutenant Leiper relates: "As the hill was approached, Lieutenant Leiper, who was still in front with his jeep, was startled to see the muzzle of a German tank gun sticking out through the trees at what seemed to be less than 30 feet away! He immediately gave the dispersal signal and the many months of continuous practice proved its worthiness as the platoon promptly deployed with perfect accord.

"The lead tank destroyer, commanded by Sergeant Stacey (sic), had evidently seen the German tank at the same time as Lieutenant Leiper, and opened fire immediately. Its first round scored a direct hit, exploding the German tank. The flames of the burning tank revealed others behind it in a V-formation, and Sergeant Stacey's next round hit a second German tank, but immediately afterwards he had his own tank destroyer knocked out by fire from a third German tank. This enemy Mark IV was taken under fire by the No. 2 tank destroyer, and was destroyed. The maneuver and fire of the 3rd (sic) tank destroyer got another German tank as it tried to back out of the unhealthy situation, and a fifth enemy tank was destroyed almost immediately thereafter."

The platoon withdrew to defilade in a small saucer shaped rise a few hundred yards away. Sergeant Stasi's tank destroyer, damaged by a round which had hit along the base of the gun and penetrated the gun shield was sent to the rear with three wounded crewmen. The assistant driver had been killed outright. † After hearing tanks moving ominously about in the fog during the next hour, the platoon sighted tanks moving slowly along the crest of a hill above the low lying fog about 2,500 yards away. Four or five Mark IVs were knocked out before CCA's artillery dispersed the rest. A while later, the platoon watched Major Charles Carpenter fly over in his artillery observation plane. The intrepid major, who had figured out a way to fasten six bazookas to the wing struts of his light Piper Cub, suddenly dove into the fog and open-

* Chapter Five, *Employment of Four Tank Destroyer Battalions in the ETO* by Committee 24, Officers Advanced Course, The Armor School, Fort Knox, Kentucky, 1950

† Thereafter, Lieutenant Leiper decided to pull assistant drivers out of the M18s before engagements began, to avoid unnecessary casualties. Assistant drivers served little real purpose inside a Hellcat since they had no bow machine gun and didn't handle the radio as in the M10 or M36 Tank Destroyers.

ed fire.* Flashes from the bazooka explosions disclosed the eerie shapes of three German tanks sneaking up the small hill from behind.

"Lieutenant Leiper pulled a tank destroyer around and brought its fire on the tanks, destroying two of them before the 3rd (sic) one's fire hit the right sprocket of the tank destroyer knocking it out of action. Lieutenant Leiper signalled for another tank destroyer to come up with a tow to pull the damaged tank destroyer back, but before the plan could be put into action the second tank destroyer was also hit — this one through the gun shield... probably due to the fact that the gun blast made it a good target point."† The platoon's last M18 was pulled back to another defilade position from which it later destroyed two more German tanks with hits in the rear when they left the woods and tried to cross a cemetery near Moncourt, Dismounted machine guns from the damaged tank destroyers later also stopped an attack by German infantry. Finally, late that afternoon, relief arrived in the form of a platoon of tanks from the 35th Tank Battalion.

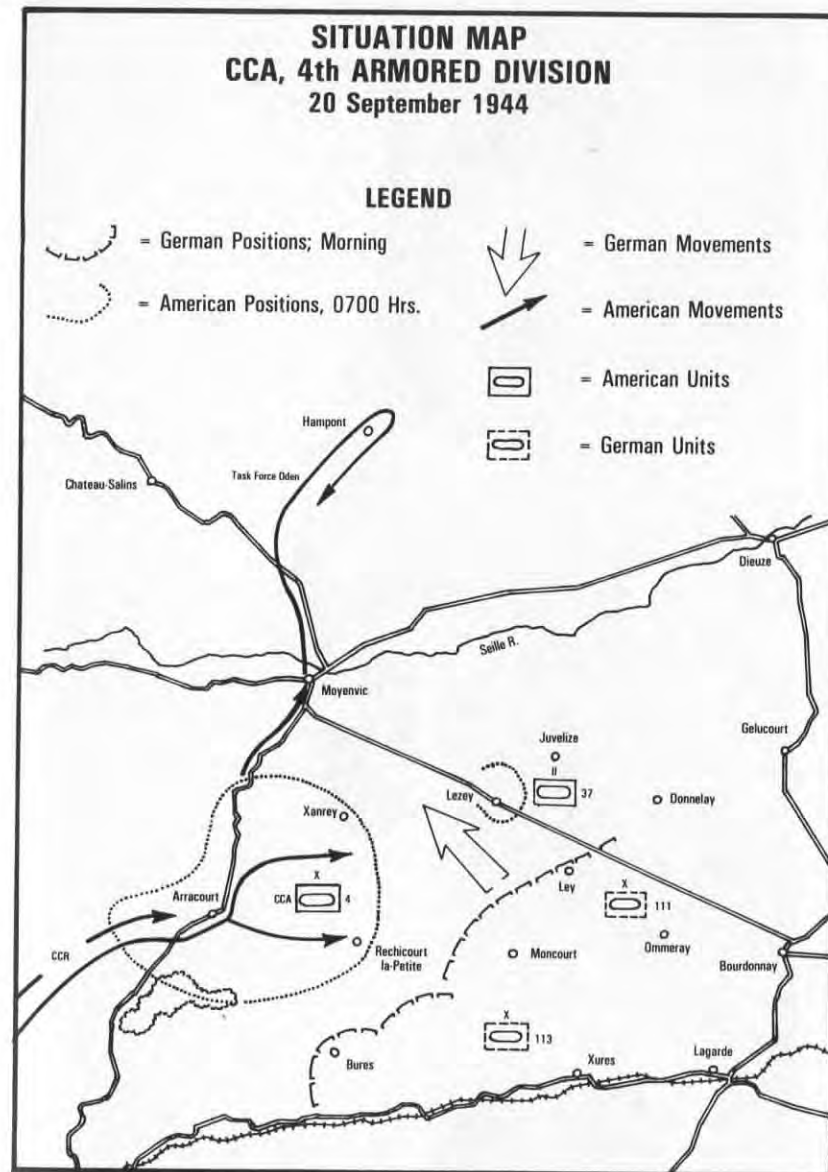
Meanwhile, another *Panzer* column ran afoul of "C" Company's 1st Platoon M18s which destroyed another eight *Wehrmacht Panthers* without loss. PFC Frank Amodia accounted for five, while Corporal John Ewanitsko destroyed the other three. By nightfall, the more maneuverable and experienced American tanks and tank destroyers had stopped the attack cold.

As related previously, CCR with "B" Company and "H & HQ" Company of the 704th arrived in Arracourt on Wednesday 20th, to enable CCA to resume its advance northeast. Lieutenant Colonel H. P. Heid Jr. arrived and assumed command of the Battalion at 1100. "B" Company, guarding CCA's right flank that day, destroyed five *Panthers* as the 111. *Panzer-Brigade* probed after sidestepping Luneville. CCA's commander, Colonel Bruce Clark, realizing that the German thrusts were more than just spoiling attacks; turned his columns around and returned to Arracourt, determined to clear out the area once and for all. The clashes which followed, convinced the U.S. Commanders that they were facing a major threat.

Meanwhile, the lack of German success led Hitler to replace his southern army group commander, General von Blaskowitz with General Balck. After sparring on the 21st, Balck ordered the attack resumed on the 22nd. The blow fell on the 4th Armored's 25th Cavalry Squadron, screening CCA's left flank northeast of Arracourt. Again, fog enabled the German armor to sneak in close to the Cavalry outposts that Friday morning. The 25th Cavalry's light tanks and armored cars fared badly until a platoon of the 704th's "C" Company, waiting in hull defilade, destroyed three *Panzers* near Juvalize. Captain Thomas J.

* Major Carpenter and his plane, *Rosie the Rocketeer*, became one of the 4th Armored's legends. By the end of the war, "Bazooka Charlie" was reported to have knocked out five *Panzers*.

† Ibid., pp. 74-75





Tank destroyer crews perfect their skills during training in England. These uncluttered Hellcats of the 603rd TD Battalion provide a good look at M18 armament, stowage and markings, including "THE COBRA" painted on the 76mm barrel in the foreground. Reels of signal wire are stowed on the turrets behind the vehicle commanders manning the machine guns. US Army Photo SC 339034



An M18 crew pitches in to finish the backbreaking task of reloading 76mm ammo near Brest, France. Note the unusual light grey camouflage applied to the lower portion of the gun tube — reminiscent of that used by the British to disguise the long barrels of their Sherman Fireflies. Separate names on both gun tube and hull are fairly common on US AFVs. The exhaust pipe for the auxiliary generator is visible to the right of the Ax. US Army Photo SC 195544

Evans won the Distinguished Service Cross for coolly directing the tank destroyers and mounting a disabled Hellcat to man its 76mm gun and knock out one of the tanks. "B" Company's 2nd Platoon also destroyed three more German tanks near Rechicourt. Then, the sun broke through the overcast and US fighter bombers supported a sharp counterattack by CCA which ended the threat by the 111. *Panzer-Brigade* and elements of the 11. *Panzer-Division*. Two days later, the Germans again returned to the attack, this time in the CCB sector near Chateau-Salins. Two regiments of the 559. *Volks-Grenadier-Division*, supported by the 106. *Panzer-Brigade*, assaulted three sides of the CCB perimeter following a heavy artillery concentration at dawn. Harpoon's "A" Company M18s accounted for four tanks before the skies cleared, bringing US fighter bombers to crush German hopes.

Patton had been ordered on the 22nd to place the Third Army on the defensive to ease the Allies' continuing supply problems. This led to CCB being shifted to CCA's right flank to strengthen it against the German concentration near Arracourt. Short withdrawals, alien to the 4th Armored's philosophy, were authorized to secure the best defensive positions. Fighting continued in inclement weather for the rest of the month with the Germans scoring several minor successes before Hitler finally authorized cessation of the attacks. At relatively little cost, the 4th Armored had wrecked two *Panzer-Brigaden* and exhausted the striking power of several divisions. For its part, the 704th's After Action Report claimed thirty-seven confirmed enemy tanks, two SPs and a towed 88 destroyed at a cost of four M18's and a M20 armored car totally destroyed. The Battalion lost fifty-eight casualties to the German tank and artillery fire.

Lieutenant Colonel Heid was transferred to the 8th Tank Battalion and turned over command of the 704th to Major Dan C. Alanis on October 1st, 1944. Both sides dug in the Arracourt area, tired from the September fighting. During the month, the Battalion held defensive positions, rotating the gun companies and attached reconnaissance platoons to catch up on maintenance and repairs. On the 6th, a Red Cross Clubmobile visited the area — the first the Battalion had seen since leaving England. "A" Company's 3rd Platoon rejoined the Battalion after being released from attachment to the 10th Armored Infantry Battalion near Rechicourt where it had destroyed a pillbox.

When the 4th Armored Division moved back for a rest on October 12th, the 704th stayed on to support the inexperienced 26th Infantry Division which replaced it and conduct indirect fire missions. This mission had been pioneered during the Tunisian fighting in 1943 by tank destroyer battalions commanded by former field artillery officers. The new technique soon gained favor during the Italian campaign where the scarcity of enemy armor and rugged terrain left TD battalions relatively idle. At first tying in to the field artillery network, many

battalions eventually developed their own Fire Direction Centers and forward observers. They found that the TD guns had some advantages of their own. With a range of over 14,000 yds., compared to only 12,500 yards for the 105mm howitzers of the artillery, the 3" and 76mm guns of the TDs were ideal for long range interdiction and counterbattery missions, relieving the 105's for close support of the infantry. In addition, the high velocity of TD guns meant the shells arrived without warning, providing a nasty surprise for those on the receiving end. And, although the M42 shells were not quite as destructive as those of the 105s, they were in plentiful supply. Division commanders were quick to discover the new firepower — equivalent to three artillery battalions in number of tubes — at their finger tips and indirect fire soon became the official secondary mission for tank destroyers. Units still in the States in 1943 like the 704th were given special artillery training before going overseas.

Thus, the 704th crews knew what to do when they unstowed their elevation quadrants and azimuth indicators and tied into the 26th Division's artillery network. Unlike many other TD battalions in the ETO, especially those with towed 3" guns, this proved to be the 704th's only prolonged period of indirect fire. Usually, one company stayed in direct fire positions with the infantry while another company handled indirect fire requests and the third company rested. The crews found deep foxholes once again essential as the open turrets of the M18s and the armored cars provided little protection from the artillery fire encountered in static positions. Shortly after 1440 on October 15th, the *Luftwaffe* made a rare daylight appearance when fifteen *Me-109s* roared in and strafed the Battalion area. Men dashed to their .50 caliber machine guns and returned the fire; two of the 109s were shot down.

On the 22nd, the green 26th Infantry Division staged a limited objective attack east of Arracourt, supported by "Harpoon's" "A" and "C" Companies to regain some of the ground lost in the September fighting. TD crews were roused in the pre-dawn darkness to scrounge chow and ready their vehicles. The "doughs" jumped off from a line of departure near Rechicourt at 0600. "A" Company's commander, 1st Lieutenant John J. Preneta, won the Distinguished Service Cross when his company was stopped by a minefield. Dismounting in the heavy artillery fire, he made his way forward, eliminating two snipers with his pistol and capturing two more. Second Lieutenant Charles Kollin, one of the platoon commanders, also won a Distinguished Service Cross for directing the evacuation of casualties and leading the attack forward again. By 1400, Benzange le Petite, scene of the earlier September battles, was reached. Both men were wounded in the fighting and Captain Smith took over "A" Company on the 23rd. The German infantry defenders complemented the 704th and the 26th's riflemen in their reports of the action, calling them "shock troops."

Finally, the Battalion was relieved on the 27th by the 602nd Tank Destroyer Battalion for a well reserved rest. Fourteen men got passes for a day in Paris. For the others, the respite meant a chance to relax, walk around and stretch without having to worry about enemy artillery or snipers, and maybe see one of the movies shown twice a day in Lenoncourt. Even better, there was the luxury of a full night's uninterrupted sleep and hot chow for all. Fourteen men had been wounded during the relatively quiet October operations, mostly by artillery.

THE SAAR

By November of 1944, the complexion of the war had changed again. The *Wehrmacht* had managed Hitler's "miracle in the West." The shattered reeling units fleeing Normandy had been transformed into a firm defense line in front of all the Allied armies. It was an incredible achievement, mute testimony to the strength and determination of the *Reich*. Meanwhile, the Canadians were kept busy clearing the approaches to Antwerp so that the port could be used to ease the continuing supply problems, while the British were laboriously preparing for another of Montgomery's massive offensives in the soggy reaches of the Upper Rhine. The US First and Ninth Armies were establishing jumping-off points to clear the Roer Plain and advance to the Rhine as soon as troops in the Hurtgen Forest took the Roer River Dams. Until these were captured, the Germans could flood the river and isolate any American units that crossed it. The heavy fighting in the Hurtgen Forest led General Bradley to stretch the VIII. Corps (just north of Patton's Third Army) thinner and thinner in the quiet, heavily forested Ardennes. On the Third Army's other flank, the American Seventh Army had fought its way from a beachhead in southern France to positions on the right of Patton's XII. Corps.

In front of the Third Army, the German 5. *Panzer-Armee* was withdrawn to prepare for Hitler's secret Ardennes offensive and was replaced by infantry units. Behind them, gangs of laborers, aided by the civilian population, prepared fortifications and refurbished the West Wall defenses. Patton had obtained permission in late October to resume his advance, with a November offensive designed to reach the Rhine through the historic "Lorraine Gateway." A heavy artillery barrage, reminiscent of World War I, would be followed by Third Army infantry division attacks. Once they had made a penetration, the armored divisions would be committed to smash through the defenders and drive for the Rhine.

The attack, planned for dry autumn conditions, was launched in driving rain on November 8, 1944. A few miles to the west, the men of the 704th Tank Destroyer Battalion could hear the ominous rumble of

the 700 gun barrage through the downpour as they waited to go into action with the 4th Armored Division. By nightfall, the infantry was making progress, but the ground was badly flooded and most of the bridges over the swollen Moselle River were washed out. Freezing rains and cold winds were a constant reminder that winter had arrived. Everywhere, the rich Alsatian farming country had turned to mud. The infantry doggedly kept advancing. "Harpoon's" "A" Company, with the usual attached platoon of the Reconnaissance Company, moved out with the 4th Armored Division's CCB on Thursday, November 9th, when it attacked through the 35th Infantry Division's positions towards the important road center of Morhange. They soon found there would be no sweeping advances. Mud was everywhere, bogging down vehicles whenever they tried to leave the roads. Restricted to the pavement, the columns struggled forward on a one tank front against the German infantry's mines and anti-tank guns. The tank destroyer crews huddled miserably in their open turrets, shivering in the dreary weather.

The Germans released their reserve, the refurbished *11. Panzer-Division* in Morhange, to counterattack and buy time while the shaken remnant of the *559. Volks-Grenadier-Division* withdrew. A detachment of the veteran *Panzers* cut in behind the CCB column that night and retook the village of Viviers. Infantry of the 35th Division regained the village after a confused battle on the 10th, but the next three days were tough going as CCB and the infantry gradually pushed and pressured the Germans back through the mud and the mines. It was an expensive advance as well. The *Panzer* troops were well used to fighting in the mud and snow, and their heavily armored *Panthers* were tough opponents. "Harpoon's" "A" Company destroyed four tanks (two of the *Panthers* were later confirmed) and a SP gun while helping to stop the *11. Panzer-Division* counterattacks. The company lost an M18 Hellcat and had one enlisted man killed and eight others and an officer wounded in the fighting.

On the right flank, CCA with "C" Company passed through the 26th Infantry Division's lines on the 10th to advance along the valley of the Petite Selle River and bypass Morhange to the south. Former "Harpoon" commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Delk Oden commanded one of the CCA columns. The 1st Platoon of "C" Company, attached to the 37th Tank Battalion, was caught in a devastating artillery barrage near Obreck on Armistice Day. The platoon commander and six men were killed and seven others wounded. The company later took up a position on the high ground northeast of Conthill, covering CCA's left flank, while the tankers fought off the *11. Panzer-Division*, remaining there until the 17th. In the interim, "B" Company and the rest of the Battalion moved to Chateau Salins and then to Conthill.

Further north, in the CCB zone of action, the advance continued to close on Morhange, breaking the second German defense line. But the

weather and the terrain left little hope for final success. So, CCB was pulled out, to make a grueling, long road march behind the lines via Courbesseaux, joining with CCA on the 17th. "C" Company was relieved by "B" Company and attached to the 6th Cavalry Group back in Nancy — to the envy of the rest of the Battalion. XII. Corps resumed the attack on the 18th. The 328th Regimental Combat Team took Dieuze on the next day, enabling the 4th Armored Division to drive eastward with CCB in the lead, followed by CCA. The enemy fought a bitter delaying action as the Americans advanced six miles to Mittersheim, and then to Fenetrance on the Sarre River. On the 24th, CCB crossed the river in spite of the *361. Volks-Grenadier-Division* and hit the *Panzer-Lehr-Division*, busy occupied in counterattacking units of the Seventh Army's XV. Corps, in the flank. Unlike the September battles, infantry was the mainstay in this encounter; mud often reduced the armor on both sides to the role of artillery support. The 704th's "A" Company did what it could to help, adding its firepower at every opportunity.

The 26th saw CCA, with "B" Company attached, cross the Sarre River and extend the US line to the right on *Panzer-Lehr's* other flank, forcing it back. Task Force West took Gungwiller after an artillery barrage, with the armored infantry clearing the streets of the village while the tank destroyers bypassed it on one side and the tanks on the other. "C" Company rejoined on the 28th, relieving "A" Company with CCA east of Fenetrance. Two days later, the 4th Armored Division had taken Mackwiller, positioning itself for an attack on the city of Sarre-Union, scheduled for December 1st. Overcast skies and the muddy expanse of flooded terrain and coal slag heaps ahead held little hope for a breakthrough.

In spite of the weather, Patton's Sarre offensive continued in December with the 101st Regimental Combat Team of the 26th Infantry Division moving up on CCB's left flank to take Sarre-Union. While the infantry fought a bitter struggle for control of the town, CCB and the 704th's "C" Company took nearby Rimsdorf. The 4th drove east towards Vollerdingen in the appalling winter weather. Mud again prevented much assistance by armor or TDs and restricted the drive to an infantry pace. CCB and units of CCA became heavily involved in fighting around Hill 318 as a small detachment of *Panzer-Lehr* stiffened the defenders, making several counterattacks to keep the escape route from Sarre-Union open. As the Americans neared the German border, the names of the towns took on an ominous teutonic flavor. And, many of the local inhabitants, having been part of both Germany and France in the past seventy years, now greeted "liberation" with sullen reception. The stoic veterans of the 704th were unperturbed; they had a job to do.

Major General Hugh J. Gaffey, Patton's Chief of Staff, relinquished his post to take command of the 4th Armored Division on December

3rd. General John S. Wood, who had led the 4th from the Normandy breakout to the Sarre, was exhausted and returned to the States for a long overdue rest.* Patton decided that the 4th Armored Division also needed to be withdrawn and rested. While the losses in armor were not great, many of the experienced officers had become casualties and the armored infantry battalions, which had borne the main burden in the past month, were seriously understrength. Before relief, however, the Division was called on for one more drive. Dreary, overcast skies continued to preclude aerial support. The 704th's TD crewmen resigned themselves to more days of misery, trying in vain to stay warm and dry. Each in his own way, they endured the constant strain and the boredom.

A task force of CCB fought its way into Voellerdingen on the 4th of December and captured a bridge over the Eichel River intact. Parts of "C" Company, however, were almost completely isolated by the thick mud in the area. Three of the four 3rd Platoon destroyers were bogged down under heavy shelling, making their position extremely dangerous in the event of a counterattack by German infantry. Corporal John Eidenschink managed, however, to destroy a self-propelled gun on a *Panzer IV* chassis with his 76mm gun. Meanwhile, CCA, supported by "B" Company, took lightly held Domfessel, but came under increasingly heavy German artillery fire aided by batteries of the *401. Volks-Artillerie-Korps* in position beyond the range of counter-battery fire from US artillery. By December 5th, CCB forced its way into Schmittviller. CCA, advancing on Binning, became bogged down in the Maginot line fortifications near Singling. "B" Company tank destroyers were kept busy destroying seven of the former French pillboxes — a task eased somewhat by the fact that they faced east towards Germany. However, the Germans held the highground to the north with a strong force of tanks and artillery, and their heavy fire blasted the armored infantry, forcing them to withdraw from the town. Many 4th Armored Division veterans regard the fighting around Singling as the bitterest of the war. Eventually, the 12th Armored Division began to relieve the tired, grimy units of the 4th on the third anniversary of Pearl Harbor.

The relief gave the scattered units of the 704th a chance to reassemble and get warm in the small towns behind the lines. Replacements arrived to rebuild the strength of the 4th Armored Division, but most had been culled out of non-combat jobs with other units in a manpower drive and had little training for combat. The special combat replacement training centers in the States were, meanwhile, being phased-out in expectation of an early end to the war. In addition, few replacements could be found for the many vehicles which had

already been driven far beyond their planned life expectancies. The difficult task of assimilating the green replacements into the combat battalions and refurbishing the worn-out equipment to last yet a little while longer kept everybody busy.

The respite ended a week later for Harpoon's "B" Company when it was assigned to assist the 4th Armored Division's 25th Cavalry Squadron in covering the right flank of the green 87th Infantry Division as it got its' initial taste of combat by continuing the XII. Corps attack. The company took up positions on the 14th, near Rimling and Hoelling, close to the German border and the "West Wall" defenses. The crews soon found out that the war hadn't changed very much. Back at the Battalion Command Post, Lieutenant Colonel James W. Bidwell became the new "Harpoon" commander. The rest of the 704th rolled east to give the 87th Division's drive more punch on the 18th. Before the new positions could be occupied, however, the Battalion was suddenly ordered to rejoin the 4th Armored Division. Amidst much confusion and scores of rumors, the "Harpoon" vehicles turned around and made their way onto the jammed road to Luxembourg along with those of the 4th Armored Division. The men soon found out why. A major Nazi offensive in Belgium had surrounded the 101st Airborne Division and CCB of the 10th Armored Division in a town called Bastogne. The 4th Armored Division's new job was to break through the Germans and rescue the besieged defenders.

ROAD TO BASTOGNE

Throughout the fall of 1944, frontline German commanders were given just enough men and equipment to prevent complete collapse. The rest were painstakingly husbanded amid great secrecy and carefully assembled into three powerful armies. Half mad, half genius, Adolph Hitler was determined to risk all on one last desperate attempt to save the Third Reich and stem the tide of seemingly inexorable defeat. Rising phoenix-like from their own ashes, two *Panzer* armies would thrust through the Ardennes, scene of the 1940 triumphs. They would seek to split the Allied armies and make history repeat itself while a third, smaller army protected their vulnerable flank from a counter-stroke by Patton's Third Army. If the gamble failed, there could be no more hope.

Hitler's surprise attack — incorrectly called the "*von Rundstedt Offensive*" in contemporary American accounts — was launched on December 16, 1944 by twenty-six *Waffen-SS* and *Wehrmacht* divisions against the weakest part of the Allied lines, the thinly held VIII. Corps sector in the Ardennes. Complacent Allied commanders at all levels were caught completely off guard.

Patton was ordered to send the 10th Armored Division north to help on the 17th. Thinking it was only a spoiling attack, he ordered the 4th Armored and 6th Armored Divisions be sent back into the lines to prevent them from being diverted as well. Before this could be

* Note: Frankel in his book, *Patton's Best*, relates that the men of the division felt that Wood's relief was actually due to politics. In any event, the General was one of America's finest armor commanders and much feared and respected by his opponents.

accomplished, however, new reports pointed out the gravity of the situation. The 87th Infantry Division was ordered to stop its attack, and the 4th Armored Division was directed to move north instead. By midnight, CCB and the 704th were on the road to Longway. General Eisenhower called a meeting of the Allied Commanders at Verdun on the 19th.

Patton astounded the assembled brass by telling them he could counterattack in three days and would relieve Bastogne by Christmas! This was not an idle boast; he had directed his staff to make a contingency plan — just in case — on December 12th, four days before the German onslaught. It was finally decided that all offensive action south of the Moselle would stop and the entire Third Army front below XX. Corps would be turned over to the Seventh Army. The Third Army staff worked all night to finalize the counterattack plans. Patton's XII. Corps would move north and secure the southern shoulder of the "Bulge" (as the Axis penetration was nicknamed), while the new III. Corps, under General Millikin, would attack towards Bastogne with the 4th Armored Division on the left and two old companions, the 26th and 80th Infantry Divisions, on the right, next to XII. Corps. The 4th Armored Division got the main task of breaking through to the paratroopers defending Bastogne and clearing a supply route along the Arlon-Bastogne road.*

Patton's attack started on schedule at 0600 hours on Friday, December 22nd, from Arlon in Belgium. Heavy gray clouds hung low overhead, eliminating aerial help; the 4th Armored Division was on its own. Men sat tense in their vehicles, the terrain in front of them bleak and cold, dotted with small villages and forbidding pine forests. No one seemed to know much about who or what lay ahead. Patton directed the 4th Armored Division to "drive like Hell," bypassing any resistance, and leading with tanks, the 704th tank destroyers, and artillery. The armored infantry was to be preserved if possible for holding the corridor open. Although the frozen ground meant the armor could move cross-country again, there proved to be little room for maneuver past the German strong points, since the road had to be cleared in order to supply the besieged units at Bastogne once contact was made. Worn out equipment and "green" replacements would also slow the drive. One tank battalion lost two-thirds of its tank strength through mechanical failures on the move north, before the attack even started. Few men of the 704th would ever forget the days spent in the gloomy forests of the Ardennes, huddled in their open turrets against the bitter cold. The ice and snow of the fiercest winter in thirty years were a further test of their endurance and determination.

CCA advanced up the main road towards Martelange, with CCB

* By a curious twist of fate, CCB's Task Force Ezell actually entered Bastogne temporarily without hinderance on the 20th, but withdrew and rejoined CCB to the south at dusk. A short time later, the Germans cut the road and completed Bastogne's encirclement.



An M20 Armored Utility Vehicle stands AA Watch. The lightly armored M20 equipped the security sections of Tank Destroyer gun platoons. It was armed with a ring-mounted .50 caliber machine gun and a bazooka, stowed in the open crew compartment, for its four man crew. Derived from the M8 armored car, the M20 was capable of 56mph on a good road, and reasonable cross-country performance when using six-wheel drive. US Army Photo SC 248587



Events down the street cause the crew of this Hellcat to man their guns. The ration boxes and .50 caliber machine gun dismantled from its turret ring-mount indicate that they plan to stay awhile. Although the censor has obliterated the unit markings, details of the siren, headlights and panel allowing access to the transmission are readily visible. US Army Photo SC 194638