

La C@SA and A HAYSTACK THAT WASN'T

SALERNO (Paestum), Italy was one of the more critical and certainly one of the bloodiest military operations of the II World War. For a time the action hung in the balance between success and a possible defeat as the enemy threatened the very existence of the newly won beachhead. This was the opening struggle of the long and bitter Italian campaign. On their first combat mission the 636th Tank Destroyer battalion under the command of Colonel Van PYLAND was ferried ashore, practically being dumped overboard as a result of mixed up orders for a screwed up debarkation schedule. The Tank Destroyer companies entered combat on September 9, 1943 on the not so sandy beaches near the ancient port city of Paestum. Several days passed before the men and the equipment of the 636th were finally melded into the battalion organization which would make it the effective fighting force which history, namely the Division Historians 'forgot' to record. Previously told had been a small scale action during which the hybrid, misfit, cast-offs of the 636th's self-styled Ranger Platoon made its initial mark. This statement does not impugn the characters or the fighting ability of individuals who found themselves assigned to the Ranger Platoon. They had been told this would be a 'Palace Guard' super-MP type outfit which would secure the rear-CP in addition to the performing of other duties. The 'other duties' did materialize under the command of a city-boy Second Lieutenant. Of course these snafus, mix-ups, passing the buck, DMW and CYAs are not included in the recorded histories of the 36th Texas Infantry Division's combat days in Africa and Europe. Two histories; one published in 1945, and a revised, dressed up version published (or to be published in 1984/85).

The Sixth Corps was charged with maintaining and advancing along a narrow Front. La C@sa Creek, a narrow stream meandering between rolling hills, rocky promnitories and swampy terrain soon proved to be the soft center of the Corp's front to be exploited by the Germans in their final effort to burst through to the beachhead area with its mountains of supplies and incoming fighting equipment. They almost made it except for one battalion, the 142d Infantry and the remainder of the 143d Infantry which had been badly mauled during the previous two days of continual heavy fighting. The 636th TD Bn., is acknowledged to have been the lynch pin which held out against heavy odds in preventing the German breakthrough, thus turning the Sixth Corps flanks 180 degrees to protect its center, at the same time leaving considerable gaps between the Corp's existing flanks and the fighting units adjacent. After the successful conclusion of what could have become a military debacle. September 11, 1943, the Germans did occupy high points which gave them direct observation for the intense artillery fires which saturated the 36th Infantry Division's regimental

positions. Accurate sniper fires picked off the American artillery FOs faster than they could be replaced. Light ~~artillery~~ aircraft spotters lasted but a few minutes. German armor appeared where no armor had been reported. German snipers and machine gunners seemed to be everywhere, firing upon our infantry and artillery units from the flanks and rear. The Commanders assembling at Corps headquarter's faced a desperate situation; there was a gap at the center of the Sixth Corp's position. The 1st and 3d Bns, 142d Infantry and the 3d Bn, 143d Infantry were close to the point of being surrounded and cut off, the 36th faced the possibility of being chopped up piecemeal. Hill 424, a prominent observation point had been flanked by German armor supported by infantry. The 142d Infantry units which had ^{ei}sieged the high ground were forced to withdraw or face annihilation. The remainder of this fateful night was spent by the available Infantry units digging in along the west high ground fronting La Casa Creek with a northern anchor adjacent the British forces who were brought to a halt in their advance, thus affording a stabilizing effect until this bulge in the 36th's front had been straightened out. La Casa or ~~sometimes known as La Cosa~~ Creek was a slight defensive barrier and the only one available. September 13, 1943, the 36th was bled white with casualties in the thousands. The Division had extended itself to the breaking point; there was little defense in depth, every man was called to dig a rifle pit, to man a machine gun position. Tank Destroyers were given over to each individual crew chief to fire at any enemy target which appeared from 'any direction'; the TDs were in line abreast in a hull down position over the west rise across LA Casa Creek from the German attackers. 'X' Company of the 142d had been forced to withdraw from a rocky promintory which faced one of the two fording points across the Creek. The first fording point could be taken under heavy allied artillery and naval gunfire but the second and crucial fording point was too close to the 36th's defensive line for such interdictory fires. The second fording point would bring the TDs from their hull down positions over the rise and into a direct confrontation with advancing enemy armor with its supporting infantry many of them in armored half-tracked personnel carriers.

US 36th +
45th Divs

The stage had been set for an imminent German break-through to the beachhead area. September 14, 1943, the security of the Salerno beachhead was in doubt. The following five days saw military action by both Allies and Germans such as was not again to be seen until the last German attempt to split the Allies at Bastogne almost a year later. The Tank Destroyers had been given a 'last ditch' suicidal role as a direct support and back-up for the infantry battalions. The TDs were ordered to hold until the last, in the event the Germans prevailed. The lightly armored ^{9th} Tank Company met the onslaught of German Mk IVs by outmaneuvering them and blowing their engine compartments right out of the armored vehicles which vastly outgunned the undergunned American light tanks. A last ditch attempt by the Germans would be made that night, preparatory for an all out attack at dawn. The 636th TDs gave everything they had and more; within a half hour the TD M-10 with a burned out 3" gun barrel had accounted for two enemy armored personnel Carriers, one large armored ammunition Carrier and five Mk IV tanks, a record which stood for all time. One Tank Destroyer in hull down position accounted for eight enemy armored vehicles at point blank range. The British and the 45th US Infantry Division compressed their Fronts, giving the 36th a shortened Front to defend, thus affording a realignment of units to meet the last enemy attack. La Casa (~~La Casa~~) Creek became the focal point through which enemy armor could penetrate the 36th's line in a drive for the beachhead. We know that Unit historians favor their own units and that goes without saying more. The 36th Infantry Division historians have done the 636th Tank Destroyer Bn and its braver than brave men a great disservice by excluding the TDers from the published exploits of each Divisional Regiment and Battalion's individual history. I do know in my own mind and from my own personal observations as a participant and observer that many of the fiercely fought engagements by the Infantry battalions would have ended other than reported and written had it not been for the M-10 TDs supporting them with fixed bayonets at the end of heat blackened gun muzzles.

SEPTEMBER 14, 1943

Shortly before dusk had set in, distorting images, confusing observers, putting an edge on teeth and temper of Staff officers who had done the best they could with what they had. Colonel Van Pyland called his

Ranger Platoon Lieutenant in for a small conference, in addition to a message of congratulation, "Well done my boy! Couldn't have done a better job myself, but you're still a young'un and you'll learn! The battalion Exec is pissed off because you didn't follow his orders but I smoothed his chicken feathers, told him you belonged to ME!" I had returned with Injun, ^{SP4 (K)} ~~SP4 (K)~~ Pete, Tex and Fats from a particularly hair-raiser several Kms behind the so-called enemy lines. Battalion received a call from Division that a single apparently mobile SP Gun or heavy mortar was laying them in with some accuracy right into the Divarty CP. Major-----, the battalion EXEC was known to all his many 'friends' as 'Chicken Feathers', a good ol' Boy from the old home town back in Texas. He had superimposed his orders over Colonel Pyland's instructions to go out and get that son-of-a-bitchen gun and I don't give a damn how you do it- just do it! Major----- added his chicken feed by stating, "You will not use anything but grenades! We don't want to alert the enemy to our coming counter-attack!" I knew darn well that we were not about to demolish an SP gun of that caliber with any type of hand grenade available in our inventory, and as to alerting the enemy, why he knew all there was to know about us or how else could he drop what turned out to be 120mm shells into a CP with pin point accuracy?" I called for volunteers. The Crazy ones responded as they usually did. The Bn CP Group turned out to watch us and see how we'd go about starting out on this one. We hosed each other down soaking wet and then rolled in the good Italian soil for a few minutes. The resulting mess quickly dried and did not resemble anything human, let alone members of the US army in doubtful standing. I picked up a Grease-gun and four clips, 4 frag grenades, two bazooka rounds for each man plus two Bazooka conversions of our own design. Fats was a civilian armaments specialist back home and could convert a piece of steel pipe into a gun barrel right there in his own private machine shop. In addition to the bazooka conversion he also somehow managed to convert the rocket's powder increments. This gave us a very potent and possibly highly illegal Tank buster. Colonel Pyland was the only man other than our own crew who had seen it in action. He wanted us to report our 'invention' to the Division Ordnance officer but I vetoed this idea, "After the war is over" I said to him. The Russians

Very, very
illegal back
yard gun smith

had their 'multiple rocket grenade launcher' which they named the Stalin Organ; the Germans had its counterpart which we named the 'Screaming Meemie' and we had a single tube weapon which could punch a hole in the frontal armor of a Tiger tank provided you got close enough to allow for a non-deflected strike against that eleven inches of sloping armor. So we improvised by using the facilities of a crazy Italian mechanic and his garage plus Fats brain storm. We kept this weapon (four of them) hidden from all comers when not in use. Suitably attired for the occasion, with plenty of defensive armament and our SP gun 'Remover' we left the CP and headed out for general direction from where the artillery plotters had figured the SP gun or Mortar should be located. A few hours of sneaking around, avoiding German troop concentrations and one very large Tank Park containing a company of self-propelled medium artillery, we listened, watched, observed and hoped for a visible sign of this German gad-fly in the 36th Division's lunch bucket. We were practically on top of the weapon when we found it. He was a monstrous long barreled Mortar mounted on a tracked chassis, partially hidden from ground observation by camouflage netting and three walls of a bombed out farm house. We observed him at close distance as he moved forward, poked his gun barrel skyward, fired and moved back out of sight from air observation. We counted eleven crewmen, two officers and one civilian who appeared to be a technician manning a plotting board. There were no security or other troops in sight or within hundreds of yards. Fats decided the action for us when he removed several TNT blocks from his personal bag, several meters of primacord from a pocket and four detonators from another package. He was a walking human bomb and we didn't know it until now! He suggested we drop the demolitions properly wired into the barrel of the mortar, unreel several meters of primacord and let it blow- after we had disposed of the crew, secured their IDs and whatever weaponry might be of use to the S-2 and S-3. I had noted the civilian as he worked with several instruments unfamiliar to me and told them we'd do it that way after we had salvaged him for a return trip with his paraphenalia, charts, graphs and the rest of it. We received a lucky break for they all lowered the tube of that monster, and stopped for lunch. What a happy laughing bunch. The civilian sat

apart, joined by one of the officers whom I could identify as a Captain of artillery. The second officer sat with the men. Good fortune smiles upon him who waits! The tube would be cool enough to slide the TNT into. Tex was quite an artist when it came to sketching lovely ladies and just as good for making an excellent sketch of this weapon posed in its unnatural habitat. We would allow ourselves a few minutes from start to finish, then get the hell out of there with our German guests, for we would have to take the Captain with us. The plan went down with a minimum of fuss. The crew was killed, the IDs were collected, plus a beautiful set of German Naval binoculars which I later presented to Colonel Pyland. We loaded the mortar tube and blew it into pieces along with enough of the gun carriage to render it into junk. The civilian technician let out a deep sigh and cried; the German officer demanded his rights under the Geneva convention, and we departed. The operation took less than five solid minutes. We came back, scaring the beans out of a few sentries, one who emptied his Garand M-1 in our direction before he ran back to 'report' and the other who stood there peeing his pants. This one took the lead once he found out who we were. We had no further problems on the way to the 636th TD Bn, CP except for an assortment of curious troopers wondering who on earth we were, or 'what' we were. Late afternoon on this fateful September 14, 1943; Colonel Pyland called us together and gave us his 'fatherly' speech which we knew meant deep trouble, a dirty job coming up if not already present. "Boys, you did a real bang-up job on that SP and the CO wants you to know he appreciated that. He also says the S-2 and S-3 are going tent-happy over the live Kraut and the civilian engineer you brought back, not to discount the papers, maps and the other stuff". He paused and admired the heavy Navy glasses which I had given him, compliments of the Wehrmacht General Staff. "Now youall know the bind we're in because the boys out of the 142d had to give up their prime piece of Real estate? Well now I'm tellin' you like I told the General, I got me a mean bunch of Mavericks who'll go out there before dark and take it back, hold it until we get there and we'll give it back to the 142d all nice and wrapped up like at Christmas back home. Lieutenant, you pick your boys and here's the maps and the rest of it, now get going!"

We had just thought there might be a day or two for some R&R and this took us back to the real world and the war. Once more I asked for volunteers and not to my surprise they all stepped forward. From Tex came the classic, "I'd rather be out there than around here!" We sat around and held our war council, deciding on weapons, supplies and the rest of the stuff we might need. Fats made the decision on bazookas and we assembled ourselves and weapons for a quick take-off. None of us knew it just yet, but those of us who would return would henceforth be known as the 'original Purple Heart Platoon'; every man received one or more wounds before the dusk of the following day, September 15, 1943. Eight of us would not return, except by way of a shelter-half wrapped up and ready for the GRS. We would never accept a Replacement although enough Nuts would volunteer to refill our slimmed down ranks. I have given these preliminaries, everything piling up during the period September 14, 1943 for on this day we would lose a few of our best friends and co-workers. We sat around for the minutes necessary to ascertain the target area, the hilly rocky mass of loose boulders, decomposed granite, sand, chiggers and whatever lived in those crevices overlooking La Casa Creek. We knew that a mass of troop movements were in the offing just over the hilly rise to the rear of our target, and we knew that any German armored thrust would have to run right over us if they were to make it to the top of the rise. We didn't have faith and trust in anyone except our selves, excluding those few Tank Destroyer M-10s hidden just beyond the crest. La Casa Creek meandered along just as it shows in the fairytale version of the beautiful countryside with its stream flowing through verdant meadow, dale and glen. Only this wasn't a fairytale and there'd be lots of blood on the ground that night. Colonel Pyland had returned with the Division G-2, who gave us a fast and very efficient briefing. "Men, you are going out as volunteers! I'll not butter it up for you! This may be a one way trip for a lot if not all of you! The Commanding General is aware of your unique abilities, so I don't want to hear what you might have in mind. Just remember that we are all patriotic Americans and we fight according to the rules of War! You may draw upon Regiment and Division supplies for any equipment not available here! Good luck men!"

Colonel Pyland motioned us to one side. "There are estimated to be two full battalions of German armor and we don't know how many support troops and armored carriers plus SP guns. Division Recon has sent out two sections and not a damn man came back! The Krauts are estimated to be about nine kilometers away, heading for our crossing point at La Casa Creek. The 142d got themselves boxed at Altavilla. They had to bring in the 82d Airborne from Sicily to unbox them. The 143d has lost most of their best NCOs and company officers. Now what's left of the 36th is dug in behind the rise facing La Casa Creek. Naval artillery has been shelling those bastards for days but they keep on coming. We've got one skeleton Platoon of the 143d which used to be a Company, right now they're dug in on that pile of rocks you men will occupy. We surmise the Germans have forward OPs all along the Creek observing across at us to see what we're up to. They've got snipers shooting every head that pops up above ground on that rock pile- so what, tell me now, what are you going to do? The Limeys and the 45th are just holding on the left flank to give us the break we need to make a push out of this jackpot we've been pushed into. GHQ Army is looking down Division's neck and Division is holding its breath waiting for daylight. My ol' country boy instinct tells me the German army'll come boiling out of that mess of hills long before daylight and don't give a shit if we hear them or not. They'll run tracked vehicles all over the place to confuse us about their intentions but they know and we know there's just one spot they can cross over without bridging and that's where you'll be looking right at them! You're going out there to be our eyes until daylight and if nothin' breaks loose, you'll be passed by our attacking battalions. That's when you'll have my personal word for a week of R&R in Naples provided we have it under our control. S-4 has orders from me to give you anything you want!" I looked at the men around us but couldn't read a single face. "Colonel I'll tell you what you might order for us; two 3/4 tons and trailers, two fifty caliber machine guns and spare barrels, two 30 calibers, two BARs, a BC scope with a short tripod, ten sets of binoculars and all the incendiary and armor piercing ammunition we can haul. We'll want lots of water and salt tabs, entrenching tools and aid kits, one squad size per man with extra morphine syrettes.

Van Pyland was a Top Hick (1st Sgt)
in WWII

We'll want a nice shiny brass bugle and an american flag". I looked around and saw disbelief, grins and dumfounded looks. "What in the hell do you think we're going to do out there? We're supposed to be eyes and ears an' here you're going to fight the war all by ourselves!" Fats sparse red head and freckles had turned a deep crimson. "Listen Sergeant Fats, we're going in there like on the parade ground, just like we got off the boat!" I glanced around and noted the Colonel's nonplussed look. "Listen all of you! I'm asking for Volunteers and no one goes unless he wants to go. I've been reading the Sele-Calore overlays for days while you guys have been taking it easy. I know what that rock pile looks like and where we'll hole up. The German snipers have all those ready dug holes vacated by the 143d zeroed in so we'll fool them. We'll go up the back side, the way we crawled up those cliffs at Arzew, remember? We're going in with the 3/4 tons, unload them and then drive them out where they can see them. They'll mortar them into junk but we'll spot the mortars. We pull up the stuff we need by using*dead-men from the back side of the rock pile. The 143d left-overs will vacate under fire but we'll see and note where that fire is coming from. Now we'll drop rope ladders down the back side of the rock pile where the Germans can't see who's coming or going. A messenger can crawl down and make it to the nearest TD with a phone line; we'll run a couple well spaced to avoid losing all of them at the first shot. The TD nearest the up-slope from the creek with a couple of EE-5s will be our commo link. We're going in wearing Class-A~~s~~ and the Germans will watch to see what these dumb Greenhorn Americans are going to do. I know the German mentality and the way his brains work! By the time they get wise they'll dump mortar on us, rifle and machine gun fire to keep us down, but it'll be too late. I'll draw their attention to my position which will have the BC Scope where they can see it, spot it and fire at it! Fats, you and Sneaky will man two widely dispersed OPs to spot the fire locations for our return 'Mail' when I give the order. The 50 calibers and the 'Big Bazookas' will hold of to engage enemy armor and incendiaries with alternating armor

*Note: A 'dead man' is a metal frypan with the pullpin used in mountain climbing

piercing will bust and fry those Germans at one thousand meters and less. We blow them up and make them stay down. The Infantry machine guns up on the rise can engage enemy infantry which deprived of its armor protection will scatter in all directions. We'll have a turkey shoot, Texas style, if this works out like I think it will. All depends on how many volunteers I get and how fast Colonel Van can get the stuff we need. Last I'll say, some of us or maybe all of us aren't going to make it back, so think fast before you deal in or out." Colonel Pyland had been taking all this in. He barked his orders to the S-4 men who had driven up to find out what we wanted. He glared at them, "I want this stuff loaded in exactly two hours, and include a couple of rations from the Officers stores". Every one of my men had moved forward, no one would remain behind. Colonel Pyland handed me the field glasses I had given him just a few short hours previously. "I want them returned in the same shape they're in now." He drove off as the S-4 looked at us, "You men are all bucking for a Section 8 or a Silver Star. You'll have it all except maybe the rope ladders but I can have them made up fast! We'll put every available man on the re-linking of that belted fifty caliber, but what about the Geneva?" He stopped talking when he saw a few of the glances tossed his way, got in his Jeep and drove off. "OK everybody in fatigues with a nice stub of candle in a pocket. The Class As go on over the fatigues and that includes the field cap. When we get up there, we take off the class As, use the candle to black out and the Class As for dummies. We'll be up there until tomorrow after dark, so easy on the rations and long on the water. Anybody forget how to scale a rock pile or rappel a cliff? I knew we'd need that stuff some day and this is the day!" Fats spoke up soberly, "Lieutenant I always knew you were crazy and now we all know it, but then, who isn't? I just think this is going to work just the way you said 'cause your wacky ideas sort of have always worked out. Anyway, who's goin' to look after your skinny ass if I ain't around?" The die was cast and we had committed ourselves.

The leading elements of German armor were fast closing on the Sele/Calore river area. Division Recon had spotted their motorcycle scouts at several locations. One battalion was still holed up in the old Roman town of Altavilla which the German advance had flanked and by-passed. The word had been whispered around that Ranger Platoon was preparing for its own grand finale, a Class-A dress funeral on the German side of the fighting Front. We made our preparations in silence. We had no anti-tank defense to stop the German armor which had massed along the entire Allied Front, with the only weak spot directly opposite the decimated Infantry Regiments of the 36th Div. We did have fourteen mobile M-10 Tank Destroyers, eight in hull down behind the rise facing La Casa Creek and six in Reserve at the 36th Division CP. We did have numerous Bazooka and truck drawn anti-tank cannon and one hell of a Front to cover. At dusk we moved quietly to the 3/4 tons to which loaded trailers had been attached. Quite a load with thirty men scrambling aboard. We lurched off like a couple of overloaded drunks heading for a night on the town. We drove with head lights on bright. There was cursing all around us as we passed dug in men, machines and equipment. No one could tell us exactly where the advance German units were to be found. Monte San Chirico on the left with the low masss of Monte Soprano on the right as we drove along the dry dusty Italian road. The word had been passed along, "Don't stop or question these two 3/4 tons with their load of parade attired soldiers!" I looked back at the lengthy string of white powdered dust which flowed in our wake. The shells started to come in, marching into the dust to our rear, we accelerated to thirty then forty miles per hour. We didn't care how much dust we raised and barreled down the road. The MLR came up suddenly as we heard the shouts and yells for us to douse those G-dd-mn headlights but we kept on going, followed by the enemy artillery at several hundred yards distance. We broke free of the sheltering flanks of the hill mass through which the advancing German armor was expected to roll. Up and down the Main Line of Resistance, now the Main Line of Defense, the dug in infantry

was taking one hell of a beating, shell burts everywhere. The Germans knew that someone or something was barreling down that road and the damn fools had their bright headlights on. The shelling ceased abruptly and I knew they were waiting for what they thought was an attack in force, but why the headlights? We had about five minutes or less to switch off headlights, leave the road in total darkness and skirt the looming mass of boulders to our front, coming in from the unobserved rear which was also known to them to be unscaleable by ordinary infantry. We bumped over the rough old Quarry road and across what was left of an old bridge which almost gave way before the second overloaded trailer crossed. A sharp turn to the right and we passed from any possible German Observer unless he were hidden from our own troops on their side of La Casa Creek. A hooded light winked Morse signals from a spot near the top of the rock mass and this caused a fusilade of machine gun burts from a short distance to our front. The Germans were very close, so what would they think when all became quiet with perhaps the scrapings of rock which would be audible to them. Several flares burst over our heads and gave us all a fright. The bright lights dangling at the ends of their parachutes lighted up the entire rock mass as if it were high noon on a hot summer's day. We froze but also got our bearings. The lights burned out and we moved in low gear to the right flank of the rock mass, parking under the overhang of a rocky cliff, out of sight, not out of mind from the enemy so near. We began our maneuver by flashing a pre-arranged signal up the "unscaleable" rock face. An answering signal gave us the go-ahead to unload. Tex, Sneaky and myself were the first to scale the cliff. In a small depression near the top we came face to face with the few remnants of the 143d infantry who had been plastered half way to hell by the intense shelling of their OP. I have never in my life seen such ludicrous appearing faces as these battered, half deafened men looked at us crawling up the side and into their rock walled redoubt. I threw the sling rope over the side. Within the space of an hour we had unloaded, hauled up and stacked our equipment and supplies under the overhanging rock face, the other side of which was in plain view of the enemy. There remained only the completion of our scenario, gunning the 3/4 tons with their attached trailers out into the open.

Four rope ladders had been drawn up and secured, well separated. Sneaky Pete draped a roll of telephone wire over his back, fastened the cradle and scaled down the ladder to do his part by reeling out the line in a zig zag run paralleling the Creek, dropping the wire along the edge of the creek bank to minimize damage by shell fragments. Forty minutes later he reached the crouched infantrymen who would take the wire reel up the rise to our M-10 Tank Destroyer communications link with the 636th TD Bn CP. We waited silently with our EE-5 hooked up and well protected with an open handset. The word came through. "Well done so far, send the infantry back to their units". Fats was busy with his armaments program and as I watched with amazement he opened a large sack filled with his favorite TNT blocks, each a quarter pound of explosive death. "Where are the Detonators?" "Right here Lieutenant", and he unbuttoned his fatigue jacket to show me the individually wrapped copper tubes he had placed bandolier fashion around his fat middle. "Fifty of these little jewels and you see? Nothin' happened.!" I had no further comment. The second, third and fourth wire reels went down the rope ladders, each well separated from the other, carried by the returning infantry men to the pick-up points who would carry them to their destination. Each line worked and we now had three additional phones to dig into separate locations. The last of the infantrymen had scaled down the rock face and we drew up our rope ladders. Once more the night was lighted by parachute flares this time accompanied by something that sounded like a box-car wooshing over our heads. We watched as the hill mass which would be the forward face of Monte San Chirico burst into light and sound as a monstrous shell exploded. Except for the thin lines of telephone wire we were on our own. I split up the Platoon into four working units, directing each to a well dispersed area where each squad would function during the coming day. I could visualize the German listening points as they called back their suspicions, for we were about as quiet as an American Legion convention during its first night in town. Being a logical and reasoning military man, the German Commander would order a very

thorough bombardment of the prepared fox holes, breastworks and machine gun pits which they knew existed on the forward face of this rock mass because they had driven the previous occupants out of their defensive holes on the day previous. A veritable fire storm of artillery, mortar and machine gun fire marched up and down the forward side of our rock sanctuary, then proceeded to traverse every yard of the same area. We were covered with rock chips, rock dust and splintered chunks which fell upon our bare heads. No serious injuries. The bombardment ceased as suddenly as it had started. We were stone deaf and half blind but our telephone lines were intact and we reassured our CP that all was well and that we were not blown off the face of the earth. Many observant FOs noted and plotted the locations from where the artillery pieces appeared to fire; others ducked deeper into their FO posts and covered their heads. A whispery voice came over the open phone line, "Our infantry is dug in about a quarter of a mile to your left rear, flanking the crossing point which engineers have mined, but engineers make mistakes; the mines they laid will not stop tanks, so the initial surprise will be in your lap when they come through. There's another ford about two hundred yards south of this one and we believe from the sound of motorized activity that they've located this one and will use it for their heavy stuff. This brings them within a thousand yards or less from your position. If you can get them to turn towards you after they cross over, we'll have a good chance of hitting them broadside as they turn, knock out the lead tanks and block the defile they've got to use to make the rise where our infantry is dug in. You'll have to make this decision because there's no way we can come to your assistance until nightfall." I passed this information on to the squads and we held a council on this new turn of events. There were about three hours of darkness left to us before the first sign of a false dawn and we knew that all hell would break loose on the coming of daylight. Our fiftys were emplaced under the overhang on the forward face of the rock pile. The enemy bombardment had made our task simpler by blasting out deep holes and crevices where only shallow positions had existed.

detonators had been wrapped in water proof sheets intended as ground sheets for our own use. These had been placed submerged at the second potential and probable crossing to be used by the German armor at day light. Each package contained two pounds of TNT, enough to immobilize a medium to heavy tank which might roll over it. A broken tread would initially cause the tank to turn on its own axis this affording the Tank Destroyers overlooking the Creek a broadside shot thus creating a block for the tanks following. As one TD commander stated to me much later on when we met in Naples, "Like shooting fish in a barrel and the damn fools kept trying to get around that first one, all we had to do was wait until he turned broadside and we couldn't miss." The whispering voice came over the open phone line again. "What in the hell was that you guys set off down there? Sounded like and ariel bombardment. Recon tells us the Germans can flank the hill you're on by coming around the blind side, the side you crawled up last night. We've got about six to eight TDs up here plus a few light tanks from the Recon company to try and stop them. If they get across both crossing points we have had it!" I then told the voice that we had created a diversion, that during the shell fire we had placed contact mines in the second crossing, to concentrate the best TD gunners on this crossing for a turkey shoot at daylight, that we could plainly hear their light skinned armor and motorcycles up and down the defiladed road paralleling the Creek this side of Albanella." There was a pause. "This is Van-you-know-who, what was that again about mining the second crossing and what did you mine it with? I don't recall giving you anything to make mines out of." Fats went on the line for the first time. "Listen you old mud-hen, you know who this is because you've busted me down often enough, when the Lieutenant says he's mined the G-dd-mn ford he means it's mined to blow your fat ass to kingdom come along with your G-dd-mn Staff of fat-assed chicken feathered friends!" There was silence, nothing except pure silence as I saw myself and every NCO with us on the way to the Naples rockpile commanded by Colonel FRY'S military police. The whisper came again, this time with the hint of laughter.

" Listen carefully; we are following your instructions and will be prepared for that second crossing attempt. Van-you-know-who has just had a mild attack, mumbled something about a son-of-a-bitch gun runner and what he'd do to him when he got his hands on him again. Seems like they're drinking neighbors back home in that Texas town. We're sending you some assistance; a reinforced squad of the Sicily boys; they'll reach you just about daybreak with no time to spare; lower your ladders and let them up, they'll try to secure you from the open right flank in event both crossing attempts are made."

I didn't have to think about that one. We were all tied in on one circuit here, but at the TD communication link there were individual phones. I had no idea who the whispering voice could be. "Don't do it! We can't use them here, it's too late for them to make it without being seen from the OPs opposite the second crossing point. They'll be observing it to be damn sure we don't try to obstruct it in some manner. The 3/4 tons were juiced up with a couple pounds of TNT, that's why the big noise. All that ruckus covered us when we planted the mines. They can't be found unless the Germans send out Sappers to probe the Ford and they're not about to give their show away by doing that, so let's not give ours away by sending those jump-Boys out here where they can be seen. I have the feeling that this will be a one way trip for all of us out here but we'll leave them something to remember us by. We'll cover the primary crossing with our long tubes and heavy Fiftys. No further communication until the show begins. It's going to get noisy around here and up where you are." "OK we'll place them on a hold."

What I didn't know was of interest just before the expected attack. The beaten Infantry remnants from the 143d had told their story after returning to their units. A makeshift squad had volunteered a return trip to our Rock Pile. Heavily armed with the versatile Browning Auto rifle and all the ammo clips he could carry, thirteen (lucky number) bedraggled men showed up at the rear base of our location; using a hooded flashlight they signalled upward until we replied just as Jacko was about to unload a few hand grenades on them. They crawled up a rope ladder and we held another council about where to put them

to keep their fire power intact. The 143d boys were the best. No one ordered them to come out here, they just came, and with a more than welcome addition to our weaponry. Staff Sergeant-----looked around with disbelief. "What happened out here? We thought the whole damn hill blew up a while back? Where do you want us and when do we shoot?" I called Fats out of his barricaded dungeon. Anyone who knew him also knew where to find him for those stinkin rag-weed stogies he chewed left no doubt as to his presence. Ole Snoose followed him as they left their weapons pit and crawled over to us. Fats knew Staff----- from back home. "Howdy ol' Buddy and welcome to the Rock Pile Rats! We decided to place the eight BARs so as to enfilade the entire open stretch between the second crossing and the base of our position. We needed some solid rock protection for these guys because they'd be standing head and shoulder above ground level to fire down at the field below. We decided to set off a few charges simultaneously to give the impression of mortar round impacts. Daybreak was dangerously close. The rumbling and clanking of unseen tracks, the sputtering of motorcycles had been heard for some time now. Colonel Pyland was right in his surmise that they'd run their vehicles back and forth to confuse their actual intent and time and place of attack. We were squatting at the narrow end of a natural funnel through which the Germans would pour more than a full sized Regiment of armored troops just less than two hours from now. Our 'back door' was now reasonably secure from ground assault. We had a decent chance to weather any fire except mortar bombs coming right down the chimney into our defenses. Our volunteer reinforcements were being given their fire positions waiting for their holes to be blasted. Fats constructed a 'ring main' and I called our TD link. The Whispering voice came on almost at once; "A squad of Restricteds raided supply and took off with quite a few BARs and all the ammo they could carry! S-4 indicated they were on the way to join your group, have they arrived?" I was surprised at this turn of events for I'd thought they had been sent out to us. "Yes they're up here and being emplaced to cover the second crossing. You'll hear a couple of big bangs in a minute, that's us blasting a few standing fire pits for these men and their weapons, so pass the word it's not an attack. When it starts, the whole Fifth Army will

know it, so don't drop anything on us. We're about as prepared as we'll ever be. Lots of movement, trucks, tracks and armor. We believe the main attempt will be through the second crossing, flank the rock pile and come up the steeper side of the defile right at the TDs and infantry up there. We have a 90 degree clear field of fire from this shooting gallery. The range for starters will be about one thousand yards maximum. I don't know what these guys did to be placed on 'Restricted to area' but chances are a lot will be hit up there. They're exposed, firing down into the open the way they'll be doing, they're good men who didn't have to come out here." Whispering voice then identified himself as Colonel-----, Liaison officer from Fifth Army headquarters with full powers to make and break Generals in the Field. The false dawn began to bathe the small valley with a dim light which caused the mists hanging low over La Casa Creek to swirl and dance. The firing holes being readied for our ^{*}BAR reinforcements blew with a thunderous roar which spewed rocks and boulders high into the sky. A dirty cloud of dust rose several hundred feet, then began to settle all around us. Rock chips and splinters rained down on us. The German reaction was one of a complete silence as the last shock waves receded towards them. We were partially deafened and half blinded. The slight scrambling of boots and the metallic clank of weapons and ammo belts couldn't be heard twenty yards away as the BAR men scrambled for their newly blasted firing positions. Loose rocks went rolling down the slopes, lodging into man high piles as they were stopped by the blasted rock and rubble below. Then all hell broke loose with a rolling artillery barrage which began at the base of our rock pile, passing quickly over us and on up the rise towards our dug in waiting troops. The Germans had started their show with HE, Smoke and countless rounds of Mortar shells. Everything began to land at the base of the rise, blanking out the bulge created by Monte San Chirico at the junction where the Sele river, the Calore river entered La Casa Creek. Daylight was upon us when we began to catch sustained, apparently randomly aimed sniper fire from a small cluster of stone farm buildings

BAR = Browning Automatic Rifles

to our left front. More sniper riflemen began to make hits uncomfortably close and all around us. I felt that an Observer was directing this increasingly accurate fire and surmised the Germans believed we might have an OP established on or near the top of this Rock pile. Corporal Eric----- motioned to me for the binoculars I carried and pointed towards the farm buildings. I could see the steaming manure pile, several hay and straw stacks, several pigs and a gaggle of geese which nothing seemed to disturb from their feeding. A Farmer who didn't walk like a Farmer, came out of the house with a pail, walking slowly towards what could be a cow shed. I observed him closely before handing the field glasses to Eric slightly above and to the right of my CP. There was vehicle movement along the trees lining the far side of the Creek and we could plainly see the black clouds of diesel exhaust smoke spiraling skywards from behind the rise in rear of the farm buildings. Tex caught the sniper's location and called it down to us. "Watch the second haystack, he's in there and that's the Kraut who has us zeroed in up here, he has direct observation on the BAR positions". I used the powerful glasses which Colonel Pyland had returned to me. A slight movement and tufts of hay fell from the stack. There was no smoke or flash as a bullet whacked in and above where we squatted behind our rocky breastworks. Tex let out a scream, falling, cartwheeling down the rocky slope. This rifleman was too good a shot at more than eight hundred yards and Tex had exposed too much of himself; our first ~~WIA~~ ^{*}WIA. The sun was coming up fast, the mists dispersing, giving us our first good look at what was going on over there. Frankly, I came close to crapping my pants. Fats called out loud, "A thousand of the bastards if there's one. They don't know what's up here or we'd be eating Mortar shells for breakfast!" I braced the phone under my chin and began to call in our observations. German armor was on the move although still out of sight. The entire wooded area behind the stone farm buildings was crawling with German infantry, Panzer Grenadiers by the dozens walking about. Corporal Geronimo-----, a full blood Apache was playing with the spade handles of his caliber 50, as I motioned him to stay down and hold fire until I gave the order.

* WIA = wounded in action - Tex died without

WIA
wounded in action

The Germans probably thought we were a bunch of amateurs and showed their contempt by exposing themselves. I caught the Whisper voice again. "Give us all you've got, estimate numbers, type of vehicles, equipment, everything visible to you. That Rock pile is just high enough to mask them from our own observation but flank Recon tells us there are possible elements of two Regiments stacked up over there". I began to give him my sightings, coordinates and what they appeared to be doing. "We're plotting this information now. When they begin moving we'll lay in in heavy from the rear to the front, disperse them in our direction. Chances are they'll know we have an OP on your Rock pile and we can't give you anything except direct fires." I heard a loud shout from above, "Here they come, the whole G-dd-mn German army!" I passed the information to the Whisper voice and told him we'd have to take care of business. I began to count the German armor, mostly Mk IVs and armored Personnel carriers followed by support infantry on foot. They were attempting to cross at both one and two spots. Somebody did his homework because the first tank carried a flail out in front beating the creek water and mud into a froth, also exploding the inadequate mine effort placed there by our Engineers. The heavier stuff including towed anti-tank guns was lining up in long rows, each waiting his turn to cross over. I don't know what they thought we had over here as I called the TD communications link. "They're on the way and crossing at the first spot, mines didn't stop them. Estimate nineteen over and heading towards us, lots of infantry support. Personnel Carriers are bogging down, infantry getting off and coming on foot. Heavy stuff coming down the bank to cross at second spot, there goes the first one sky high, blew him right out of the water, he's blocking the ford, the others are trying to get around him, infantry coming right for our position, we'll wait, give it to them right on coordinates you have, hold TDs for direct fires, we're taking heavy tank fire right up the slope, the BAR men are going to catch real hell". I cut off all communications and gave the order to engage the tanks with our caliber Fiftys at five hundred yard, to engage the long Bazookas at close range, the thirty caliber machine guns on ground troops- and NOW!"

The battle for La Casa Creek was on and we were now fighting for our lives. I heard the whip-crack of the TDs as they engaged tanks with direct fire. The heavy Fifty caliber machine guns were causing the German tanks to turn right broadside to the TDs on the rise where they had moved up from their hull down positions for direct action. Crossing point one was a shambles of burning armor and running men, many of whom attempted to re-cross the stream only to be cut down by artillery and mortar fires directed at their rear. The farm buildings disappeared in a cloud of smoke and rubble. German Grenadiers had made it to the base of our Rock pile and were crawling towards us. None of them made it! Sergeant Mack----- had been wounded in the gut, he stood waist high and tossed grenades down on the Germans until he was cut down. The second crossing point was in worse shape. In trying to get around the twisted metal of the first tank which had blown up, the second one ran over another of Staff Sergeant Fats homemade tank busters and exploded all over the infantry which had pressed close to avoid the deadly fires from our Rock pile. The overall scene was one of total disorganization, Germans scrambling for cover only to be cut down by our machine guns. Enemy armor had become totally disoriented by the smoke which the 36th Division's chemical mortar platoon tossed into the melee. A tank would appear on the fringes of that vast smoked in arena and would be promptly knocked out by a Tank Destroyer. Less than two hours and the battle was over. One TD had gotten five Mk IVs with six shots, a record which still stands. The second crossing was turned into a flaming junk yard as the meat-grinder of shells, and machine gun fire raked everything in sight. This was the deciding battle which caused the remaining German Forces to retreat beyond the Calore river and they didn't stop running until they hit the Rapido river where the battle for Cassino and the Liri valley would be the makings of another epic in which the Tank Destroyers played a leading part, a part which received little or no recognition when the Unit histories were written.

Infantry battalions of the 36th boiled down the slopes from the rise, closely followed by the Tank Destroyers , Weapons Carriers and support vehicles. The Germans were to be given the same medicine they had been dishing out for the past week. I began to take inventory, first of men, then equipment. The upper parts of the Rock pile had been drastically changed by the mortar and tank fire bombardment. Our Ranger platoon had been decimated and just three of the BAR men remained alive. Human flesh, sinew and bone can take a lot of punishment but doesn't stand a chance when placed in rock and rubble emplacements under intense shell fire. Our big bazookas and their men had been buried under rock which would not be moved except by blasting. There was very little equipment worth salvaging. I'll not give names to the men who died up here during these few hours which seemed a life-time. I don't know how the official reports indicated the loss of our comrades to this day. Slowly and painfully we gathered what little we could and began our descent. An infantry two and half ton truck had pulled up under the lee side of the bluff we had scaled on our rope ladders. A thin faced sharply dressed Captain and several medical corpsmen waited as we climbed down, the able assisting the disabled, the dead remained where they had fallen or were buried beneath the rubble. A low flying artillery spotter plane made several passes over the Rock pile and I could see an enlisted technician using a Speed Graphic camera taking pictures. We reached bottom and just sat there in a small huddle, some silent, a few weeping. This was our first real baptism under enemy fire, the first real loss we had sustained among our more than closely knit platoon. Fats, Tex, Grady, Sneaky had received wounds which would take them out for a while. I happened to think of the dummies we had emplaced, dressed in our class A uniforms and wondered what the German observers had thought as they saw this at dawn- no matter, they served their purpose to give us time to dig in as deep as we could. A discordant note was struck by an officious appearing G-2 Major who had been sent down from Division Hq., for, as he stated in a precise tone, an after-action report for the 'record'. I managed to grab Tex before he'd tried to brain the Major with a rock. I suggested to

the startled '~~Pogue-bait~~' Major that he get his ass back to our Battalion CP and check in with Colonel Van Pyland as I could not guarantee his physical safety at this time. He jumped in his Jeep and roared off up the defile and over the rise. We loaded up and left this place. Months later I read the after-action report and found no mention of our part in this crucial effort to assist in plugging the weak spot in our line. I did read about the TD which had bagged the five Mk IV tanks plus a Personnel and Ammunition carrier and that each crew member of the TD was awarded a Silver Star. We did not read about the dozen or more tanks blocked at the second crossing by Fats home made TNT mines, nor of the poor showing by the Division Engineers who had inadequately mined the first and expected crossing with the wrong types of mines, no doubt with the German observers watching every one they planted. No mention was made of the men who made up the Ranger Platoon, except a very short reference to the gallant stand made by the 143d infantry remnants who had been cut off on top of the Rock pile. The Infantry has been called the "Queen of Battles" and I have always believed the "King" to be that beautiful Garand M-1 Rifle. The later issues of this weapon were the top of the line! I'll never forget those hundreds of US Infantrymen moving so slowly over the rise and then practically dog-trotting down the hill in our direction, watching them as they crossed the Creek, up the hill and over the crest in pursuit of the fleeing Germans. Just as we were pulling out for the return to our CP, an artillery battalion was moving in from the opposite end of the valley. Aiming stakes, and ammo dumps, water and ration points; cammo nets and slit-trenches- all told us we were off the front line. Our wounded were evacuated to the beach aid stations and those few of us who were able, headed for the kitchen for hot coffee. I refused evacuation, had my leg and neck bandaged, then reported to the CP where Colonel Pyland awaited us. He asked me whether we had any hard feelings for being placed in the position we found ourselves in, and that even he hadn't been let in on the 'Big picture' by Division headquarters.

I wrote out a report which covered the salient facts and prepared a list of men to whom awards should be issued. I made up the KIA list and a brief summary how they they had been killed. The Colonel told me quite frankly, until the top of the Rock pile seemed to explode with all our weapons firing, he had written us off because not a telephone line remained intact. Our fire so disconcerted the German Staff that they had thought several heavy weapons Platoons were dug in on the Rock pile with other troops at the base in reserve. Also an interrogated German Recon Officer stated they wondered all night long about the 'Fool Americans' who had driven up in their trucks with headlights on, dressed in full dress uniform! Our previous MOS assignments had been Infantry and Artillery which gave us a damn good background for the anti-tank, later the Tank Destroyer role in which we participated. Most Armor units did not have this basic grounding in Infantry weapons. So much for the battle of La Cosa Creek, ~~which I'll also call La Cosa Creek,~~ and little or no recognition which the TD men received for their part in giving the 36th Division Infantry units their chance to break out and turn what could have been a defeat of major proportions into victory. I have read another version of this battle and this one failed to mention any Tank Destroyer units but did mention the heroic actions of the Division and 5th Army Tank units. Hells Bells! The Division Tank units weren't big enough or equipped to take on massed Mark IVs with their long barrel souped up guns! The 5th Army Tank units weren't within miles of La Casa Creek. The 45th Division which flanked the 36th had gotten so screwed up with the British units on their flank that they just dug in and held on. The TDs had a more powerful gun and a more maneuverable although lightly armored vehicle, and where it counted, the German tanks didn't have a prayer! I had always surmised and later knew for a fact that a strong anti-Tank Destroyer feeling existed among the Armored officers who graduated from the Armored training Force at Fort Knox, and there must have been a reason somewhere among the top echelon for relegating the TDs to a direct Infantry support role without the recognition they truly deserved.

One might ask, "What did happen to the M-10 Motor Carriage with its deadly 3" rapid fire gun? Well.... after the war practically all the M-10s were given free of charge to the French Army forces, and I ascertained many years later that M-10s were used to battle both French and Algerians during the war in Algeria. Historians and Unit History reporters are prone to overstating the accomplishments of the Units they're reporting on, specifically their own! Tank Destroyers to them were mostly lumped in with the exploits of Tanks with very little distinction being made. War photos showing the Infantry entering a town or city invariably showed the loaded M-10 TD right in the forefront.

PS: La Casa Creek's action brought 3 Silver Stars to the dead BAR men; 15 Silver Stars and 31 Purple Hearts to the Ranger Platoon which would henceforth be called (behind our backs), the Purple Heart Platoon.