



**Valley Forge Military Academy 2010  
Admiral Becton Military History Research Award**

Delk McCorkle Oden



By

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# Admiral Becton Essay:

## Delk McCorkle Oden

When people write about war heroes and great military leaders, they usually talk about famous names in history. People like Alexander, Julius Caesar, Patton, Eisenhower, MacArthur, or Westmoreland; names that shall ring throughout the halls of history eternally as masterminds of their era. However this is not the case here. This man is my war hero, my military leader, and my grandfather: Major General Delk McCorkle Oden. Yes there is a lot of sentiment behind the decision to write this essay on him, but he did things in his life time that are extraordinary and deserve to be written about. This is in honor of my grandfather, a man who I barely knew; but who's story has inspired me throughout my life to do my best.

First thing to know about Delk Oden is how he came to be the man he was. When he was a boy, Delk saw the officers at Fort Sam Houston in boots, spurs, and Stetson hats and decided it had to be West Point for him. His father, a watermelon farmer, did not believe in him and would not accept to be embarrassed by his son failing to get into the institution, so he pulled him out of high school to help around the farm. However, this did not hold Delk back from keep reaching out to his dream. His sisters, who were all very supportive of him, paid for him to go to school and he would attend Marion Military Institute in Alabama for two prep years. While he was applying it was funny because his congressman wanted him to go to the Naval Academy. Eventually, however, he got into the Point 13 days before he would be too old to be accepted. This would just be the beginning of a long and amazing career for Delk McCorkle Oden.(1)

His first commission was not his choice of branch. He missed his choice of Cavalry by 17 files and was assigned as an infantryman to 27<sup>th</sup> Infantry (The Wolfhounds) at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii. Toward the end of his tour in Hawaii, World War II broke out in Europe. Delk came to the realization that US involvement would become inevitable, so he transferred to cavalry because the cavalry would get all the tanks. His initial assignment, as a troop commander in the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry, required him to activate and train C Troop at Fort Riley, and then he moved to Leavenworth to activate F Troop, of the 10<sup>th</sup> Cavalry, and then served as the adjutant of the “Buffalo Soldiers” through the 1941 Louisiana Maneuvers. Following Pearl Harbor in January of 1942, he reported to the 84<sup>th</sup> Reconnaissance Battalion of the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division in Camp Pine, New York (now Fort Drum).



When promoted to Major he was given the first available battalion: the 704<sup>th</sup> Tank Destroyer Battalion, a unit activated six months earlier that required much training (1). When he was given the command he sent a letter to the 704<sup>th</sup> that exemplifies what kind of a leader Delk was. This is what the letter says:



**DELK M. ODEN**

*Major*

Commanding Officer

*Greetings to the officers and men of the 704<sup>th</sup> Tank Destroyer Battalion,*

*You are to be members of the United States Army's newest fighting force, the Tank Destroyer Command. You are further privileged in being permanently attached to our powerful Armed Forces.*

*Some of you may feel that because our organization is so new and because we, as yet, have no battle standards, that we are lacking in traditions which the older branches of the service boast. This, however, is not the case. The members of this organization came from three of the oldest branches of our Army, bringing with them the traditions and characteristics of all three. You must have as much confidence in, and knowledge of, your weapons as Artillery; you must emulate the precision of maneuver and the thoroughness of planning of Infantry; and in your attack, you must develop the boldness and courage of Cavalry.*

*These characteristics will carry you to success on any battlefield and I know you have them all.*

*Signed: Delk M Oden (2)*

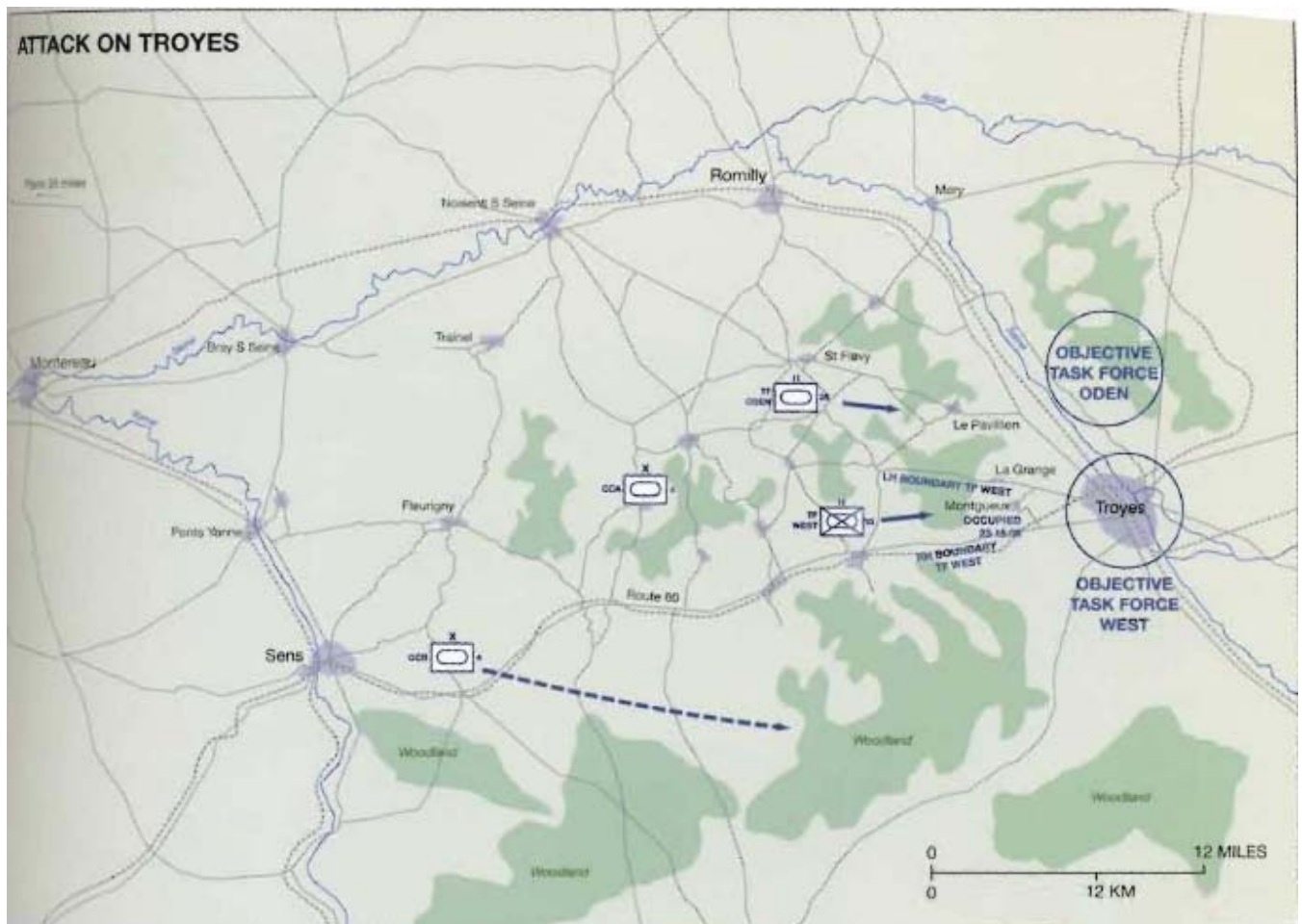
This was the kind of leader Delk Oden was. He believed in his men, he trusted them and he was willing to mentor them. Even if the unit was fresh new recruits he would always see the best in them and their abilities. It is because of his leadership here in the 704<sup>th</sup> that they broke all Armored Forces records in gunnery, tactics, maintenance, driving, and administration while at Camp Hood. In January of 1943, the 704<sup>th</sup> rejoined the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division in what is now Fort Irwin, California. Then on January 23, 1943, Delk was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel.(1)

After desert training, the 704<sup>th</sup> was detached from the division and sent to Camp Maxie, Texas to test 36 of the new T-70 Tank Destroyers. This lightly armored vehicle carried a high velocity 76mm gun, was powered by a 600 HP aircraft radial engine, and was the most mobile and fastest armored fighting vehicle in the world. Delk was ordered to wring out all the bugs in 90 days. When he found a flaw, he was to call the Tank Destroyer Board, Army Ground Forces and the Tank Automotive Center in Detroit. He recommended thirteen modifications to the vehicle, and when the unit rejoined the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division in England in February 1944, it was issued with 36 new M-18s (formerly the T-70), with the thirteen modifications on every one. Landing in France in June, the 704<sup>th</sup> introduced the first M-18s into combat at Avaranches in July 1944.



THE M18 TANK DESTROYER - THE HELLCAT

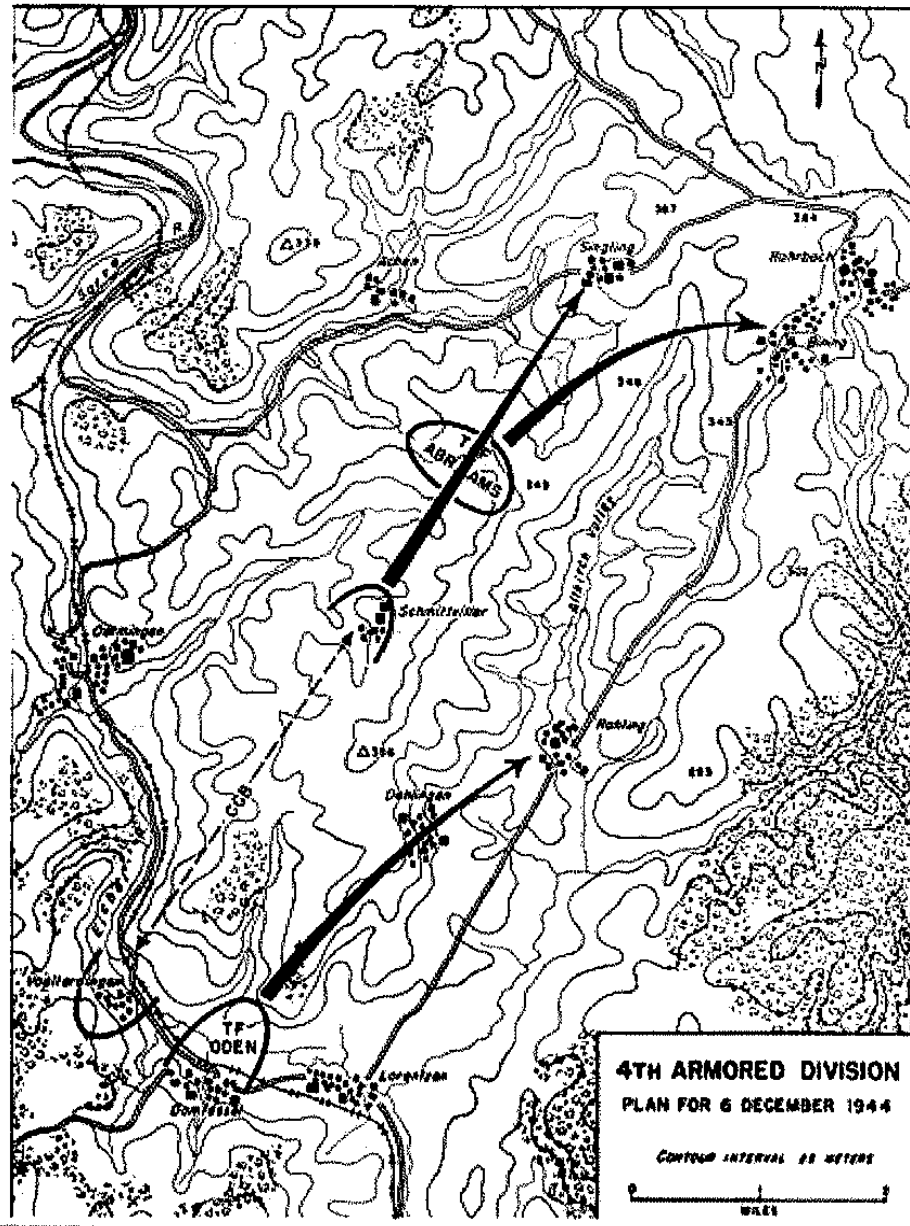
As the division moved into combat, one of three gun companies from the 704<sup>th</sup> were attached to each of the three combat commands of the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division. Delk was immediately employed commanding Tank-Infantry Task Forces. In August of 1944, after capturing the city of Orleans, he was ordered to command of the 35<sup>th</sup> Tank Battalion, where he would remain for the remainder of the war. For several years after WWII, the Command and General Staff College used a number of actions of “Task Force Oden” as historical examples of large armored operations in combat.



(7)

In December of 1944, at the Battle of Shingling, Task Force Oden pushed on from the Eichel River bridgehead at Domfessel to take Helingen and Rahling in order to be in a position

to support Task Force Abrams which was attacking Bining and Rohrbach in order to reconnoiter the high ground in the east. (4)



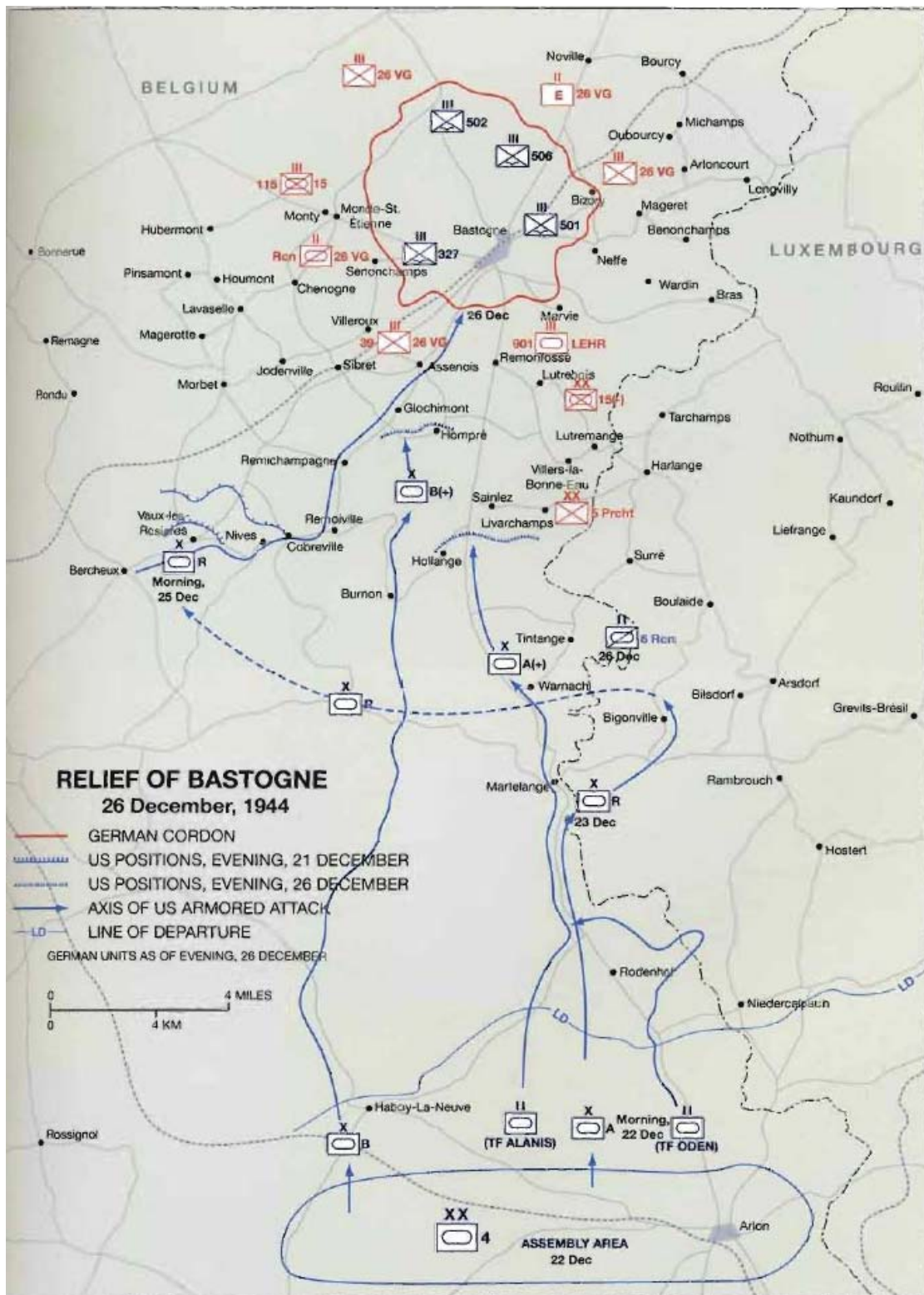
(7)

The relieving of Bastogne and the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division during the “Battle of the Bulge” is probably one of the more known things Delk took a part in; he played a fairly large role in this mission.

At the hour when the Combat Command B’s (CCB) assault first reached Chaumont, the eastern task force of the combat command had started moving across the Martelange Bridge. Since it would take a long while for the whole column to close up and cross, General Earnest ordered Lt. Col. Delk Oden, commander of the 35th Tank Battalion, to forge ahead with his task force in a bid to reach Bastogne. The road ahead climbed out of the valley and onto a chain of ridges, these ridges closely flanked by higher ground so that the pavement ran through a series of cuts that limited maneuver off the road. The cavalry point had just gained the ridge line when, at a sharp bend, the Germans opened fire. Fortunately the tank company following was able to leave the highway and find cover behind the rise to the west of the pavement. For half an hour artillery worked over the enemy location, and then the artillery observer with the tanks "walked" the fire along the successive ridges while the tanks moved north in defilade. At the same time the half-tracks of Company G, 51st Armored Infantry Regiment, clanked forward along the pavement.(3)







(7)

“It was growing dark, so Delk brought his light tank company and assault guns (used throughout

the Bastogne relief as medium tanks) abreast of the medium tank company with orders to continue the advance through the night. The head of the task force now was close to the village of Warnach, which lay to the east of the main road. The light tanks had just come in sight of the village when the company of armored infantry appeared around a bend in the main road. The Germans in Warnach, apparently waiting for such a thin-skinned target, knocked out the first two half-tracks. To bypass the village at night was out of the question. While the assault guns shelled the houses a light tank platoon and a rifle platoon went in. Only one of the tanks got out, although most of the foot troops finally straggled back. Shortly after midnight a company of Shermans tried to get into Warnach but were stopped by antitank fire. Meanwhile tanks and infantry of the task force pushed on to the north, clearing the woods on either side of the main highway (the leading tank company ended up in a marsh).” (3)

On Christmas Eve of 1944, the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division was still surrounded by Germans at Bastogne. The 4<sup>th</sup> Armored, which led Patton’s Third Army, had the mission of relieving the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne. Ground was covered with snow and they expected a full moon so they planned to keep the attacks going all night. In the morning Task Force Irzyck, consisting of 8<sup>th</sup> Tank Battalion and the 10 Armored Infantry Regiment, was to Delk’s Left and was in a tough, noisy fight for this Belgian town; and to Delk’s right was Task Force Abrams, consisting of the 37<sup>th</sup> Tank Battalion and 53<sup>rd</sup> Armored Rifle Regiment, were in a hard fight to take the town of Bigonville just across the border in Luxemburg. Delk’s Task Force Oden consisted of the 35<sup>th</sup> Tank Battalion and 51<sup>st</sup> Armored Rifle Regiment, was in the center and had just taken an easy objective and was about to assault a new one. At this point the droning sounds of plane engines came from the rear. Around 55 C-47 Army Air Corps air craft were coming in for resupply.

When the planes arrived over the “Beleaguered Bastards of Bastogne” they released the supplies: multicolored chutes --- one color for food, the other for medical supplies. Delk was so pleased in the actions of the C-47’s and their great display of their courage that he “Felt like I was standing eight feet tall in the turret of my tank.” (6)



TASK FORCE ODEN LEAVING CHATEAU-SALINS, *on the morning of 11 November.*

(3)

March 28<sup>th</sup> 1945, Delk M Oden was recommended for the Congressional Medal of Honor, however, instead he was rewarded the Distinguished Service Cross. This is the Citation.



*The President of the United States of America, authorized by Act of Congress, July 9, 1918, takes pleasure in presenting the Distinguished Service Cross to Lieutenant Colonel (Cavalry) Delk McCorkle Oden (ASN: 0-20805), United States Army, for extraordinary heroism in connection with military operations against an armed enemy while serving with the 35th Tank Battalion, 4th Armored Division, in action against enemy forces on 28 March 1945, in Germany. During operations near Guissen, Germany, Colonel Oden fearlessly maintained position at the head of his armored task force although suffering from a wound received a few days previously. When blown out of his tank by a direct hit from an enemy 88-mm. gun which killed his gunner and set fire to the tank, this dauntless officer mounted another tank and continued to lead the attack. Inspired by his intrepid gallantry, the task force drove forward to inflict tremendous losses of men and material upon the enemy. Colonel Oden's heroic leadership and indomitable fighting spirit exemplify the highest traditions of the military forces of the United States and reflect great credit upon himself, the 4th Armored Division, and the United States Army. (5)*

Germany surrendered in 1945 and that meant that it was a job completed for my grandfather. In September of 1945, he became the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division Chief of Staff; in February 1946, he was transferred to G3 of the Army General Staff. He shipped out to Leavenworth in August later to study, and then would return to the Pentagon at the desk he was at ten months earlier. Three months later, Delk was made Assistant Secretary to the Army General Staff. In the fall of '49 He attended the Armed Forces Staff College and joined the Joint US Military Aid to Turkey (JUSMAT), Ankara in early 1950: he served five months as advisor to the Turkish Armored School, and then became the Special Assistant to the commanding general. He was promoted to full colonel in 1952; that very same day, his general made him the JUSMAT Chief of Staff. He graduated the Army War College in 1953 and became Chief of Staff, US Forces Austria at Salzburg until the withdrawal of all occupational forces from Austria in 1955 when he became the first post-war Military Attaché to Austria in Vienna. (1)

In order to expand its aviation aspects, the Army asked Delk, along with fifty other colonels, to go to flight training. After which, he went to Fort Polk as Commander, Combat Command A, 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division (the only separate combat command the Army ever had). He would return to Fort Rucker in June 1959 as the Assistant Commandant of the Aviation School until 1961 when he received his first star (Brigadier General) and became the Director of Army Aviation in DCSOPS of the Army General Staff. From 1963-1965 Delk served in Vietnam, first as Chief, Army Section MAAG. He then received his second star (Major General) in 1964, he took command of US Army Support Command-Viet Nam.(2) While in command of US Army Support Command Vietnam, Delk came up with an Air cavalry tactic called the "Eagle Flight".



(1)

An Eagle Flight operation was a tactical concept which involved the employment of a small, self-contained, and highly trained heliborne force. Tactical planning emphasized the use of this force to locate and engage the enemy or to pursue and attack an enemy which was fleeing from a larger friendly force. As an airmobile force it was also prepared to engage any enemy force which had been located and fixed by other friendly forces. The inherent flexibility of the Eagle Flight as a force that was ready for immediate commitment, either alone or in conjunction with other forces, was its most significant feature. An 'Eagle Flight' was a variation of the normal heliborne operations developed in Vietnam in order to:

- complement the operations of committed heliborne or ground forces
- extend the combat effectiveness of such forces
- operate independently, either alone or reinforced, on a variety of missions

As it's name implies, it was a force that was designed to search for, pursue and attack it's quarry. These tactics would be used to support various auspicious units during the Vietnam conflict such as the Green Berets. (6)

He returned to Washington in 1965 as Director of Officer Personnel Worldwide; then commanded the Aviation Center and School at Fort Rucker from February 1967 until his retirement on 1 October 1970. Retirement did not mean the end for this great man. Upon retirement, Delk became a consultant to industry, and in 1973, Textron asked him to form a new company: Bell Helicopter International (BHI), with corporate headquarters in Iran. He became the BHI's President and Chief Operating Officer, starting 1 April 1973 with 35 employees and a contract with the Imperial Iranian Government to train military helicopter pilots and mechanics. When he left the company in April 1975, he had 3700 U.S. employees, their families with schools for their children, and two additional contracts with Iranian Government...one to form and train Iranians to operate a national helicopter material command and two, to activate and train Iranians to operate a helicopter rebuild and overhaul facility. (1)

Delk Oden would finally retire in DC, and in 1990 Delk was appointed by the Secretary of the Army as the Honorary Colonel of the 35<sup>th</sup> Armored Regiment.



***Crest of the 35<sup>th</sup> Armored Regiment. (7)***

*Delk led an active and exciting life. He contended that he was fortunate in doing everything he wished except to jump out of airplanes. His service to his country was exemplified by his many decorations for both valor and service. He wore the Distinguished Service Cross (DSC), the Distinguished Service Medal with oak leaf cluster, the Legion of Merit, the Soldier's Medal, the*

*Bronze Star with “V” Device and oak leaf cluster, the Army Commendation Medal, two Purple Hearts, the French Croix de Guerre with palm, the Czech War Cross of 1939, the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry, numerous theater ribbons, Senior Army Aviator’s Wings and the Army General Staff Identification Badge (the “Liver” Badge). (1)*

That was the closing to his eulogy, written by my father, Ray L Oden. Delk McCorkle Oden passed away on June 13<sup>th</sup> 1997. Those last remarks show how grateful his family, his country, his friends, and his service were to him and his actions as a soldier on the field. By the time he had died, he was a well known name, in fact there was a nationwide college scholarship named after him. He was a well respected man and for the most part was friends with everyone he knew. There was not a single man who would not be willing to jump in front of a bullet for Delk and there was not a single man Delk would not take a bullet for; that was just the man he was.

As his grandson, I wrote this paper because I felt awful that I had such a lack of knowledge about my own grandfather. It was a shame that out of the great eighty some odd years of his life, he only got, or rather I only got 5 years to know him. Being able to research my grandfather was the real reward out of this. It answered all the questions I had about my grandfather about his career and all the wondrous things he got to see, or experience in life. I know who he is and I am not sure that there is anyone as proud as a grandson as I am now that I have done this paper. I only wish that he could have gotten to know me a little better as I got to know him over these past few weeks. He will forever be my hero, and if I don’t get this award it doesn’t matter to me, the fact that I got the chance to know who my grandpa was, and got to see my grandpa for the past three or so weeks, is the most rewarding experience I could ever of had.



## Endnotes

1. *Delk McCorkle Oden Eulogy* by Ray L Oden
2. *Letter to the 704<sup>th</sup>* by Delk M Oden
3. <http://homepage.mac.com/guyries/page9/page19/page19.html>
4. *The Lorraine Campaign* by Delk M Oden
5. <http://www.militarytimes.com/citations-medals-awards/recipient.php?recipientid=23115>
6. <http://www.eleven-bravo.co.uk/the-war/tactics/eagle-flight.php>
7. Forty, George. *4th Armored Division*. Print.
8. Buchanan, Richard. *Men of the 704th*. Print.

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