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TITLE: **TANK DESTROYERS**

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TANK DESTROYERS

On September 16, 1915, The British introduced the tank into modern warfare. With the idea in mind that there is a defense against every offense, many minds on both sides were put to work at once to find a defense against this new weapon. The Germans developed the armor-piercing machine gun bullet. Both sides, to a limited extent, employed field guns in a direct-fire anti-tank role. These were the major anti-tank developments during the war. At the end of World War I, the tank was still the king of the battlefield and could roam almost at will.

Anti-tank thought continued after the war and generally paralleled the development of the tank. Since the trend in tanks was toward the light type, this produced a light anti-tank gun, such as our 37mm gun. The Germans were the exception to this and unveiled the new famous "88" in the Spanish Civil War.

During the early days of World War II, the British found that the most effective defense against the German tank was ambush, since that enabled the anti-tank gunner to hit the tank on its flank which was more lightly armored. This was developed into defense in depth as we know it today. However, since they employed a light anti-tank gun, the heavily armored German tank, with its tactics of fire and movement, was not subdued. It was further found that, for anyone gun to survive the onslaught of the Blitzkrieg, it had to be supported

by atleast one other gun. These two principles - defense in depth and mutual support - have been the basis of all later anti-tank doctrine.

At the time of the German invasion of France, General Marshall directed that a study be made with the view of finding an adequate defense against the tank. One of the consequences of this directive was the conception and development of the tank destroyer. Shortly after, the Tank Destroyer Center was opened at Camp Hood, Texas under the command of General Bruce. The mission of the Tank Destroyer Center was not only to train the new tank destroyer units but to continue research along this line.

Since all new ideas go through a process of change to gain the desired objective, tank destroyer materiel and doctrine underwent considerable change since the time it was first conceived. The first tank destroyers used in combat in Africa was the M-3 half-track mounting a 75mm gun. Due to the gun's inability to penetrate the heavy German armor and the poor armor protection given to the personnel by the half-track, this destroyer gave way to the high velocity, flat-trajectory 3" gun on the M-10 motor carriage. In many respects, this vehicle was similar to the M-4 medium tank, except that it had an open turret and lighter armor. The gun was powerful enough to destroy the German PzKw IV tank and the M-10 motor carriage offered the personnel protection from small arms fire and shell fragments. As German armor was developed, tank destroyers had to keep pace in order to meet the newest threat.

In the Spring of 1944, the M-18 made its appearance. The M-18 was a full-track, highly mobile, lightly armored vehicle, mounting a high velocity 76mm gun. This was the first vehicle designed especially for the tank destroyers and is one of the finest track vehicles we have ever made. It was not long, however, before the German Panther and Tiger tanks appeared on the battlefield and it was found that the 76mm gun did not have the necessary power. The M-36 was created as the answer to these new German tanks. The M-36 is similar in appearance to the M-10, except that it mounted the 90mm anti-aircraft gun.

Like materiel, the organization of the tank destroyers underwent considerable change in its early days. They were finally organized as battalions, groups, and brigades. The battalion was the tactical and administrative unit and was classified either as self-propelled or towed. The self-propelled battalion consisted of headquarters and headquarters company, a reconnaissance company, three gun companies, and a medical detachment. Each of the gun companies had three platoons of four self-propelled guns each, giving the battalion a total of thirty-six guns. The towed battalion was similar to the self-propelled battalion in most respects, the main differences being that the guns were towed instead of self-propelled and the battalion reconnaissance consisted of only two platoons which were a part of headquarters company.

The group was a tactical organization only and consisted of group headquarters, a headquarters company, and two or more battalions. Normally, one group was attached to each corps.

However, in combat, the group exercised very little command function over the battalions since the battalions were usually further attached to one of the divisions of the corps. The only time that the battalion I was with operated under a group directly was when we were attached to VII Corps. In this case, the group had the mission of protecting the rear echelon of corps against possible parachute attack. The battalion was ordered to establish road blocks and maintain patrols in conjunction with other battalions. Generally, the group functioned as the tank destroyer section of the corps or in close cooperation with the tank destroyer section if such a section had been set up by the corps. In practice, the role of the group was to act as advisor on tank destroyer matters, as coordinator of tank destroyer employment, and as general supervisor of anti-tank defense.

The primary mission of the tank destroyers was the destruction of enemy armor. It was for this purpose that they were organized and trained. It was believed that the best way to accomplish this mission was to hold the battalion in division or corps reserve until an enemy armored attack appeared imminent. During the period that the battalion was held in reserve, it made a thorough reconnaissance of all likely avenues of approach and the selection of positions to repel any attack coming through these approaches. As soon as the direction of the attack was determined, the battalion would move to the previously selected positions and await the tanks. It was found that we could beat the Germans this way.

but could not, because of our light armor, slug it out with them. Our motto was " Seek, Strike, and Destroy." The " Seek " was made by reconnaissance and intelligence - the " Strike " by hitting the enemy on the flank as he entered our position - and the " Destroy " by putting him off by fire and delivering massed, close-range, direct fire on him.

However, by the time that we landed on the European continent, the Germans had suffered tremendous tank losses and their production of tanks was seriously hampered by the strategic bombers. The large scale armored attacks of the Blitzkrieg had practically ceased. Instead, the usual tank formation seen consisted of from two to ten tanks. In view of the reduction of the size of the attacking armored force, it was no longer necessary to employ the tank destroyer battalion in mass with its tremendous fire power. It was found that a company, or even a platoon, properly employed, had no difficulty in overcoming this new type of German tank attack. Therefore, it was generally decided that the tank destroyers should furnish close anti-tank support to the front line units. Thus, the companies were attached to the regiment or the combat command, and, often, the platoons of the company were further attached to the battalions.

This, of course, made a considerable change in the employment of the tank destroyer battalion headquarters and the service elements. If the division did not have an anti-tank officer, the battalion commander functioned in this capacity under either the artillery commander or the G-3. Either he or

one of his staff officers made frequent visits to the regimental and battalion headquarters not only to recommend but to supervise the employment of the tank destroyers. Very often, it was found to be most practicable to have a staff officer stay at the regimental command post. This officer would act in the dual capacity of liaison officer and commander. Whenever a trouble spot was encountered, the tank destroyer officer was right on the spot to recommend employment as well as to receive the orders. He would then radio the orders to the company or would have the company commander report to him so that he could give the company commander the situation and mission while the company was being moved up.

The job of the service elements of the battalion became more difficult. The companies, under this plan, were usually rather widely spread out. It was necessary, therefore, to plan and maintain two or three different routes of supply and evacuation. This, plus the fact that many supplies and services could be obtained only at army, kept the personnel of the service elements going morning, noon, and night.

When the tank destroyers were in direct support of the infantry, they had to be as close to the forward elements as the terrain would permit. In general, this meant that the tank destroyers would overwatch the infantry from positions 100 to 500 yards to the rear. A careful but rapid reconnaissance of the terrain was necessary to do this since the destroyers always attempted to get some defilade or cover, as well as good fields of fire. In the final analysis, the position

chosen had to be one from which the tank destroyers could destroy the enemy tank before it could overrun our own infantry.

In order that the tank destroyers could intelligently cooperate with the infantry, close liason was essential. Being the supporting arm, the plans of the tank destroyers were, of necessity, based on those of the infantry. It was, therefore, essential that the tank destroyer officer advised the infantry on the capabilities and limitations of the tank destroyers before the plans were made and the combat orders were issued. Further, the tank destroyer plans had to be tied into the anti-tank plan. In order to do this, the tank destroyer command post was usually immediately adjacent to that of the infantry and the tank destroyer commander became a member of the special staff of the infantry commander. Communications, radio, telephone, and messenger, were constantly maintained between the two.

The role of the assault gun naturally developed from this close front line support. Toward the end of the war, this became the most commonplace mission of the tank destroyers. They were fairly well suited to this role because of their mobility and tremendous fire power, as well as armor protection. Here, the closest cooperation possible was necessary. We borrowed a sufficient number of SCR 300's from the infantry so as to be able to install one in each platoon leader's destroyer. We also put a EE-8 telephone on the outside of each destroyer for communications with the infantryman on

the ground. Further, whenever resistance became sporadic, the infantry would ride on the backs of the destroyers, thus insuring even closer cooperation.

An example of this close cooperation and how the tank destroyers operated as assault guns was had by one platoon in the vicinity of Marienlab, Germany. One of the destroyers was brought under tank fire as the town was approached. The infantry immediately jumped off the destroyers and the destroyers hurriedly sought the best available firing positions. The tank, a Mark IV, was soon knocked out. The tank destroyer platoon then took the buildings in the vicinity of the tank under fire with HE ammunition. A considerable number of the enemy infantry were flushed out and were immediately killed or captured by the accompanying infantry.

When the tank destroyers supported an armored unit, they would be employed in much the same manner as when in support of an infantry unit. They formed the base of fire for the assaulting tanks and overwatched them to the objective. Often, in the assault on a town, the tank destroyers would swing around to the back of the town and take positions from which they could close the enemy's avenue of retreat by fire. Also, they were frequently employed as the flank guard for the armored division.

The tank destroyers were a welcomed attachment to cavalry units, primarily because of their fire power and punch. They were employed by the cavalry either in a close support role or to greatly increase the power of their reserve. When an

important roadblock was established, you would usually find the tank destroyers there reinforcing the cavalry troops maintaining it. They were also used to quickly knock out any small stubborn resistance that would otherwise delay the advance of the cavalry.

The normal deployment of the division was to attack with two regiments abreast and one in reserve. This meant that the gun company attached to the reserve regiment was idle, that is as far as its fire power went. Also, it was not uncommon for the entire battalion, or a part of it, to be held in corps or division reserve, in which case a number of guns were silent.

Since a large proportion of the tank destroyer officers were field artillery officers, they began to think of the possibilities of using the battalion on indirect fire missions. This line of thinking was encouraged by most commanders since an idle gun is a wasted gun. The method of such employment was worked out with the assistance of the artillery. In the Spring of 1944, indirect fire became another of the missions of the tank destroyers.

Originally, it was contemplated that a tank destroyer platoon would be attached to a field artillery battalion for operations. In practice, however, this did not work satisfactorily because of the differences in the guns and the fact that this would spread the battalion out over such a large area that it could not readily be assembled for its primary mission. In order to meet these objections, each

gun company organized and trained a fire direction center, a survey crew, and a wire crew. The personnel for these various crews were taken mainly from the security section of the company and operated under the direction of the company executive officer. This meant that the company could be fired as a unit or that one platoon could be used in indirect fire at any one time. The targets were generally designated by the field artillery battalion to which the company was attached.

In a few cases, the battalion set up its own fire control center and operated directly under division artillery. During the halt, just prior to the crossing of the Rhine, such a plan was adopted and utilized by my battalion. We had a platoon from each of two companies in indirect fire positions during this period. The battalions S-2 and S-3 sections operated a fire control center. Here the targets were plotted as directed by division artillery and the fire missions were assigned to the companies. While this was mainly for practice and training, it was proven to the satisfaction of all that the battalion was capable of operating in this way.

"In the crossing of the Roer River, the tank destroyers were employed in indirect fire as well as direct fire. During the early hours of the assault crossing, fires were placed on enemy positions and installations across the river using indirect laying methods; in most cases, ranges were from 2,000 to 3,000 yards. Fires for the initial assault were scheduled. Targets selected were enemy assembly areas or avenues of approach which had been determined previously by

infantry patrols, aerial photographs, air observation, reconnaissance company (tank Destroyer) observation posts, and from G-2 information. Targets were plotted on the map by inspection and firing data computed; indirect fires were delivered during hours of darkness. As the infantry advanced up the escarpment, scheduled fires ceased and all fires were delivered on call from the infantry. Contact with the infantry was maintained by reconnaissance company personnel, equipped with radios, who crossed with the leading infantry elements. During the assault crossing and the establishment of the bridgehead, tank destroyer guns were in indirect fire positions reinforcing division artillery fires in the corps sector. Targets selected were those suitable for harassing and interdiction fires, such as towns, roads, and road junctions. All fires were scheduled. Tank destroyer guns also fired illuminating shells according to a scheduled fire plan for the purpose of illuminating and directing the movement of the assaulting infantry." 1.

While the destructive effect of the tank destroyer shell was not as great as that of the 105, its harassing effect is believed to be greater since the high velocity shell gives no warning of its approach. Also, the range of the tank destroyer was considerably greater than that of the 105 - approximately 14,000 yards with both the 3" gun and the 76mm gun and 19,560 yards with the 90mm gun. This made it suitable for harassing fires, interdiction fires, and reinforcing fires. The tank destroyer gun was able to relieve the 105s of a

1. T D Information Letter #6 Hqs 1st T.D. Brigade

number of their longer range missions so that they could be more effectively utilized in close support of the infantry.

Due to the absence of an armored, high velocity weapon other than the tank destroyer, still another mission was given to the tank destroyers - the mission of destroying pill-boxes and other fortifications. Since most of the forts encountered were found to be mutually supporting, the platoon was employed as the working unit. Two guns were placed in position to bring fire on the embrasures of the forts, while the other two were in an overwatching role. This prevented the Germans from manning their weapons while our infantry advanced the assault parties on the blind side of the fort to be knocked out. When the infantry were in their final assault positions, the infantry commander would lift the fire of the tank destroyers. This was usually done by radio but various other types of visual signals were used. The M-10, with its 3" gun, proved to be an excellent weapon until the advent of the M-26, with its 90mm gun. The 90mm gun would penetrate 3.8' of concrete at 1,000 yards with one round. From three to ten rounds were generally used to obtain a complete penetration. However, the maximum effort was made to secure firing positions from which the embrasure could be hit and it was not usual to attempt to penetrate the concrete of the fort. When firing at the embrasure, it was often only necessary to get one hit. This would generally jam the shutters or would cause considerable

2. FM 101-10

flaking on the inside with consequent casualty effect.

Whenever a penetration was made, a quick round of HK would bring the crew to its knees. One of the best known operations of this type took place at Cherbourg. The infantry hit a particularly difficult fort which they were unable to approach because of the intense machine gun fire from other forts which were so located that fire could not be brought on them. The tank destroyers were called up and immediately placed their fire on the steel door of the fort. The American commander then called on the Germans to surrender. The answer was that General von Schleiben, the defense area commander, Admiral Henneke, commanding naval forces in Fortress Cherbourg, their staffs, and about 800 other Germans capitulated. This was, virtually, the end of the defense of Cherbourg.³

Our first mission, after leaving the staging area, was one that was unusual in the E.T.O. but was commonplace in the Pacific. We were assigned the mission of protecting the southern coast of the Cotentin peninsula from possible attack by the Germans occupying the Jersey and Guernsey Islands. Contact was established with the G.I.C. and the Navy. From these sources, we learned that the Germans were incapable of any large size attack. They had sufficient personnel but they had only a few small fishing smacks and possibly a few midget submarines. However, since it was believed that their food supplies were almost exhausted, it was very probable that they

3. T.D.s in Europe by Major A. A. Blinn - Mil. Rev. May 1945

might stage several raids in order to get at the than vast dumps that were located on the Cotentin peninsula. After a thorough reconnaissance of the area was made, the sector was divided between two gun companies. The third gun company was held in reserve. The guns were emplaced on the commanding ground along the coast with each gun supported by at least one other. They were further tied together by patrols. It was also found that a British naval radar station was operating in our area and we established telephone communications with it. While we were on this mission, I heard my first newscast from Germany. The newscaster was saying that the German troops on the Jersey and Guernsey Islands were performing a very important mission in that they were keeping thousands of crack American troops tied up on the Cotentin Peninsula guarding the dumps.

There are probably many other missions that were performed by the tank destroyers; however, I believe the foregoing missions were the most important or at least the more commonplace. The tank destroyers were one of the most versatile units on the battlefield. They not only performed many varied missions but often found themselves performing two or three of them at the same time.

The tank destroyers have passed into history. However, recently one heavy tank battalion was made organic in both the infantry and armored divisions. At present this battalion is to consist of headquarters and headquarters company and three gun companies. Each of the gun companies will have four platoons equipped with M-26 tanks in each. I believe

that these battalions were created to fill the job that was performed by the tank destroyers during the war. If this belief is correct, the officers in the new heavy tank battalion will do well to study the history of the tank destroyers thoroughly and profit by their experiences.

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