

1st Plt, A Co

THE 601 TANK DESTROYERS IN TUNISIA

1942 - 1943

By

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On December 24, the 1st Heavy Platoon, Company "A" 601, moved up to assist the French at Pichon. The objective was a sandstone ridge blocking the road to Karohan, the German Air Base.

A German Paratroop Company was dug in the sandstone cliffs, and the French hadn't been able to get past them. As Captain Steel attempted to direct fire he had a shiny map case under his arm, and a sniper found him an easy target. This left Lt. Marcus in charge.

The platoon and the French Artillery fired on the ridge all day, but there was still some resistance. Just at dusk a group of Arabs appeared at the foot of the ridge and took off their brown and white striped garments and turned them inside out and put them back on again, so they were now two striped shades of grey. They left their long guns stacked against a rock and taking only their knives, they disappeared into the base of the cliff.

A short time later we heard the Germans screaming and saw them running as the Goombs cut them down with their knives, and then collected their ears, for the French paid them twenty francs for each ear they turned in.

One evening shortly after the new year, there were five of us under a truck tarp, just getting ready to go to sleep when the Jerry patrol plane passed over. We always called this the "evening mail run." As we listened, there came a crash; we thought it was the plane and we went out to the road to find the French general's automobile upside down at the side of the road.

What happened was that two of the General's men had borrowed the car and they took off for a night on the town, but lost control of it on the curve in front of our bivouac. After the French came and took the two men to the hospital, we were left with the wrecked car as our responsibility, so we had to mount a guard over it until they came to salvage it.

I caught the 12:M to 2:A.M. guard mount on the vehicle. It was a bright moonlight morning and as I stood there I heard a sound of something approaching from the direction of the German lines.

I thought it might be a German patrol, so I squatted down in the dark shadows among the rocks. The moon was so bright that I had no trouble identifying about a dozen Goombs mounted on donkeys. Well, I was relieved that it wasn't the enemy, but then I wondered if my ears might not be of the same value to a hard up tribesman as a set of German ears! To be on the safe side I remained hidden among the shadows of the rocks, but as they passed near my position, they looked like they were asleep in the saddle, only each one looked over at me and said, "Bon Jour."

On January 19, 1943, "A" Co. of the 601 T.D.Bn. moved out of the area at Pichon and proceeded to the village of Ousseltia. This was a French Foreign Legion post with a high wall enclosing it. The Legionnaires were mostly fugitives from all different nations throughout the world. One of the men who was an ex-Chicagoan could still talk our language, and he assured us that the valley north of there concealed 47 German tanks. We weren't too concerned for we had been rushed to other areas in southern Tunisia to counteract enemy tank activity, only to find nothing there.

Early in the morning we moved up about five miles and took up positions on the high ground at the mouth of the valley. The 2nd heavy platoon which made up the four heavy destroyers and four light destroyers which were 37mms mounted on 3/4 ton trucks, were stationed along the road that ran through the valley.

The 1st heavy platoon which I was a ^{CANYONEER} ~~commander~~ in, was placed on a hill to the left of the road.

When daylight came we saw a beautiful green valley spotted with little Arab houses and rich with olive groves. A more peaceful scene one could not ask for.

We made a weak attempt at camouflaging the position while it was till dark, but our main thing was to dig a deep foxhole, for we were more worried about the German planes up to that time than we were of ground forces. We sat around and played cards and read or just snoozed all day until dusk. We hadn't seen any officers all day, for they had an

observation post set up in between the two gun positions. Three or four times during the day the recon company ran a jeep and command track up and down the road the length of the valley, but evidently they didn't see anything.

Just at dusk the word came that an enemy tank was moving up the road. We mounted our guns and sure enough there was a tank sitting out there about 300 yards away, and as we stared at it in disbelief, it fired at us--but the round didn't come near.

All the guns in the company fired at the tank and at that range I doubt if there were any misses, but we didn't seem to have any effect at all on it. It just backed down the road and fired up a flare which was repeated on both sides of the valley and every tree in the valley turned into a German tank that started to concentrate their fire on us.

We could see their tanks moving around our left flank but it got dark so fast that we couldn't even find a target to shoot at. The entire valley looked like a bunch of blue fireflies and the entire hillside was bursting from explosions.

Master Sgt. Cobb yelled at us to get out of there as quick as we could, so we pulled back about $\frac{1}{2}$ mile and sat for a short while, but we couldn't stay there long for the shells began lobbing in on us.

We then pulled back to a Company Command post that was set up about a mile from our positions. We took up positions at the edge of a wooded area on each side of the road. A jeep that had gone up the road returned with word of approaching vehicles. We were ready to

fire on the vehicles but we couldn't get any definite recognition. We could also hear tanks moving off to our left. We were afraid to fire because the target might be the 2nd Heavy Platoon moving back. It was finally decided we would go back to Ousseltia.

We were joined there by a British anti-aircraft outfit that had a battery of Pom Pom guns. We formed a semicircle around the fort facing the valley, and we made a very impressive looking defense. We were all set to make a last ditch stand of it when Lt. Fred Miner and what was left of the rest of the A Company came out of the valley. They raised "Holy Hell," because they claimed we had deserted them under fire!

I was never anything more than low man on the totem pole, as far as the battalion was concerned, but everything I've described here is the way I saw and I don't think under the conditions there was any other intelligent solution for the two sergeants who were in charge.

Anyhow, Lt. Miner said there was a company of Legionnaires under attack by the Germans, so we went back into the valley about 1:00 A.M. and took up a position at the bottom of the hill where the Legionnaires were moving through.

When the tanks came over the hill we fired on them and they fired back. In the black of early morning we couldn't see if we were hitting anything or not. The tanks firing downhill shot over our heads; then when they compensated they hit just in front of us. When a round of armor piercing hit in front and lifted us up, we decided it was time to pull out of there!

I guess we did what we set out to do, for we distracted the tanks

long enough to let the Legionaires get away.

Mike Dragon's destroyer refused to start when they tried to pull back, so they set off an incendiary grenade on one of the gas tanks and walked out.

The Germans never followed up so we spent the rest of the night in the area. A heavy fog set in at the break of day. We followed up on a platoon of medium tanks as they tried to make contact with the Germans. Two of the tanks got hit by a gun they couldn't locate, and the other two moved back.

As the tank crews from the disabled tanks moved back through us on foot, we offered them a ride and all they said was, "The Hell with you! You paper armored bastards, all you're good for is to draw fire!"

We then started firing at anything out there that looked like it might hide a gun, and the one thing we hit was the corner of the Arab house where the German gun crew was sitting. The concussion got them all, but we didn't know it until we moved up and found the graves of five men a couple of days later.

That was our first action against tank destroyers ~~who wouldn't even disturb them.~~

About the first of February, 1943, they pulled us back from Ousseltia Valley and put us up in bivouac near Makatar. We sat there for a couple of weeks. This was up in the mountains so we had snow and cold weather all that time. Around the 14th we joined up with the rest of the 601 Battalion and moved out to the area near Sbeitla. One of the things that

amazed us was the size of the ammo dump there. It must have covered $\frac{1}{2}$ square mile and looked like mostly heavy stuff. We heard that the 1st Armored Division was in trouble so we pushed south of Sbeitla about 30 miles. We couldn't use our radios, for all we could get was a high frequency squeal.

When it got dark we pulled into a circle with all guns pointing out. I pulled a time of guard from 10:00 P.M. to 12:00 M and all around us we could see tank battles going on. We could tell the German tracers from ours because they were different colors.

Captain Fuller, who was our C.O. at that time, pulled into the area and asked me to wake him if the German tracers that we could see moving around on both sides of our position came together.

Just about midnight, as I was going off guard, the two lines of tracers came together. I found the captain still awake and aware of the situation. I called my relief and told him it looked like we were completely surrounded by German tanks.

Before I could get to sleep I was sent up front as outpost guard. I was posted about 10 yards in front of our position. I was feeling mighty low, for we had heard that the 1st Armored had lost 80 of their tanks and the 34th Infantry Division at Fondouk had been overrun. It just didn't look too good! I could see the battle going on and while I was watching there came the damdest explosion I ever saw. It lighted up the countryside like day. It was the Ammo at Sbeitla. I was just standing there watching it burn when Sergeant Vita crawled out and warned me that there were patrols working all through the area, so

both lay there and kept watch until daylight started to break. Just at dawn we lined out and started to move when four of our own planes came hedge-hopping and one of the other companies opened up with a 50 Cal. They sprayed our area and wounded one of our men.

The planes assumed we were German and came back and strafed our Column. Two of our boys were killed.

Later, German planes came over and they waved their wings at us. Evidently they assumed we were Germans, too.

The German artillery started to hunt us out so we broke up our column and dispersed around a small valley bordered with Roman ruins. Then our own Artillery started laying in on us. When the Germans saw this, they stopped firing. I guess they thought we were friendly.

In the early afternoon we moved to a position on the open desert about 5 miles from Sbeitla. Sometime that day five units of the 1st Armored Infantry and some other T.D. outfit that had been pretty badly mauled, passed through us trying to find a way out. Soon our recon company made contact with the enemy so we formed up in two echelons with "B" Company first and they were to fire three or four ~~or~~ rounds and retreat back through "A" Company. Then while "A" Company fired off three or four rounds "B" Company was to form up and fire while "A" Company pulled back. This was good retreat policy except when "B" Company saw the 300 tanks moving down on them, they just turned and kept going. I didn't blame them, for enemy tanks covering 150° of the skyline can be very awesome. Especially when they were leap-frogging. That is where every other tank fired while the other moved

forward and then vice-versa.

We started firing as soon as B Company moved through us, and we continued for about 7 or 8 rounds; then we figured it was getting too hot, so we took off after "B" Company. Everybody was throwing out smoke pots so it made a dramatic scene.

I couldn't see where we could run to for we were supposed to be surrounded and as we approached Sbeitla there were about 50 tanks lined up and following us with their guns. It turned out to be part of the 1st Armored that had broken through and was going to fight rear guard action. One of the tankers told me they were just ready to let us have it when Lt. Col. Baker came through in his jeep and told them it was his men coming through and not to fire.

As we came through Sbeitla everything was burning or smoldering; there were box cars on the railroad full of ammo burning. There were tanks and burned out trucks and jeeps all along the way. German planes strafed us as we moved through the town. As we came out the other side of town one of the German planes got hit and was burning just off the road. There was a French officer on a beautiful black horse that came galloping through the town. A short distance down the road I saw the horse lying dead. Our vehicles were loaded down with French soldiers who were trying to get back to their outfits.

We spent the night guarding a road crossing while the tanks and other outfits moved past. The Germans had dropped paratroppers at Feriana Airport and we were to keep them from cutting off the only retreat through Kasserine Pass.

We didn't have any trouble that night so we were the last to move through the Pass and on to the Plains of Tebessa. I thought the ammo dump at Sbeitla was large, but the dump here was at least 10 times larger. We hardly got settled in when they sent the 1st Heavy Platoon which was down to 3 guns, plus an anti-aircraft unit to work with, an English recon unit that was keeping a Pass out of Ferianna under surveillance. The name of the British recon outfit was the Derbyshire Yeomanry. Their vehicles were small four-wheeled light armored scout cars with a gun of about 37mm, and also a small machine gun. These scout cars were so fast and maneuverable it was impossible for an artillery piece to follow them. They would place us in a position to protect their flanks and rear, then they would maneuver around throughout the area spaced far enough apart so they wouldn't interfere with each other. They kept in touch with one another by radio. If they spotted anything they would fire at it and try to get it to disclose its strength. We never had to do anything except stay on the alert.

The valley ran parallel to Kasserine Pass and we could hear a battle going on there, but it wasn't until much later that we knew what it was all about.

I came down with amoebic dysentery, and spent three weeks in a hospital bed. If you want to hear about the battle in Kasserine Pass you'll have to contact Charles Gonter or Dante Cappello, or someone else who was there.

You ask if we had our black "Y" on the side of our destroyers like I pictured it: yes. The Battalion insignia was on the side and the star was toward the front near the door and also on top of the hood and on

the louvers of the radiator.

The only anti-aircraft was 30 Cal. mounted in the back of each jeep and we have served ^{AL} 3/4 ton trucks. WITH 50 CAL. MOUNTED ON THEM.

After the Battle of the Kasserine Pass the gun companies were allowed to rest up and get their equipment in shape while the recon company tried to keep the enemy under surveillance.

We finally knew that our holiday was over when the chow got exceptionally good and the chaplains started holding special services for those of us who wouldn't be around in the future.

We were combat mounted when we moved up on the line with the 1st Infantry Division about the middle of March. There wasn't much direct action for us; most of the enemy turned out to be Italians who couldn't wait to surrender.

On March 20 we moved into the open desert near El Guettar where we were constantly hit by German dive bombers for three days. On the evening of the 22nd, the heavy artillery moved up into a group of large sand dunes that straddled the Gafsa, Gabes Road and dug in. We moved past them to the edge of the sand dunes and we dug in. "B" Company pulled out on the plains to the left of us. Just at break of day the 10th Panzer Division attacked, but we managed to fight off their first wave. During this attack a platoon of "B" Company pulled back and took up a position on the ridge to our right. Between us and the 5th Field Artillery we managed to do a great deal of damage to the Germans.

We didn't do too well, for although we considered it a victory, we only had three guns left by the end of the day when the 899 tanks destroyer battalion came up and relieved us.