



This photo of the burning town of Sbeitla gives an excellent idea of its very gently rolling neighborhood, with distant hills faintly visible through the drifting smoke from town and ammunition dump.

SLUGGING IT OUT

By Maj. Edward A. Raymond, FA

Fundamental Tank Destroyer doctrine suffered a sea change between Camp Hood and Sbeitla. The theory of "Seek, Strike, and Destroy" became "Hide, Hit, and Maneuver." "The main TD lesson from the Tunisian campaign," says an Allied Force Headquarters announcement, "resulted from a misconception of 'offensive action.' Destroyers must not be used to 'hunt tanks.' Neither can they be used as tanks in a fire fight with tanks, without disastrous losses." Tank Destroyers were best used in Tunisia to establish a base of fire and give close direct support to other AT elements from hull-down positions, using their mobility to avoid artillery fire, to occupy alternate, supplementary, or cover positions, or to shift position to meet a changing tactical situation.

The experiences of an outstanding TD battalion in the battles of Sbeitla and El Guettar furnish excellent food for thought. Upon due reflection, they will make United States artillerymen still prouder of their Arm.

SBEITLA

Prior to the Sbeitla action the PJKth TD Bn less Companies A and C and the 3d Platoon of its Reconnaissance Company had been ordered to Ousseltia Valley at night, with the mission of preventing a large known enemy armored force from moving south in a valley at least eight miles in width. Conference with French commanders showed that the situation was extremely critical. Next morning the Germans failed to press forward and an Allied counterattack appeared desirable. The CP of the supported combat command was too far back in the mountains to coordinate the fighting, so a first attack order, issued back at the CP to unit commanders, resulted in an uncoordinated attack at 1605 hours, ending in a fight after darkness. All available heavy TD platoons were attached under infantry company commanders, leaving the TD battalion commander commanding a reserve of one light platoon. Practically all the ground gained was given up by pulling units back to the original defensive lines

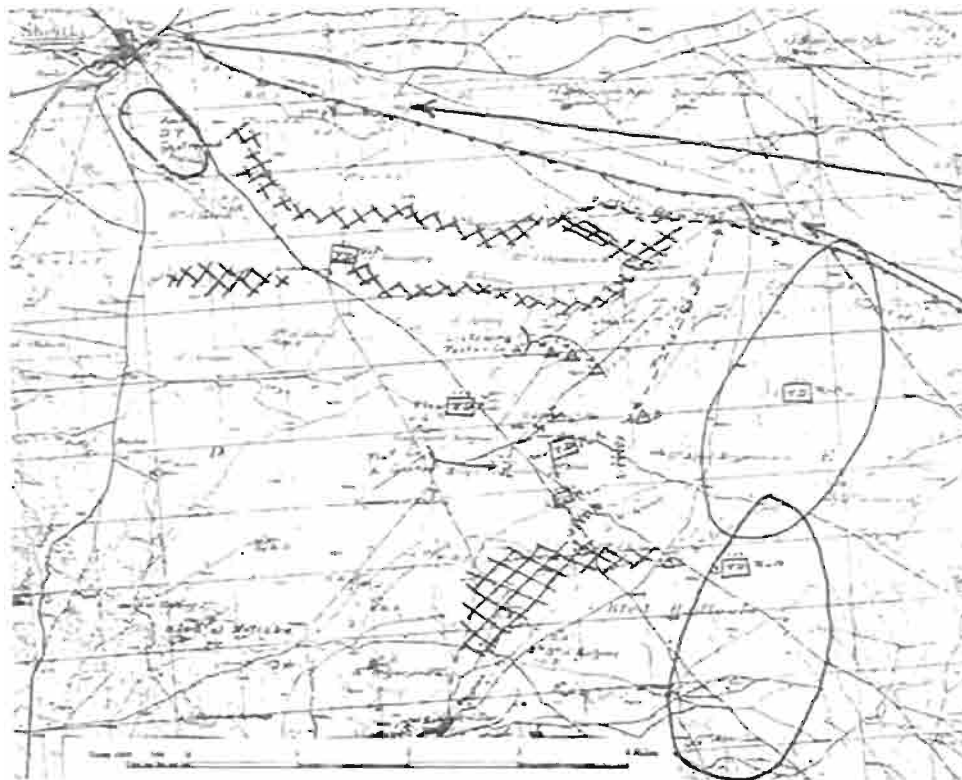


Figure 1

Time: 0001 hrs to daylight, 17 Feb 43.

Mission: To hold position, be prepared to counterattack on order, and cover mine fields east of position (which were not actually established).

Light platoon of Company B was attached to 2nd Bn 10th Armd Inf.

Enemy did not strike south of Sbeitla — Faid road. Heavy arrows from east indicate: north arrow, attack route of at least 4 tanks; south arrow, tanks heard approaching along road, by patrols.

Cross-hatched areas are wadis and sand dunes, very difficult for half-track vehicles

organized by the TD battalion. Contact was lost, and the enemy continued during the night to improve his strong points covering and protecting the network of roads leading into Kairouan Pass.

Another uncoordinated attack was launched the second day. Then the 26th Infantry (under Col. Stark) arrived and, with the support of proper artillery fire, captured the Kairouan Pass in an attack up the east mountain range. At the same time armored and TD units launched an attack into thin air: as the enemy had not been kept under pressure, he had evacuated the valley for at least 15 miles to the north.

On 16 February the battalion covered the advance of the combat command as far to the east and southeast as Djebel Hamara. Through personal reconnaissance the battalion commander found that the engineers were about to lay an extensive minefield west of the line he was ordered to reconnoiter, greatly endangering his reconnaissance elements. The battalion's position area was unsuitable for maneuver due to wadis and deep sand dunes. The front assigned to the reduced TD force was far too great to cover. The mission was defensive. So the battalion commander made the following mental calculations:

1. It was doubtful that he could expect proper artillery support.
2. The support to be expected from the other combat command to the left flank was unknown.
3. No help from supported armored infantry could be expected, as its initial position was over 7,000 yards west of the TDs' main line of resistance. At least 20-30 minutes would be required for friendly tanks to advance and counterattack an enemy threat. Since direct-fire guns are badly handicapped at night, the destroyers would probably not last 30 minutes unaided. If a counterattack were ordered, help would be available.
4. Routes and plans for a possible withdrawal, including the order of withdrawal of units and rallying points, were not given or were very indefinite. (Later information indicated that all of the armored division was making a hurried daylight withdrawal through Kasserine Pass.)

Initial positions occupied prior to 0001 hours, 17 Feb., are shown in Fig. 1. From then until daylight reconnaissance units thoroughly covered the areas around gun units, and these in turn were ready for all-round defense of positions or for counterattack.

After daylight the guns of Company B were moved west behind a ridge, with instructions to be prepared to move rapidly to the crest and fire generally east and northeast. Four guns of A were placed west to cover B and protect the left flank, with direction of fire generally north and northeast. Good OPs were obtained, and the battalion commander could see both flanks. Two platoons of the Reconnaissance Company were employed on the flanks, with the remainder of the company in reserve near the CP.

A force of 16 enemy tanks was observed moving to encircle the left and rear of the battalion. Very little movement was required to meet this threat: CO "B" was directed to move to his crest and fire on enemy tanks east of his position, CO "A" was directed to smoke and shell enemy tanks north of his position.

Enemy tanks, including two PzKw VIs, appeared on the right of Company B. Others, in large numbers, were moving east of "B" in waves. The guns of "A" were firing on the original 16 tanks, which were moving along a

cactus hedge and slowly closing in on the left rear, and smoking them; the range was 1,500 yards. The battalion commander estimated that about 30 tanks were attacking his flanks and rear while others attacked his center in waves. He ordered "A" to cover and "B" to withdraw platoons by bounds. Bn S-3 was sent to meet a platoon of "B" and place it near the CP, which had been designated as the rallying point at a conference with company commanders the evening before. A message had been sent giving a second (supplementary) rallying point, but the COs of Reconnaissance Company and Company A did not receive it. "B's" movement was accomplished successfully; "A" continued to fire north until forced to withdraw.

Before this stage of the action the Battalion Commander remembers ordering his executive to take care of Hq Co and, if necessary, to move it north of the Kasserine Pass. This was done because it was the colonel's understanding that the entire armored division was withdrawing to Kasserine. He had personally observed the — FA Bn withdrawing— where he did not know, except that it was considerably west of Sbeitla. He also saw what he believed to be supported armor moving out of the mountains south of his OP. He observed enemy tanks forcing the remaining guns of one platoon of "B" and probably three guns of "A" west of the route he wanted them to withdraw along, so as to reinforce the flanks of the supported tanks.

He ordered, under S-3, remaining vehicles (except his own jeep) toward the second rallying point when enemy tanks got within 600 yards. These had all the CP radio equipment, and the battalion commander did not see them again until near Kasserine. The battalion executive was ordered to move the guns of "B" (then near the CP) to a more favorable position to the west, in the direction of the second rallying point. This was very necessary, as "B" could no longer see enemy tanks southeast of its position because of high sand dunes. As the company pulled out it came under heavy artillery and direct tank fire. Paced by the battalion executive, all personnel behaved coolly; that officer, in a jeep, showed complete disregard for his own safety all day. The second rallying point was found already untenable, and the company was reformed behind a ridge to the west.

The battalion commander could not tell whether or not the vehicles of "A" and "B" had passed the rallying point or had been destroyed. He thought that some might still come out of the fight, so remained

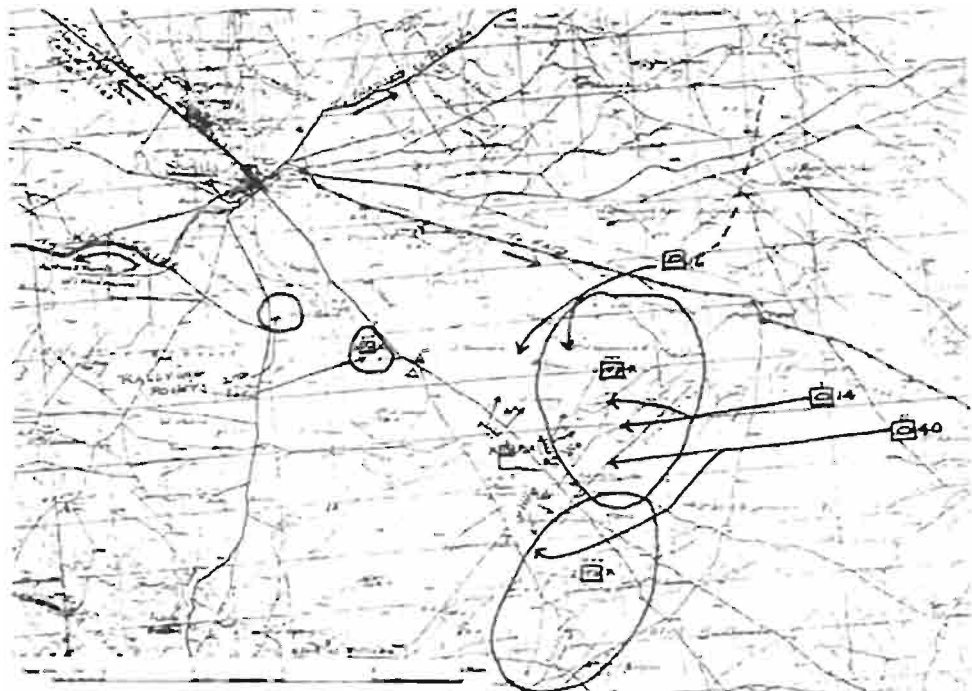


Figure 2

Time: From about 0700 hrs to about 1220 hrs, 17 Feb 43.
Shortly after noon the battalion was forced to withdraw by platoon. Some guns had been moved slightly forward before the attack.

behind to direct them. He could see no friendly tanks at this time, although he later learned that there had been some in the area, well concealed in wadis. He directed some vehicles of other units arriving from the southeast to the road south of the railway which led to Kasserine. After some time he moved along this road and found some of his guns in position, awaiting orders. Here a company commander, a platoon commander, and several enlisted men came out of the fight on foot and rejoined the battalion.

The commanding general of the combat command ordered units to assemble in the vicinity of the CP and the battalion commander, with a handful of vehicles, complied. It later developed that some guns and other vehicles had moved into Sbeitla, which was under heavy fire and burning. There they were evidently directed by MPs to move west, or moved on their own initiative into a double line of traffic which was pouring mixed units out of the town toward Kasserine. Some vehicles remained in Sbeitla and used their best judgment in a bad situation.

The ride the S-3 took with the two radio half-tracks after leaving the battalion commander is described in his own words:

"I rode in the first track and the S-1 rode in the second. When I reached the Oued El Melouia I started to turn left but noticed that the oued was getting very sandy and I did not think that the tracks could negotiate it without getting stuck. I didn't feel like taking chances—enemy fire was falling near us and I knew enemy tanks were approaching—so I then proceeded northwest, looking for a place to turn off. I had made no prior reconnaissance of the ground and decided that the best way to get to the area I wanted to reach was to go to Sbeitla and there take the road south.

"When I got into town I discovered that the road going south was blocked by big rock piles, and an MP in the town shouted to me that the road to the south was mined, and pointed out the way traffic was to take through the town.

"At this time four enemy fighter planes were overhead and two were bombing and strafing the vehicles in Sbeitla. About 10 or 12 vehicles were temporarily halted in town, partly blocking the road, and the men were running for cover in the ruins of buildings.

"I looked around and noticed that the other half-track was not behind me. I ordered my driver to continue by moving around the traffic jam, and instructed the men in my vehicle to fire the machine guns, rifles, and tommy guns at the attacking planes. As we passed each vehicle I shouted to the men taking cover to get back in their vehicles, fire at the German planes, and keep moving, because they were seriously blocking the road. My track was halted at the edge of town by wires across the road where a telephone pole had been knocked down. At this time two Mc-109s approached our vehicle, the first one at 3,000 feet and the second at 1,000. My technical sergeant tried to get the .50-cal. MG around to fire. I dismounted, went to the rear of the track, and assisted him in getting the gun from the rear of the track to the left side. The sergeant fired a few rounds at the first plane but saw that he could not turn the gun around on the cradle. The second plane appeared and the sergeant fired about 100 rounds right in front of the plane. He hit it. It started smoking, dropped to 500 feet, banked away, and was seen to drop over the hills to the east. Two other planes circled the area at a high altitude.

"I ran to the road, pulled the fallen wires loose, and then proceeded northeast so that the road would be clear and that I might reach the area cross-country. At the first crossroad a major, who an MP told me was provost marshal of the armored division, told me to keep the vehicles moving at 200 yards interval in the direction of Kasserine, and that it was important that the traffic keep moving in that direction. I parked my vehicle off the road and passed the information on to the other vehicles that were still with me.

"Then I proceeded cross-country to try to find a route to the rallying area. I found the S-1 and his track, and one "B" destroyer. Together we planned a way of getting back to the battalion. I was to take the 75 with me and proceed cross-country; S-1 was to take the main road to pick up any combat vehicles of the battalion that he could find, and bring them to the rallying point.

"On my route I came up to a 75-mm howitzer (SP) from a tank reconnaissance company, trying to duel an 88-mm gun. I tried to help, but the first round from the 88 landed 50 yards from us and we moved back over a hill to start indirect fire—But American tanks attacked the 88 and

made it unwise for us to fire. S-1 and another officer appeared an hour later, saying that the rallying point was in enemy hands. We decided to go to the main road and head toward Kasserine to attempt to find the battalion. We happened to join the colonel's column in the dark, about 5 miles east of Kasserine."

Of the Battle of Sbeitla, the battalion commander said afterward, "The officers and men under my command engaged a superior force, inflicting heavy damage to the enemy in a brave manner, and withdrew very skillfully until both gun company commanders had their armored cars destroyed. Platoon commanders did everything that could reasonably be expected in completing the withdrawal without losing all guns, only giving way when outnumbered and outflanked."

EL GUETTAR

The Battle of El Guettar was a counterattack by the German 10th Panzer Division on the 1st Inf Div positions 4 miles southeast of the town, after strong defensive positions 3 miles southeast of El Guettar had been captured from Italian units by the Americans two days earlier.

An attempt by the PJKth TD Bn to push rapidly east along the Gabes Road to maintain contact with the retreating Italians had necessitated breaking defilade, costing a destroyer and several casualties. After this, the battalion waited until after dark to patrol the valley for tank thrusts.

On 22 March the CG 1st Inf Div required part of the divisional artillery to make a night displacement east of the hill mass (the defensive position) in order to increase its range for infantry support; he gave the PJKth the mission of protecting these exposed artillery units, as well as preventing a tank penetration which would cut the supply axis of CT-26 and CT-18. The battalion was reduced in effective strength (by battle losses and the detachment of two platoons of "A") to 31 75-mm guns (SP) and 6 37-mm guns (SP). The battalion commander decided to use Companies B and C and the Reconnaissance Company less 1 platoon, east of a strong defensive position (see Fig. 3). Destroyers and machine guns were dug in, lateral patrols were established, and "A" was placed in battalion reserve so that it could defend a pass on the Gabes Road and protect the right flank. The Reconnaissance Company covered the movement of "B" and "C" into position and was prepared to move on battalion order; it also reinforced "A" with one platoon.

East of the defensive position and north of the Gabes Road are wadis and gentle rolling ridges with some knolls. With dry, sandy soil, it is favorable tank destroyer country. South of the Gabes Road the terrain is very flat, and around the right flank was soft and boggy at that time. Previous reconnaissance had proved that even jeeps could not maneuver out of range around that flank. This ground condition proved invaluable. It was clear weather and visibility was excellent.

G-2 information did not indicate a large German attack. It was bright moonlight when two German motorcyclists came down the Gabes Road shouting "Panzer! Panzer!" to scare the Americans; they were throwbacks to the medieval herald Talliaferro, who at the Battle of Hastings rode out from the Norman front all alone. Most of the seemingly insane things the Germans do to defeat their enemies' will to fight would never occur to Anglo-Saxon minds and suggest strange weaknesses in their own defensive psychology. The Americans shot one of the motorcyclists and captured the other. The prisoner stated later that his unit had arrived at 0400 hours and was ordered to attack at 0500 hours.

The 1st and 2nd Reconnaissance Platoons were outposting the "B" and "C" positions at a point about 5,000 yards east of the pass, with the 3d Platoon remaining in the pass to defend it. At dawn the 1st and 2d Platoons were to withdraw to help the 3d. By 0300 the initial positions were occupied and contact was established with infantry companies on the mountains to north and south.

After a 15-minute interval the motorcyclists were followed by at least two infantry companies on foot in squad column, preceding 16 tanks. Both TD platoons engaged the enemy with MGs, 37-mm fire, and 75-mm HE and AP. At least 50 enemy infantry became casualties. The enemy tanks did not appear to be hit at this time. The 2d Platoon withdrew at 0520 with the loss of the platoon leader's half-track and injury to him; it was still dark. The 1st Platoon withdrew to the first rallying point at 0600 and an hour later, just before dawn, withdrew from the outpost line. In this movement another track was lost.

At about 0800 hours 21 tanks attempted to outflank the Reconnaissance

Company on the right. These were engaged by direct fire from 4 destroyers. The artillery fired heavy concentrations on the group of tanks. At least 8 tanks were disabled or destroyed on this flank, of which four were retrieved by the enemy. The attack was stopped at about 0930 hours. During this action a B Company destroyer was hit and burned.

From about 0930 hours to around 1600, our position was under heavy long range artillery fire. At about 1700 hours another attack came due west down the valley. Just prior to this attack the TD positions were dive-bombed and strafed three times. The ground attack consisted mainly of infantry, but the tanks could be seen about 5 miles away. This attack was stopped about 1,500 yards short of our position.

The lieutenant commanding the 3d Platoon in the pass relates that "At dawn German tanks approached our position from the east. We opened fire with one 75-mm gun and one 37-mm gun. Destroyers on the left of the pass went into action along with the artillery. The tanks did not advance any farther west at that time. Enemy artillery at about 0730 hours laid a heavy concentration of smoke on our position. At about 0800 hours my OP on the south flank reported scout cars and tanks on our south flank. There were 22 tanks and scout cars attempting to out-flank our position at a range of about 2,000 yards. I put four 75-mm guns and two 37-mm guns into position and opened fire. Friendly artillery was notified of the menace and heavy artillery fire was also brought to bear. At about 0900 or 0930 hours the tanks withdrew, leaving two tanks in the most forward position and two more farther to the east. From my OP I could definitely observe four disabled tanks being towed from the position.

"One B company gun placed in position on this flank was destroyed by enemy tank fire. From about 0930 to 1630 hours, OPs observed enemy infantry advancing on both sides of the road about a mile east of our

position. At about the same time our position was dive-bombed and strafed three times. When enemy infantry had approached to within 1500 yards we opened up with one 75-mm gun, using HE shell. The Section Sergeant adjusted on the right of the line of infantry and made 5-mil shifts for 200 yards to the left of the road. I estimate that at least 100 enemy infantry were killed or wounded during this fire. Our artillery then engaged the enemy infantry with time fire and the attack was stopped.

"We organized our position for night defense against tanks and dug in machine guns for anti-personnel attacks. There was no other attack on our position."

The lieutenant commanding the remaining platoon of A Company received orders about 0300 hours to reinforce the Reconnaissance Company in the pass. "I placed three of my guns in defilade," he states, "on the north side of the road entering the pass. Shortly after daylight German tanks approached us from the east, traveling on the main road. I waited until the leading vehicle got within 800 yards and then ordered the platoon up to the crest to open fire. About the same time the unit on my right flank, units in the valley, and the field artillery opened up, making it difficult to observe the results of the firing of my platoon. The tanks then withdrew, reorganized, and began to circle the high ground. At this time I counted well over 30 tanks circling to the right. I ordered two of my guns to take them under fire, keeping the other guns ready for another thrust at the pass. The combined fire of the artillery and the TD elements on my right turned this thrust back before they had gotten 1,000 yards from the hill. My platoon did no more firing until noon, when an unidentified American half-track towing a field piece came down the road toward the pass. I held my fire because I was afraid that it was Americans escaping from the enemy, but when 7 Germans

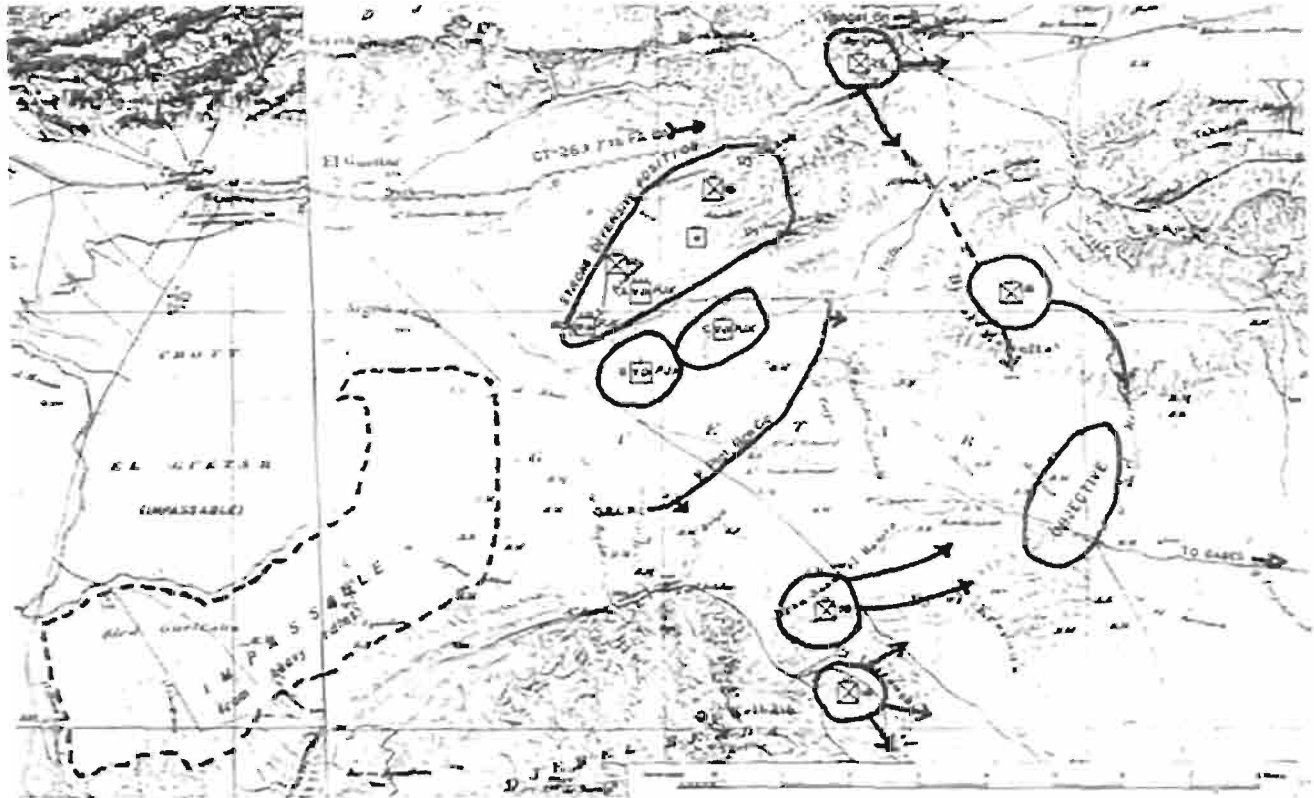


Figure 3

Initial positions: 0100 hrs to about daylight, 23 March 43.
 1 Plat Co B withdrew to vicinity of Co A.
 Co C and Co B less 1 Plat (20 guns) repulsed enemy tanks with fire and movement. from defiladed positions behind small ridges north of the Gabes Road until dark, when 3 guns (still serviceable) withdrew northeast and contacted friendly infantry.
 The enemy gave up their attempt to envelop the right flank about 0830 hrs. One company (12 M-10s) was used to counterattack northeast but was forced to take defensive action.

dismounted and placed the gun in position I opened up with 2 guns, expended 20 rounds, and blew up the German gun and vehicle. Thinking that these men might be Americans, the S-2 left the battalion CP in a jeep, even though he was wounded at the time, and went out under fire to the disabled vehicle. He found five Germans dead and captured the two others in a wadi."

A glance at Fig. 3 will show B and C Companies in position behind the pass.

Two platoons of "B" withdrew without orders, under intense enemy infantry and tank fire. The company commander stated that he did not order this withdrawal and did everything he could to stop it. The platoon commanders stated that they were being surrounded by enemy infantry and were greatly outnumbered by enemy tanks. Their decision



Near El Guettar the Italians laid a mine-field in straight lines, right on top of the road. Hill masses rise precipitately from the plain.

to withdraw was no doubt sound under the circumstances and operated somewhat in our favor as it drew in many enemy tanks, which were taken in the right flank by fire from the concealed positions of Company C's platoons and the 1st Plat of "B," suffering heavy losses.

"B's" platoons that withdrew were immediately ordered to counterattack north and northeast. Due to unserviceable guns, only one platoon could be used to correct the situation and continue on the original mission of protecting the artillery.

The enemy attempted to envelop the right flank, using 22 tanks. Since the terrain was known to be impassable except within fairly close gun range and was mostly mined, this enemy effort was expected to fail. The tanks came within ranges of 2,200 to 2,000 yards from the right reserve guns, using smoke shell to screen their advance. Two enemy tanks were destroyed and six disabled. The range for TD guns was too great to expect more hits or good penetration; bracket adjustment was required. The fire of the destroyers, furthermore, was plunging, which gave less effect and required a large ammunition expenditure. At this stage of the action the indirect fire from artillery battalions slackened and then ceased, due to ammunition shortage. The TD battalion commander ordered all guns in his immediate vicinity to cease firing until the enemy tanks approached within 1,000 yards or until more ammunition (then on the way) arrived at the positions. The enemy took advantage of this lull to withdraw to the east out of range, and then move north to assist the attack against the American left. Before withdrawing they hooked onto four disabled tanks, towing them away. This wonderful target could easily have been destroyed, had the required ammunition been at hand.

One of the B Company platoon leaders describes his part in the above action as follows: "We reached our positions at about 1000 hours and started to dig our guns in. At 0400 hours we got a report that a tank attack was coming down the road. I ordered my four destroyers into firing position and waited. At about 0530 hours I saw many human silhouettes coming over a ridge in front of our position, and ordered all guns to fire. Our shells were landing all around the infantry. Our firing continued until about 0615 hours, and took a heavy toll. Meanwhile enemy infantry kept advancing under our fire, and some of them swept around our left flank. I made a quick decision and ordered my platoon to withdraw to a hill about 1,000 yards behind us, where A Company had their guns in position. From

our new position we commenced firing on 22 tanks that were coming down the right flank. A few of them were knocked out and the rest withdrew. The A Company platoon leader whom I had joined was ordered to the left flank. He had only one serviceable gun remaining, so I was ordered to give him three of mine, leaving me two. These I placed in a modified position and fired on tanks to the right flank until both guns were hit by enemy artillery. I had the crews withdraw to our rear bivouac area while I remained with A Company."

A staff sergeant of B Company relates that after occupying position in darkness, his destroyers were dug in without good knowledge of the terrain; "consequently a few tracks had to move later in order to fire on enemy tanks.

"Fire was noted along the southern ridge, east of us, at about 0430 hours; later enemy machine gun tracers kept pouring up the valley, evidently hunting for armor. Radio communications were excellent. Our men started looking for an infantry attack and began feeling a bit unsure of themselves.

"When the first sight of a tank was reported to the lieutenant he told us to wait until it got closer. Infantry was also reported approaching. The first shots were fired by the track on my left. It was still very dark and vision was only possible on skylines at 1,000 yards. One track commander discovered a tank a few yards ahead of him, but could not lower his piece enough to fire, so the lieutenant ordered him back a few hundred yards. There was now very heavy firing going on, both by the enemy and by ourselves, with machine guns, rifles, and field guns.

"My view of the tanks knocked out before dawn was limited, but I saw numerous fires and was shooting in draws that ran north and south, also along the road running east and west. The half-track next to me was hit and set afire, but the crew got out. Dawn came. It appears to me that the enemy believed we had withdrawn. Shells were exploding in the burning half-track and the remaining vehicles had defilade. On our part we were not sure which tanks were hit and which were merely at a halt.

"At this time enemy infantry was observed. We opened up with machine guns, with the support of C Company on our left. Next we saw smoke being laid down east and west along the southern ridge. Half an hour later that lane was full of tanks, and it looked as though we were cut off. All our three guns opened up with 'C' and the 105s to our rear. All the tanks from the right front—that is, those furthest advanced—pulled back fast. We felt pretty good then. We had numerous hits and there were plenty of fires. One track commander shot the top off a PzKw VI; there were many of these immobilized, with crews bailing out. Tanks in all directions were just sitting, but at this time we were positive of 7 tanks destroyed, a large ammunition truck destroyed by fire, and numerous infantry either cleaned out or hiding.

"Then at around 0730 the large field guns opened up on our artillery and got a few hits on their ammunition, which burned. Enemy tanks on our left opened up on us and we started pulling back once more. Another track received a direct hit and the crew was badly cut up, with one killed. The lieutenant and the track commander administered first aid under cover of our machine guns. Another track was hit from the left, but the crew was safe. The wounded were sent in in the AA truck and we withdrew to the northwest about 800 yards. By this time the enemy had a lot of small arms going, and rapid fire machine guns. His heavy field batteries were firing and tanks were all over the terrain in groups of six. Seeing a large flight of our bombers and fighters, I figured we had plenty of help. We were zeroed in on again, so shifted. We counted our ammunition; we were about out: I had 5 HEs in my mount. We just waited. We could see our artillery fires and the enemy tanks pulling up and drawing back to keep out of our barrages. The enemy tanks numbered in three digits, but no one had the heart to count them as it hurt us had as it was."

C Company's commander was ordered to set up a defensive line of guns to protect the MBth FA Bn, which he did with two platoons in line to the left of the Gabes Road. "At about 0500 hours," he recalls, "our Reconnaissance Company sent back: 'An armored attack is coming down the road. Do not fire on us!' At about this time a

cloud of smoke enveloped the road and machine gun and cannon fire from tanks began coming from within the smoke screen. I went to the 3d Platoon and conferred with its commander. We counted at least 18 tanks moving towards us. I radioed to my reserve platoon to send two guns to reinforce us and leave two to give depth to the roadside position, and informed battalion of the envelopment. The two reserve guns arrived and I tried to extend my left with them, but they could not move over the crest because of enemy fire. Battalion radioed that 'B' was coming to our assistance. It seemed to us that tanks had gotten between our 1st and 3d Platoons. Every time we moved to counter this we seemed to run into a cross fire. We finally ended up near the mountain with two guns and two personnel carriers. It was reported that the enemy was digging in a large caliber gun on a ridge above and to the left of us. We were moving a gun and the personnel carriers into a ravine out of this 90-mm fire when the gun threw a track. A machine gun and the 90-mm gun had us pinned down so that we couldn't move. We went to an OP and were immediately placed under heavy fire.

"At this time the 3d Platoon ran out of ammunition. I had sent a guide to the munitions officer in a jeep, but he had failed to get through. Nevertheless at just this moment I saw the munitions officer advancing toward the 3d Platoon under a hail of fire. One of our men reported that enemy infantry was coming along the foot of the mountain. As we could not get straight back to the company our best bet on getting back at all was to circle back through the hills. So I ordered the vehicles destroyed, sent the men back in groups of three, turned over net control to my executive officer, destroyed my radio, went back over the mountain, and reported to the battalion CP."

The munitions officer says of the action, "My job was to supply ammunition to my company, who were out in front. It wasn't long before our 3d Platoon began to call for ammunition. Failing to get a definite answer as to their location I decided to try to find them, and started out of the pass in which my half-track was waiting. Cutting off to the main road we skirted the mountain slope to the left flank, where we found three sergeants whose destroyers needed ammunition badly; we gave them our complete stock and started back to reload. At this time enemy artillery was getting close to us, and we increased our speed. On reaching the pass the tanks had swung to our right flank and were shelling the pass heavily. We reloaded the half-track with all the ammunition we could find, besides the supply in the ammunition trailer. One of the other lieutenants came along at this time to get ammunition also, after bringing in a seriously wounded man.

"As we set out the pass was again being shelled directly by a group of tanks from the right flank, who immediately spotted our track and gave us no easy moments. The other lieutenant, riding with me, directed us to his guns. Once when he was none too sure of his terrain he went ahead and located the guns under fire. We put our load into his destroyers (the 3d Platoon) and started to return for another load. Circling slightly more to the north to get out of artillery fire, we found B Battery of the MBth FA Bn, and they said it was impossible to get out that way. I went up on our OP and confirmed their statement, as the tanks had moved in closer and had cut us off from the pass. My driver said he was having motor trouble and the radio operator said we were now net control, as the company commander's half-track was out.

"I decided to remain at the present location to direct the company and warn them of the enemy's actions. I had the 3d Platoon fall back to the MBth FA Bn, and there we decided to fight it out if the tanks reached our position. With another lieutenant I set up several OPs to prevent being surprised by infantry and tanks. Our artillery was trying to adjust on the enemy who were holding the key point to the valley's entrance.

"We remained where we were until 1545, when the order came that as the tanks were going to attack at 1600 we were to get out of our position. We removed the breech blocks, radios, etc., and loaded them on the remaining runable destroyer, and sent it with a half-track and a jeep to make a run for it. The remaining personnel assembled, and we sent them in groups of six up and over the slope under enemy artillery fire. The enemy counterattack was well under way at this time so we hurried the men on, not wanting to be cut off if our troops were forced to withdraw."

In final comment on the engagement the battalion commander states, "The entire power of the TD battalion, greatly assisted by other

1st Division units, was employed in successfully turning a serious enemy armored attack. Although reduced in personnel, strength, and guns, the battalion was more powerful than in previous battle operations because platoons and companies were not detached, and because the battalion was integrated in the battle scheme."

LESSONS

Behavior of Enemy

The TD Battalion reported the following German habits during the Tunisian Campaign:

1. Tanks, (a) had a tendency to bunch up under fire, (b) fire time shell, (c) tow 88-mm guns, (d) were often serviced with ammunition by captured American jeeps.

2. MG fire was often used primarily for morale effect, especially at night.

Reconnaissance

The role of reconnaissance in TD units can not be overstressed. Reconnaissance for ready, firing, alternate, and supplementary positions and rally points must be made before an action, and these choices must be made in the light of all possible eventualities. The Old Man, all members of the staff with combat functions, and company commanders, should reconnoiter the ground they are to use. This is an exhausting, never-ending assignment. Reconnaissance in connection with TD operations gives plenty of employment to TD reconnaissance companies and TD battalions in general, without calling on them to double in brass for reconnaissance troops or battalions of divisions or corps.

At various times during the campaign the battalion borrowed M-5 tanks from the armored division and mules from the French, to increase mobility. (For the desirability of a liaison plane, see below.)

Digging In

Since the destroyer is not designed for slugging it out with enemy tanks in the open, it must have dug-in positions for all-around defense. Alternate positions should be prepared for each gun, if time and the ground permit. Tank destroyer defensive positions must be organized with a view to combating the infantry which usually accompanies tank attacks. All the organic automatic weapons should be placed in dug-in positions. OPs—including the post of the platoon leader—should be dug in like field artillery OPs, even if it is not likely that they will be used for long.

Tactics

Successful TD tactics depend upon employment in mass. The German does not like to attack with less than 60 tanks. Even battalions should not be broken up, and detachment of one or two guns or a platoon is attended by many evils. An ideal tactical scheme is the use of a light force as bait, withdrawing according to plan, and bringing enemy armor under massed enfilading fire from prepared positions.

The principle of holding out a reserve should not be forgotten when on reconnaissance in force.

Night Action

There were three night attacks upon this TD battalion during the campaign. At first the men were sorely disturbed by the sight of enemy tank fire and tracers at night. Recognition of tank silhouettes proved difficult for them. They lacked prior training in detecting military sounds.

Direct fire at night, except at illuminated targets or on bright moonlight nights, is very difficult with a panoramic sight. The cross-hairs of the sight on the M-10 did not show up in darkness. Protective fires by indirect means are one solution; coaxial mounting of MGs firing tracers, such as the Germans use, may be another.

The siting and use of secondary weapons is especially important at night. In movement during the hours of darkness, no matter how tired or depressed the men are there must be patrols on foot all around a column in the presence of the enemy; at night men in vehicles are next-to-deaf and next-to-blind.

Air

War is fought in three dimensions these days, and TD personnel should never forget it for five minutes. On the defensive side the common error, largely avoided in this TD battalion, was to fire too early. Unless an enemy plane attacks, ground fire will disclose

positions. Fire delivered before enemy aircraft come within range endangers neighboring units and wastes ammunition.

On roads full-time 360° observation is mandatory. In a single vehicle one lookout is not enough; two men should be posted back-to-back. In a column, front and rear observers should be posted on alternative vehicles.

American soldiers need little encouragement to stay with their .30- or .50-cal. MGs, either on ground mounts or on vehicles, when enemy planes close in. The handling of the MGs of the battalion was admirable, and achieved surprisingly big results. (Incidentally, at 1730 on 23 January one of the lieutenants shot down a Focke Wulf 189 with a .30-cal. air-cooled MG.)

On the offensive side, the battalion needs a couple of light liaison planes for reconnaissance purposes, road control, and to cause hostile artillery to keep quiet: German training evidently calls for the suspension of all but extremely urgent fires when under air observation.

TD battalion commanders should not hesitate to initiate requests for needed aerial assistance. At 1050 on 21 January the colonel requested, through channels, air support to strafe and bomb a lot of enemy tanks and vehicles out of range of artillery and plainly visible to the northeast of his position. At 1330 the mission was carried out by 12 A-20s, escorted by P-40s. The Air Corps had no trouble in identifying the enemy. A French colonel watching the operation exclaimed, "Bon, Bon, Exactement!"

Mines

The vertical dimension in this war goes down as well as up. Hostile mines are feared worst of anything by most men on the front. The lurking danger is nerve-racking in the extreme. The Tunisian Campaign was fought without regularly assigned mine-detectors in the companies. At least two detectors per company were badly needed. The men had had no adequate prior instruction in detecting and handling mines, and were forced to learn the hard way. This battalion did know friendly markings, but not all TD units did: a motorcyclist from a neighboring battalion was killed running over a friendly mine on a plainly marked field. The unit here described took the hint: its only loss from a friendly mine occurred to a Reconnaissance Company jeep carrying three men in a field supposedly completely cleared. Once four destroyers were posted in Faid Pass among several friendly mine fields, of which the battalion had received no warning. Although the position was occupied at dusk, no one made a misstep.

The Pioneer Section did a tremendous lot of essential service with mine-detectors, and cleared hundreds of mines before it got detectors.

The enemy appeared to be short of artillery ammunition in some sectors, but always used mines on a lavish scale. He evidently seemed to feel that, weight for weight, mines were more productive than artillery shell—certainly in building tank traps. TD units on

the defensive need trained personnel and facilities to lay their own minefields.

Indirect Fire

Fire by quadrant, using regular artillery methods, is indicated in many situations. Fire for destruction at mid-ranges requires a 25-yard bracket and quadrant setting.

On 22 January, "B" (less 2nd Platoon) was reinforcing elements of an armored battalion in an attack. The armored battalion was withdrawn, and was to have been replaced by the reconnaissance company of the armored regiment. Due to the latter's delayed arrival, the TDs protected the right flank of a large force and supported what developed into a holding attack by friendly infantry. From their positions the TDs brought indirect fire to bear on German strong points and enabled the infantry to advance. It is just as well that the battalion had "absorbed" a few quadrants back in Ireland and knew artillery methods.

Secondary Missions

In addition to their primary role, TD units can be profitably used on special missions when, and only when, there is known to be no immediate threat from hostile armored forces.

Secondary missions may include reconnaissance in force, advance or rear guards for special combat forces, artillery support, mine and booby trap removal and establishment of straggler lines (bands of stragglers are more than a match for one or two MPs). All these missions were accomplished successfully by this battalion, but it is not inferred that the battalion liked such jobs.

Artillery Support

TDs need artillery support when attacked by infantry, when they are subjected to night attack, or whenever they can indicate important targets to the artillery. Although the TD battalion is not an organic part of the combat team—is not "in the family"—the artillery should observe its conventional obligation to establish liaison with all supported units, and coordinate plans and fires with the TD battalion.

Ammunition

Ammunition resupply must be at the point of defense. Ammunition resupply must be initiated as soon as a position is occupied, if the mission requires a stand.

Conclusion

Tank destroyers are a new weapon. Everyone was waiting with great interest to see how they fared in Tunisia. It must be remembered that there were few units present, that they were supporting a thinly-held line, and that the mountainous nature of the country greatly restricted maneuver. Most of the TD units initially had obsolescent equipment. TDs were used a great deal for jobs they were never designed to do. Their losses were heavy. But TDs in Tunisia unquestionably taught a wealth of lessons and proved their own worth in the only way possible—by slugging it out with the panzers, round by round.

FORGET ABOUT THESE

The following visual aids have been declared obsolete;

FS 7-98—U. S. Carbine Caliber .30 M1, Part III—Marksmanship—Known Distance Targets
FB 18-3 —3-luch Gun Motor Carriage M-10, Part I—Controls and Operating Instructions