

History of the WWII Tank Destroyer Association / Society

William Oettle

I became a member of the National Tank Destroyer Association in 1983. My wife, Edith, and I attended the Second Annual Reunion in October to dedicate the 22,000 lb. monument at Tank Destroyer Blvd. and Hood Rd in Fort Hood, Texas. Many of the members and visitors stayed at the Holiday Inn in Killeen.

Warren Mitchell from Redwood City, California was President of the Association and Museum Chairman. Quintus Atkinson was Vice President and Washington Liaison. Alex Woodside, now deceased, was Vice President and Secretary. Marvin Ravelly, now deceased, was Vice President and Treasurer. Lonnie Gill was Honorary Historian. Jerry Cohen, now deceased, was Vice President and Reunion Chairman for both the 1982 and 1983 reunions at Fort Hood. The two ladies that were Newspaper Editors and Office Managers were Carolyn L. Sherfy and Dorothy M. Mitchell.

Marshall B. Hanks of Tiburon, California was in poor health and suffering from cancer. He passed away January 25th 1984. Mr. Hanks was the first tank destroyer veteran to actually begin working toward getting individuals to enroll in the National Association.

Friday evening, October 21, 1983, we enjoyed our banquet in the Mini- Dome at Fort Hood. T- bone steak was the main entrée and apple pie for dessert. The next day we dedicated that magnificent stone. It reads "Seek, Strike, and Destroy" 1941 – 1946 in Memory of the Tank Destroyer Forces of World War II. It shows a Black Panther crushing an enemy tank. On the front is the date 1983. Approximately 600 members and guests were present.

My wife and I also attended the third and last National Reunion in 1989. The members met at the Galt House Hotel in Louisville, Kentucky and boarded busses to Fort Knox. Tank Destroyer men, wives, and special guests were present. There, we dedicated a National Monument for all Tank Destroyer Forces of the United States. Warren Mitchell was President of the Association at the time.

We were permitted to drive an M- 18 Tank Destroyer that had just been brought over from Yugoslavia. It was at the Louisville Motor Speedway. Its final home is in the Military Museum of Southern New England, at Danbury, Connecticut. Brigadier General Edward J. Czerniuk, now deceased, of the 704th Tank Destroyer Battalion served on the Board of Directors.

Several months later, with their work pretty well accomplished, the officers disbanded the National Tank Destroyer Association.

I joined the WWII Fort Benning Association in 1995 after speaking with Col. Robert French (Ret.) of the 899th Tank Destroyer Battalion. He had gotten the organization off to a great start and had plans for a new monument well underway. He did most of the basic groundwork and most of the major planning which led to the excellent Tank Destroyer Monument Dedication Service at Fort Benning, Georgia, November 9, 1995. The monument is an obelisk of Cherry Black Granite with four bronze plaques, one on each side. One plaque has eight battalions on it, that had been infantry, then made infantry- anti- tank then finally on Dec. 15, 1941 were designated as tank destroyer battalions.

The dedication service was held at the National Infantry Museum on the main post. LTC Joe Joepner (Ret.) of the 899th was one of the major speakers. Col. Lee Barnes (Ret.) of the 654th was also active in helping to see that the Monument Dedication Service went smoothly. Of course, Col. French was the Master of Ceremonies. Chief of Staff Col. Gregory Camp accepted to the museum and port.

Later, I told Col. French if we would go ahead and form a new National Association, I would nominate him for President. He hesitated but told me later that he regretted not following through with my suggestion.

A short time later we decided to form the WWII National Tank Destroyer Society, with its base at 49 Greenview Lane, Dadeville, Alabama 36853. Col. French became President, I was selected Secretary and Treasurer, Joe Goepfner was Vice President but soon resigned, and Calvin Boykin took his place. There were several other officers.

After much work and fund raising, we were able to have our 4th Monument Dedication Service in Constitution Park at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, July 3rd 1997. The monument is of Caprice Blue-Gray Granite similar in design to the one at Fort Benning, Georgia. Col. French was Master of Ceremonies, and Major General Leo Baxter accepted the monument to the park and fort.

The next morning at our business meeting we adopted a constitution and by-laws. We used the constitution and by-laws of the 602nd Tank Destroyer Battalion with some alterations, courtesy of Dean Hart and Dr. Ray Young. Col. French presided over the meeting.

At that time, Calvin Boykin was elected President and did an excellent job. I was chosen 1st Vice President and worked in every way I could to help keep the organization strong. Col. French was elected Secretary and Treasurer, and continued to be Editor of the *Panther Press*. He and his wife, Doris, who is Assistant Editor and Office Manager, did many, many things of vital importance toward keeping the organization running efficiently. Their daughter, Dori Cantley, has been a great help, also. Patrick Chase retained his position as Historian, and Paul Stevens was elected Co-Historian and Chairman of the Memorial Committee. Father Harold Tetlie continued as our Chaplain. Many officers served as Vice Presidents.

In April 1999, my wife, daughter, and I visited Fort Knox on business and found that our rally and rededication service scheduled for over the 4th of July was postponed.

While there, I discovered that the square concrete collar around our National Monument that was erected in 1989 was all busted and destroyed due to freezing and thawing. I wrote Warren J. Mitchell, our past President of the National WWII Tank Destroyer Association who lives in Redwood City, California. I informed him about the matter and sent a photograph. He answered my letter thanking me for the information. I also wrote Col. French and sent him some pictures and phoned Calvin Boykin about the matter. The collar was repaired, and good caulking was used in the space between the collar and the monument platform. The problem was solved.

The WW II National Tank Destroyer Society met the 9th - 12th of November 1999 at Fort Knox, Kentucky. Our major purpose was for a memorial re-dedication service in Armor Memorial Park. Two new bronze plaques were added to the national monument that had been dedicated in 1989.

Lt. Colonel Henderson, on behalf of Major General B.B Bell, Commander of Fort Knox and the Armor Center, gave us a hardy welcome noting our special guest, Brigadier General Robert Cundiff (Ret.) who served with the 644th Tank Destroyer Battalion in WW II., and also served in the Korean and Vietnam conflicts.

Calvin Boykin, President of the Society, gave the key-note address. After lunch, several members and guests took a tour of the Patton Museum of Cavalry and Heavy Armor.

That evening we had our banquet at Gallota's Restaurant after which we had a short informal Town Hall Business Meeting with brief presentations by General Robert Cundiff, John Purdy (Museum Director), Col. French, Bill Oettle and several other society members.

We would have attended the Armored Forces Memorial Dedication Service at Memorial Drive "Avenue of Heroes" Arlington, Va. in 1991, but there was a mix-up about the completion date. The Membership was never informed about the date of its dedication.

Edith and I were to visit that beautiful monument on the 14th of September 2001; at Arlington, Va. After our tour group we would have visited New York City, Philadelphia, and Washington D. C., but when the terrorists blew up the Twin Towers, our trip was cancelled.

There was a meeting and open house in the College Station, Texas area March 17, 2001. About 17 people including a small group of WW II Tank Destroyer Society Members and their friends had gathered at the site of a display of armored fighting vehicles owned and refurbished by Brent Mullin.

September 18, 2002 we celebrated the 60th anniversary of Fort Hood, Texas. It was held at the Howze Auditorium on the post. Lt. General B.B. Bell was the major speaker.

Then on November 11, 2004 approximately 125 military personnel and others were present at Fort Hood, Texas, when a new Memorial Park was dedicated. A 22,000 lb. National Monument was re-dedicated, and a new National Tank Destroyer Monument was dedicated.

That dedication service was the pinnacle of my terms as President of the Association. Now I am serving as Vice President. Calvin Boykin is presently serving as President.

I do know about some vehicles: armored and non- armored. They are: an M-18 Tank Destroyer that was acquired about three years ago, from the Republic of Croatia in Yugoslavia. It is in excellent condition. There is one light tank, an M-8 Armored Car, two Chaffee Tanks, a truck, and some Jeeps. I believe there are several other pieces of equipment that I've failed to mention.

I have been working with and collecting written tank destroyer materials since 1983 and holding National offices since 1994. My former office of the National Tank Destroyer Association represents 106 T.D. Battalions, of which: 61 fought in the European Theater, 9 served in the Pacific, and 36 battalions weren't activated. There were 100,000 tank destroyer personnel in all.

The four major Tank Destroyer vehicles were:

- * The original M-3 Half-Track with an obsolete 75mm cannon that failed to do much damage to the heavy Nazi armor.
- * The M-10 with a 3' gun and a 50 caliber machine gun.
- * The M-18 with a 76mm high velocity cannon, probably the most popular anti-tank vehicle we had during WWII.
- * The M-36 reached the front line during the last year of the war; its fire power of the 90mm cannon was adequate in knocking out the heaviest of German armor.

By February 1945, the tankers were beginning to use the new M-26 Pershing tank in combat for the first time. It carried the same 90mm gun as the M-36 and armor thicker than the Sherman's. There was the 3' cannon towed gun, but it had limited viewing side range and had to be set in place before firing. There were a few other vehicles, but their fire power was very limited.

Our WWII National Tank Destroyer Society has been gradually slowing up in its effort to do pertinent work. All of us are becoming older and less able to travel. Also, our Secretary, Treasurer, and Editor of the *Panther Press* Newsletter have been in rather poor health for several months. Tank destroyer forces have been disbanded since heavier tanks with greater fire power have been built. There are no more active tank destroyer personnel, so when all of us pass on; there will be no more to take our place.

Warren Mitchell from Redwood City, CA. was the first President of the WWII National Tank Destroyer Association. Robert French was second to hold a similar office. Calvin Boykin from College Station, Texas was the third. And I have just finished my second term as the fourth President. Calvin Boykin is again serving as President currently.