



(From left) Thomas Langan, Medal of Honor winner Clyde Choate, Charles Connor and Bill Harper at the reunion

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Medals won by members of the 601st Tank Destroyer Battalion

41 years later, antitank unit reunites in city

By Edgar Williams
Inquirer Staff Writer

They began gathering at midmorning yesterday, these men of a long-ago war, and what did it matter that the hair was gray and most of the waistlines somewhat enlarged?

The men of the 601st Tank Destroyer Battalion, one of the crack Army outfits of World War II, were together again — 257 of them, anyway.

They had come to Philadelphia for their first full-blown reunion ever, an event that will continue through tomorrow at the Holiday Inn Independence Mall, Fourth and Arch Streets.

"It's amazing," Clyde Choate, 65, was saying as he moved about in the first-floor Adams Room, where an exhibit of artifacts and battalion memorabilia had been set up. "Most of these fellows I haven't seen since the war, but I'm having no trouble recognizing faces and remembering names. Take old Charley here." He reached out and touched Charles Connor, also 65, who lives in Germantown.

"We recognized each other right away," Connor said. "Last time we saw each other was 41 years ago."

Somebody suggested that Choate, from Anna, Ill., must have had a lot of practice recognizing faces and remembering names, inasmuch as for 32 years he was a member of the House of Representatives of the Illinois Legislature — and for 22 of those years was Democratic leader of the House.

"That's right," Choate said. "But I don't think I'd have trouble with these fellows, anyway."

What Choate doesn't tell a first-time interviewer is that he

(See REUNION on 2-B)

257 veterans of battalion hold reunion

REUNION, from 1-B

holds the Medal of Honor, having been awarded it for valor in an anti-tank action against the Germans in Alsace, France, in early 1945.

"It isn't phony modesty, either," said Tom Langan, 64, of South Philadelphia, who was a participant in the action for which Choate earned the medal. "It's just that it embarrasses him to talk about it to people he doesn't know well. I'll tell you this: He was a great soldier in a great outfit."

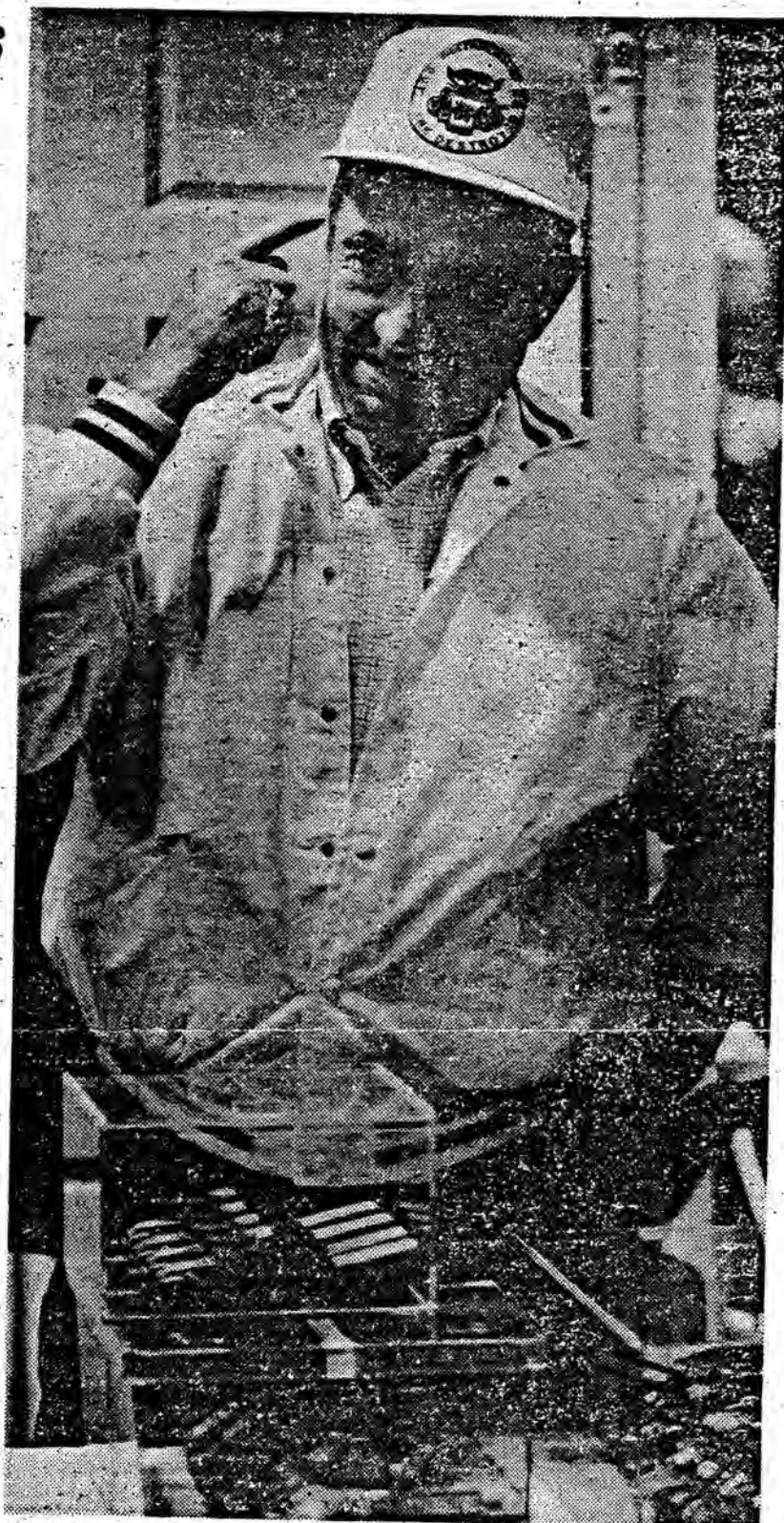
It was an outfit that engaged in 34 months of almost continuous fighting, starting in North Africa, moving to Sicily, then the rest of Italy, then France and finally into Germany and Austria, fetching up May 8, 1945, outside the city of Salzburg, Austria. And it was an outfit whose members were regarded as somewhat daft — or at least flamboyant — by members of other arms of the service.

This was because of the nature of the vehicles in which these men fought. The proclaimed mission of the outfit was to *Seek, Strike, Destroy* — destroy tanks, that is — and to accomplish this the Army gave them vehicles that came to be called in barracks humor "Purple Heart boxes," meaning that the men who rode around in them were odds-on to catch shell fragments, grenades and the like.

"What it was," Langan said, "was a tank vehicle with an open turret that had a big gun mounted on it. You went out to do battle with tanks and you were constantly having somebody deposit a grenade down the open turret. They used to talk about us as the guys who rode around with the top down like a convertible."

Not long after the war, Langan said, the Army deactivated all tank-destroyer battalions on the ground that it was sheer folly to use a tank-like vehicle without a top.

"It only took them four years to figure it out," Langan said.



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Clyde Choate talks about the battalion's 'Purple Heart boxes'