

THE HALFTRACK

Woff-Facts

They are nothing like a tank. They are frail-looking little babies beside a German Mark III. But they have raised so much hell with the Germans in Tunisia, that they're called the U-Boats of the Desert

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WITH AMERICAN FORCES, TUNISIAN FRONT. It was an odd game played in the blazing sun—played in the open, on the desert, in wadis, in gullies, anywhere. Both sides wore the same kind of helmets, the same except for two minor differences: one helmet had a definite flare in the back and was rather old looking. The other was painted a dull green and looked new. In one helmet stood a German soldier, in the other an American.

The score for our side was minus eighteen half-tracks and for Jerry there were thirty tanks that weren't working any more.

Rommel had thrown in the armor of his prize Tenth Panzers to push back and maybe break through the American position near El Muettar. Maybe. But there was a tank destroyer outfit waiting for them.

The steam-roller wave of enemy tanks started toward the American positions at 0530 hours. Concealed in the curves of the foothills in front of a long, flat plain, halftrack crews waited until they could see the Jerry tanks rolling out of their own smoke-screen and then they opened fire. Almost immediately, Lieutenant Charles Munn reported three hits by his platoons. But the other German tanks weren't hit. They moved stubbornly forward.

Soon after the mortar fire started blistering Munn's position, one Jerry made the sad mistake of stepping out of his Mark III to get a clearer picture of the action. Sharp-eyed Sergeant Milford Langlois spotted him and opened fire with a fifty caliber. Curiosity killed another cat.

Just then the Nazi boys took time out for a short intermission while they regrouped forces. Act two began at 1030 hours when Sergeant Hal Segit reported hits on three tanks. Later, Sergeant Allen Breed counted up six that he and his gunner, Corporal John Sauklis, had knocked out.

One crew threw a lot of armor-piercing shells at a Mark IV, making it so hot that two Jerries jumped out, but they didn't run very far.

Munn's position got tough. An adjoining unit withdrew, cutting them off completely, and German 88s found the range, knocking out another halftrack.

"Our position was pas bon," said Munn.

It became more and more "pas bon" at about 1500 hours, when they only had one gun left and the Axis artillery and dive bombers started bothering them. But they stood fast, working in relays to keep up the steady fire with their single gun.

The time finally came when ammunition officer Lieutenant John Perry, had to radio headquarters and tell them there was no more ammunition to pass. The order came back: "Wait until dark and try to bring out the vehicles. If it gets too hot destroy the vehicles and come out on foot."

It did get too hot. With one gun, no ammunition, all the artillery, mortar and tank fire coming right at them and a strong German infantry force moving up, they decided to clear out but fast.

A small squad of volunteers stayed behind to destroy the one gun plus some other vehicles. One of the boys tried to make a run for it with a half-track but he didn't quite make it. "One of my best men, too," said Munn. The remainder of the group made for the hills, skirting the ridges like goats, hiking six miles past Nazi outposts and finally reaching the main line without losing a man.

"All of us were pretty happy about getting back but we were still plenty sore about one thing," said Munn. "There was a German officer riding back and forth in one of our jeeps, using it as an ammuni-

tion carrier. The boys would have given six months' PX rations if they could have recaptured that jeep—and what was riding in it."

Not too far away from Munn's boys at the same time there was another platoon led by Lieutenant John Yowell. His group was the last to leave the battle area and they chalked up six Nazi tanks in one column.

One halftrack crew, in the short-lived, fighting life of ten minutes, blasted two enemy tanks. The chief of section, Sergeant Adolph Raymond, holding the position three hundred yards in front of the field artillery, had a giant Mark VI for his first customer. Five rounds bounced off like beebies but the sixth hit the tank below the turret and started it smoking. In a quick swing to the left at the same time, Raymond's crew was thrown into

the air and badly shaken. Luckily nobody was really hurt. The five-man crew climbed back on to the halftrack and went scouting for more tanks with turrets.

Another halftrack also had a field day in that battle, but theirs lasted longer. At one thousand yards this unit hit a Mark IV right beneath the Boogie wheels, then blew it up a few seconds later with high explosive shells. They got another Mark IV with their first round, and thirty minutes later got their third victim square and solid, watching it go up in flames.

Finally, when they were out of everything except smoke ammo, Lieutenant Yowell ordered them to retire. The section leader was Corporal Victor Hamel and his unit included three privates and a Pfc.

A three-quarter-ton weapons carrier trying to evacuate a lot of wounded drew heavy fire. Platoon Sergeant Michael Stima started firing his fifty caliber machine gun at German infantry five hundred yards away, drawing all the enemy fire to himself, and enabling the carrier to sneak through.

"You know," said Stima, "there were a helluva lot of Jerries in that one spot, but after I was shooting awhile they just seemed to disappear."

Lieutenant Yowell likes to tell this one:

There were several Jerry tanks coming down the road, approaching his position less than six hundred yards away. Yowell turned to Gunner Sergeant Willis Smith and yelled, "Why don't you fire?"

"Well, sir," said the sergeant casually, "I think I will wait until they come a little bit closer."

The day went well.

