

THE WINTER LINE (Italy)

TDs were used primarily as dug in anti-tank defense right on the MLR of the infantry unit to which they were attached. During a static situation one company of 12 TDs was attached to each infantry Regiment with overall control held by Div Hq. The TD Bn Hq acted as a sort of central message center and CP for communications and logistics. The 636th Reconnaissance Platoon remained under control of TD Bn Hq and was frequently attached to the Div Recon Troop for recon missions. During a moving situation, one TD Platoon was attached to each infantry Bn with overall control and command exercised by Regiment UNTIL a German tank threat was anticipated or actually appeared, at which time operational control over the TDs was exercised by TD Bn Hq which received operational instructions from Div. Sounds a bit complex and complicated but for the purpose of communications this worked out extremely well and permitted the TD Commander to utilize his Bn in its primary combat role. During a static or MLR situation the TDs were not given interdiction missions (artillery fire missions) from their MLR dug in positions, obviously so as not to bring down enemy artillery fires upon the dug in infantry. For such interdiction and harassment artillery mission, one TD machine was detached from each TD Company and assigned to a sector for indirect fires. The distinctive whip crack of the 3" gun quite often brought a response of enemy return fires and more than often heavy mortar fires. FO posts spotted the locations of this 'return mail' and these locations were plotted for artillery counter-battery fires from 105mm, 155mm Long Toms and from the big self-propelled ^{8"}Howitzers. To my knowledge, although the Germans made many attempts they never captured a TD intact, that is from the 636th TD Bn. A German POW artillery officer informed us that our M-10 was called the 'Russian anti-tank Tank' because of the peculiar configuration of its opposed sloping armor sponson which was a Russian design. I have never seen anything in print about this. In this photo the TD is one of three concealed under the trees on the MLR facing the Germans who have an outpost in the buildings to the front upper center. The Ranger Platoon used the partially demolished stone farm house in the center foreground as a 'jump-off' point in the nightly hunt for 'wandering German Patrols'.

SAN PIETRO (Italy)

The 636th TD Bn did have a lot in common with the horse and mule pack trains which carried supplies up the almost impassable trails to the infantrymen dug in overlooking the Liri Valley on the road to Cassino. Sixteen Tanks made a brave but foolhardy attempt to run the road (Hiway 6 the road to Rome). Sixteen tanks were knocked out in less than an hour. A battery of German 88mm guns which originally had been designed for anti-aircraft fires but had been found to be a very excellent tank buster had accounted for the tanks. One Platoon of four TDs managed to traverse a mule path to a point where they flanked the 88mm battery for direct fire. The final score was one 88mm battery, one large ammo storage bunker, one communications Half-track and four large tracked Prime movers. The elimination of the German battery permitted the rapid deployment of 2d and 3d Battalions, 143d Infantry to crawl up the slopes of Mt Sammucro thus flanking the heights overlooking San Pietro where the Germans had entrenched themselves. The TDs returned to a position at the base of the mountain, digging in hull-down to await German tank retaliation.



STEADY PACK HORSES AND MULES HAD TO BE USED WHEN JAGGED PEAKS MADE MECHANIZED TRAVEL IMPOSSIBLE.

SAN PIETRO (Italy)

Companies A & C were detached from their Infantry Regiments and proceeded to positions overlooking the Liri valley along the axis of the San Pietro / San Vittore road all of which was in German hands. Eight Tank Destroyer Guns were lined up abreast with plenty of Infantry support dug in at a safe distance on the flanks and to the rear. This move was accomplished during the hours of darkness. At first light of day the 'Liri Turkey Shoot' began. The TDs are looking down from their positions at the German vehicles on the road. OPs had been amassing information on targets to be fired upon. Bunkers, fortified stone houses, partially concealed German tanks, trucks and other vehicles. With the rising sun at their backs the Tank Destroyers fired their guns until the barrels smoked. Within the two hour shoot, not a return round was received from the Germans. The TDs and Infantry withdrew. Later count of the knocked out tanks and vehicles brought the score up to more than forty. All that day the Germans replied with long range artillery fires, as the Division forward OPs plotted their locations for Air Force retaliation. San Pietro was bombed and shelled into a hardly recognizeable mass of stone rubble and yet- on the following day, women could be observed hanging their wash on the shattered limbs of trees.

THE RAPIDO RIVER (Italy)

Much has been written about the Rapido river crossing. A book titled, THE BLOODY RAPIDO, contains accurate geographical and topographical information; overlays taken from Staff maps which were never implemented and stuff such as that. Briefly, this abort of an operation need not have taken place and should never have been tried on three occasions after the German defenders, hard core veterans of the Hermann Goering Parachute Division (not Panzer Div as so often reported) zeroed in on the 'prepared crossings' so clearly marked and outlined with white Engineer tape and lovely little flag markers- just sat there and waited for a German version of the 'Turkey shoot', the unfortunate 36th Div Infantry being the turkeys. A long sentence but read it slowly and it says it all. The 36th Div History calls the Rapido, quote 'a swift running mountain fed gorge'! This is true, but NOT at the point selected by Army (General Mark Clark's) Staff. The 36th Infantry Division was to force a crossing over a desultory, muddy canal with sloping banks leading through boggy terrain to the river's edge on our side, and with steep crumbling banks leading through a soggy meadow overlooked by a huge dike embankment on the enemy side. By measured distance our side of the river crossing extended about one half a Km and the 636th TD Bn was to cross on a Bailey bridge to be erected by the 36th Div Engineers at the right or East anchor of this preselected crossing point. First of all this was no place to cross anything larger than a Recon Jeep! Secondly there was no place to dig in for Infantry on the opposite bank unless they had web feet and the paws of a Beaver. Thirdly, although the 36th Div Commanding General vociferously decried the selection of the crossing point, first with General Clark's Hq and then, an unheard of visit to British General Montgomery (on the QT) bypassing VI Corps Hq. This attempt to persuade the Top Brass to reconsider a crossing at the point given the 36th failed. For the next several days

The Rapido River (Italy)

Colonel George Forty who authored 'FIFTH ARMY AT WAR' was most certainly not at the Rapido crossing area assigned to the 36th or he might have not have written the brief words, quote "There were some gains on both flanks but the vital attack was in the centre, and it failed, despite the great gallantry of the American troops involved." Colonel Forty's very descriptive book dealt mostly with the 'gallant British' forces on the left flank and the French forces on the right. The Brits had every opportunity to break across the Gustav line in their sector, flank the German meatgrinder which was tearing the 36th to bits, but it did not! There may be many tactical (not strategic) reasons for this and I have read about a few which just don't hold water! General Walker, the 36th Div commanding General gave the go-ahead and General Clark states later, that he was not made aware of the true state of affairs at the time the crossing site was picked 'FROM A MAP RECONAISSANCE' in which no member of the 36th Infantry Staff took part; which did not consider (until after the debacle) and the glossed up after-action reports were prepared) the many 36th Recon Troop reports, or the results of valuable German prisoner interrogations indicated the strength of the German defenders overlooking the crossing site! I do know what I am writing because the Ranger Platoon under my command (selected volunteers) crossed the Rapido twice at night, infiltrated the German lines and brought back one German Staff officer and one Senior Sergeant alive, for interrogation. All later efforts to determine where these two valuable prisoners were taken for their interrogation proved fruitless except one expletive statement from a Captain at 36th Div Hq S-2 who laconically said, "They were too hot for us and we were ordered to send them to the Limey GHQ!" I'll not go into the heart rending sight of our Infantry, light tanks and artillerymen who had massed for the crossing, being chopped to bits before they got to the river's edge.

Companies "B" and "C" were designated to make the crossing. A Bailey bridging unit had managed to throw across a bridge under cover of smoke and interdictory fires. Mortar and machine gun fires raked the crossing site. The Germans had every last foot zeroed in and some of us believe they also had hidden Observers on our side of the river, their fires were too devastatingly accurate and right on target as the assault units the TDs among them moved towards their jump-off points. We knew darn well the Germans couldn't see through that smoke, for we could hardly make out the men and vehicles in front or to the rear of our DPs.

Unknown to the Bn CO I had quite an interview with the German officer prisoner before turning him over to Bn S-2. He had pointed several heavy dug in machine gun emplacements, and these were giving the Bailey bridge site holy hell. I asked for permission to take one TD M-10 manned by my men, move it to a position which we had reconnoitered during the night, and blow those machine guns out of their bunkers. We were used to being called 'Crazy' and the question arose, "How will you be able to pin their locations for direct fires through this smoke?" Simple, I told the S-2 Major, "I'll take two men over with flares, light them up from the immediate rear, and duck for a hole!" That's the way it worked out and instead of one TD blasting away, there were four! Someone had faith in our unorthodox methods and means for accomplishing them. The two machine guns plus their dug in supporting infantry were blown out of there, the Bailey bridge lasted long enough to put two Infantry companies across where they were immediately decimated by enfilading machine gun and mortar fires and the bridge was blown up by two direct mortar hits. The TDs did give them a chance to get across but that's all they were able to do. A few sentences in later reports did give the 636th TD Bn credit for knocking out the machine guns, thus making it possible for the 36th to make the first of several deadly, aborted crossing attempts. The Tank Destroyers were moved back from the river to await further developments. Their function as artillery pieces protected by light armor served a much more realistic purpose for interdiction and artillery fires than as assault guns attempting to negotiate marshy ground without infantry support. Div S-2 and S-3 came to us and gave us a 'pat on the back' plus a few additional jobs such as bringing in a couple of Prisoners which according to them, would not be turned over to any higher Hq until 'we had wrung them dry of their mother's milk!'. I have no harsh feelings for the hidebound British military mentality except when it applied to their own 'Commando type' operations. I do have the utmost contempt for their 'know it all' treatment of our Div Staff officers, several times in my own lowly (Second Lieutenant's) presence, one incident which I shall ^oplate.

The 36th Div G-2 had long since acknowledged that I did have an excellent command of the German language plus military terminology. A German parachute Div First Sergeant had been taken prisoner and had refused to talk to anyone except (his lawyer) a representative of the Red Cross, spouting the Geneva Convention rules regarding treatment of Prisoners of war. I and several of my Platoon volunteers had accompanied a Div Recon patrol to capture prisoners for interrogation. We slipped into a German Infantry FO post and took the lot. We brought them back across the Rapido river close to a British outpost. A Brit Brigadier was present at the outpost and at once began to berate the German officer and First Sergeant we had taken with our mixed bag. The Brit spoke a barely understandable German and the two Germans looked at one another, grinning a bit. I tried to remonstrate with the Brigadier and received an icy stare and a slight flick of his fly switch. "You don't interrogate prisoners until they're separated" I told him again. The Recon Troop patrol leader was a First Lieutenant, which placed him one notch above my rank. I turned to the German officer and spoke to him in German. "You will tell the truth! You know that I can understand every word you speak! If you lie, I'll gut-shoot you right at the belt buckle!" The British officer Brigadier so-and-so stared open mouthed at me. I motioned to my men to put the British outpost under the gun and hold them until we made our departure. We took our PWs to our Div G-3 and immediately explained what had happened. I returned to the 636th TD Bn CP and the word had already come down from higher HQ. The CO immediately gave the entire Platoon an assignment for a long Recon patrol, "Get lost until this blows over!" We did and the situation was not mentioned again. Needless to say, I did not venture close to any British military unit from then on.

The 36th Div infantry had been badly mauled. Two Regiments were reduced in their fighting strength to about one third of what they had started with. The Rapido now became an object of personal interest to every Squad leader who had lost friends. Individually after nightfall, one Squad and in several cases entire Platoons (the remnants) forded the river with nothing but their rifles, light

machine guns and bazookas plus all the ammo they could carry. Other bloodied slightly wounded followed them carrying ammunition. On the fateful night which Historians indicate as the great 'Breakthrough' several hundreds of small Squads infiltrated behind the heavily fortified German machine gun bunkers, mortar pits and dug in tanks. The Germans were frozen in their surprise and died in their bunkers. No prisoners were taken and no quarter was given by the men of the 36th Infantry Div. Isolated reports from after action talks with men who had made this 'unrecorded and not to plan' river crossing indicated that "The Germans didn't want to give up so we shot them!" A bridgehead was established and the 36th Div with newly arrived reinforcing units poured over the Rapido, breaking out of the Gustav Line. The French on the right flank and lastly the British on the left flank also moved out, thus keeping the Corps line and flanks intact. The official versions of what had taken place do not coincide or reflect the truth of what happened during those fateful four days on the banks of the Rapido. The name Rapido means exactly what it is-during the winter run-off at flood stage. Less than a week after the 36th made its bloody crossing the entire marshy plain occupied by the German defenders was under several feet of water. During the mad dash up the hiway after the retreating German armor, one Tank Destroyer during the hours of darkness, carrying a full load of Infantrymen, ran full tilt into the rear end of a stalled German Tiger tank which in turn was the last vehicle in a tank column. The Infantrymen who hadn't been tossed off as a result of the collision, fell off as the TD loaded and fired at point blank range (later estimated at 10 feet) into the engine compartment of the Tiger. The TD and its partially deafened crew went into reverse gear, back up and off the road. The remainder of the TD Platoon with its infantry piggy-back riders, fanned out and another 'Turkey shoot' began. There was no official count of enemy tanks and truck borne German infantry knocked out because the Germans in the lead vehicles of their column began to fire to the rear, knock-out their own tanks and killing their own troops. Historians do not record this episode on the road to Rome. I counted nineteen German MK IV tanks and two Tigers which definitely had been knocked out by

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'C' Company, 636th Tank Destroyer Battalion, but no mention in 36th Div records was to be found. I'll make my own comment on the actions of the Infantrymen I saw fight at the Rapido. They didn't fight out of any patriotic instinct; they fought out of pure naked fear, survival and then revenge! Our General Staff Planners at Corps level knew that the Germans had all the crossing sites zeroed in. They had been informed by 36th Div Engineers that all marked paths cleared of personnel and anti-tank mines had been remined by German Engineers who had crossed to our side during darkness and under cover of the dense smoke we poured on the crossing site. A later question passed around perhaps as a hind-sight remark, "Why didn't some son of a bitch think to mortar and shell our side of the crossing area before the first infantry tried to make a crossing? This would surely have detonated and blown up the mines which the Germans had replaced inside our own cleared paths leading to the river?" But that isn't the way the Planners work, is it?

MONTE CASSINO & TERELLE

I will not write about what I saw spread out below me from a very unusual Observation and direct fire location backed into a hollow of the mountain upon which perched the village of Terelle. The 636th had been seconded to a role for which it was well suited. Indirect artillery fire at given targets in the Liri valley. This gave most of the TD men a break as the 3" guns fired as artillery batteries in a rotation sequence. During our Recons and scrounging around the rim of hills facing the enemy, our 'Lone Ranger' Tex Sandridge came upon a mule train led by dark skinned soldiers in French uniforms. I am not casting racial slurs, but to Tex these men were Black men, actually Senegalese Muletiers who supplied a French Recon unit perched on the mountain above the village of Terelle. Tex decided to tag along with these mule-train fellows and apparently they hit it off very nicely after he showed them he knew quite a bit about balky mules climbing what appeared to be a sheer cliff wall from the valley side, but was actually a passable road on the mountain side. We ascertained later that no one in Division knew of this road's existence and ariel photos showed only a trail. Of course the shadow of the mountain could have distorted an ariel photo which under closer photo-interpretation would have revealed a road which could be traversed by a light armored tracked vehicle. We thought we had lost Tex until he came stumbling in that night loaded with wine (mostly consumed), several bottles bearing undecipherable French labels. I had the errant 'Texan' dried out and made presentable, for he did give us an idea. Contacting the 636th TD Bn CO was no problem; convincing him that he might be able to move a Platoon of TD M-10 Tank Destroyers up what was described as a mule and goat track was something else. The 'Old Man' was chafing for some TD action. He knew that we were sitting here until the valley and Monte Cassino with distant looming Mt Cairo were in Allied hands. He didn't know it yet but the Rapido river crossing would give him a piece of the action he craved, but in the meantime....

Tex was a true civilian at heart, acknowledging very little authority if it didn't suit him at the moment. The Bn CO and Tex knew one another from the same 'home town' and this served to give his story some credence, otherwise how in the hell did he manage to come by this French wine? With Tex as a Guide, I and the Colonel with his Jeep driver started out to locate the terminus of the trail he had stumbled upon. After returning to the CP unsuccessful, the Colonel called the S-2 who in turn called Div G-2 who in turn wanted to know "Why do you #%&* want to know about a French unit up on that mountain?" The Bn CO then had to tell the story. The G-2, also a 'civilian soldier' and a home-town boy, alerted his staff. Within the hour a Jeep complete with Major, Captain and two riflemen arrived at the 636th TD Bn CP. Tex had to be restrained from heading for the 'Tulies' out of pure fright at what he had started. The G-2, Bn S-2, Bn CO with Tex firmly in his grasp plus the Ranger Platoon as 'body-guards' drove off towards a flank of the mountain. G-2 had found the old road on maps which had never been used for this campaign. G-2 following closely behind The Bn CO's Jeep decided that now he had found the road, he would lead the column. Mules negotiated this track for decades. The villagers of Terelle and the French had come up another road which was not in the American sector, therefore not of immediate tactical interest until now. The Bn CO cursed long and loud, for this hard track could accommodate a two and a half ton truck, or maybe a German tank column? The finding of this road also caused an Infantry Battalion to relocate its position and a Tank Destroyer Platoon of four M-10s to cover its approach. Tex did have a plus going for him at that moment which also earned him a promotion to Private First Class. Half way up the track I learned that the French unit positioned outside Terelle had not been informed of our approach. I mentioned this to the Bn Co who informed the Bn S-2 who told the G-2 that we could be fired upon by the French outposts. G-2 laughed and before we could think about whatever his 'private joke' might be- we were challenged in some incomprehensible language and almost immediately

received several bursts of machine gun fire from a position ahead and across a small gully. The Ranger Platoon dismounted and came to me. I asked the G-2 Colonel "what are your instructions?" big mistake, for he bellowed, "I don't give instructions, I give orders!" "Yes Sir, what are your orders- sir?" The Bn CO whispered something to the Colonel G-2 who exploded again, "Why the hell don't I know this 'Shave-tail' can parley with the Frogs?" So the cat was out of the bag. The Bn CO was the only man who knew I had a language facility in French and Russian plus German and a passable English. G-2 Colonel was all smiles, "Sorry Lieutenant, go on up there and parley with them and tell them we're coming up whether they like it or not!" I called to Tex, "Come on, get a white undershirt and wave it around; they know you?" Tex grinned and with no white flag began to walk ahead of us, yelling at the top of his voice. A reply which I couldn't decipher came down to us accompanied by a bearded Goumier or Senegalese appropriately dressed in the remnants of a French uniform but armed with a very business like Thompson sub-machine gun. He embraced Tex and came towards us. Across the gully we could see a few more heads, one wearing a red fez. Within minutes we were once again mounted and proceeded towards the top of the mountain. Within the hour the Colonel G-2 had paid his compliments to the French Major of ---Recon unit; communications by radio were established, we were invited to stay the night and to watch the beautiful Liri valley on the following morning. Both Colonel G-2 and the 636th TD Bn Co respectfully declined the invitation, but the Ranger Platoon was delegated to remain as an Observation Post to report directly to 36th Div Hq via channels, the 636th TD Bn CP. Our CO didn't have to be told that a platoon of M-10s positioned up here would have a field day, firing at German targets across the valley. I didn't have to be told that such fires would no doubt bring about a thunderous retaliation from the well placed 88mm guns with their extra long barrels and souped up ammunition of which we had neither.

Just before daybreak we could hear the protesting growls and scream of overworked diesel engines as four tank destroyers hove into view. I'll repeat this for what it really means to the good Christian as Staff Sergeant ----- crawled out of his machine, "Christ on a Crutch! I've never been sea-sick in my life but when I looked over the side and a thousand feet down that ravine (rest is unprintable)"

The M-10s were deployed and positioned in natural indentations of the mountain top surrounded by solid rock on three sides and a sheer drop of more than 2900 feet to the front. The machines were camouflaged and as a precaution we told the villagers that all were to remain in the village, took a head count, made a thorough search which turned up a small German arms cache plus assorted weapons, some from the First World War. The Germans across the Liri valley could have seen the smoky exhaust from our diesel engines or a light reflecting from some optical device, for they proceeded to welcome us with some very accurate fire. The slight rise from our positions to the leading edge of the cliff prevented direct hits. The German shells landed just below the escarpment or burst overhead against the mountain. I am certain that if they knew what was up here they would have ranged in some heavy artillery. Immediately below us in the valley and slightly to our left was a British 4.5 battery which was stacked in there like a dining room table with its legs pointing straight up, an anti-aircraft battery. I mention this because at the first bomb run for the Abbey of Monte Cassino directly across the valley, this unfortunate artillery battery disappeared^{ed} in a cloud of smoke and twisted metal. We were priveleged to see the entire show as the Abbey, Cassino at its base, and the surrounding mountain side was reduced to smoking rubble. Countless sticks of bombs fell short into Allied positions on our side of the valley. The Liri valley was shrouded in smoke for almost a day. From the German side there was not a sound. We could plainly see the German ambulances moving in and out of a tunnel at the base of hangman's hill directly across from us. The French Major grimaced as he stated matter of factly, "They are not moving the dead and wounded, look at the axels."

I used his powerful BC scope and saw the bottoms of these vehicles practically dragging the ground. I called our Bn CP and reported my observations, but received the word, "We don't shoot at Ambulances or the Red Cross!" Before I could pass this on to the TD Commanders there was a single thunderous explosion which could be heard along the entire narrow front opposite us. A single HE round from the first TD had blown up an ambulance, which it seems was carrying something other than dead and wounded. The parade of ambulances ceased. I reported what had happened, receiving no reply from Bn Hq. This was the only action engaged in by the Tank Destroyers during the first few weeks of the Liri valley/Cassino Front campaign. Three days later we were ordered off the mountain. The Germans knew what that single round fired at their ambulance meant. There were no return fires, and no further ambulance traffic. The tank destroyers battle for Cassino would begin in earnest with the flanking movement attempted ¹²⁵ to by-pass the Cassino bottleneck, the ill-fated crossing of the Rapido river.

P.S.

There was no mention made of this incident, no record exists except perhaps in some unknown's personal diary or memoirs.