

9 Jan 84

First I want to comend the people responsible for setting up and running the reunion at Ft Hood, they did an outstanding job.

I gather from reading the TDA Newsletter you do not have very much info. on the 636 T D Bn., so here is my small contribution;

1) Attached is the official statement of lineage and battle honors for the 636th at the time they were assigned to a Texas National Guard unit. So, our history lives on. Please note that the 636th was placed on the rolls of The Army of The United States, on 3 Dec 1941.

2) We were activated at Cp. Bowie Texas, about 60mi's from Ft Hood, and selected to^{be} sent to Hood as School Troops. The story has it that our Div Cmdr Turned down the request. Consequently we were one of the few Bns that did not go thru Cp Hood, We stayed with the 36th Div on and off for the next four years.

3) As for our weapons, we were issued the 75mm on a 1/2 track at Cp Blanding Fl. In the spring of 41. In Oct or Nov. of 41 at Cp Edwards Mass we drew our M10s. I might add here that our S3, Maj Austin, an engineer from Ft Worth, Tx., received the Legion of Merit for designing and building a counter balance for the M10, it was platform made out of angle iron and filled with molten lead, you will please note in the pictures of the M10 that the counter balance was not cast with the turret, but bolted on. We drew new M10s when we arrived in Africa and our Rcn Co was issued M5 lt tks. We kept these vehicles thru Italy and S. France (late 44) Then we drew M36s and the Rcn Co drew M8 Armd Cars.

One Very Small Unit of the 636th TD Bn.
36th Inf. Div.
Texas Nat'l Guard

"THE BIRTH OF A RANGER PLATOON"

Very briefly, during the initial landings at Paestum, the Platoon was debarked minus its light machine guns, vehicles and the lone M-10 tank destroyer which had been assigned to it. We did have two water cooled Browning caliber 30 heavy barrel machine guns minus the hoses and condenser cans, so at first opportunity on the way in from our 'Mother' ship we permitted them to slide gracefully over the side. We scrambled ashore during a hailstorm of gun fire directed at the beach head from all sides including the heavens o'erhead. It was a case of follow the leader and we somehow managed to crawl across the rocks and debris into the hollows of sand and stunted growth to a small drainage canal where we assembled and counted heads; all present and accounted for, except two men. The scraping noise which had been following in our tracks was now more than audible. I detailed several men to find out what in the hell it was and if enemy, kill it; bring back all IDs plus any weapons and grenades. This would be our first baptism as ambushers after the arduous weeks of training at the Arzew staging and training area outside the city of Oran in French Morocco, North Africa. We had spread out in a wagon-train circle, tight and close, facing all directions. We had sidearms, the reliable Colt 45, M1 carbines, several Grands and frag hand grenades. Our single bazooka had but one HEAT rocket. The several hours since the main landing force had fought its way inland to a stalemate seemed like several days. The beach behind us was cluttered with every possible piece of equipment; trucks, jeeps, tanks and tank destroyers; artillery with prime movers - all trying to head ashore and inland away from the murderous shell fire. Our ambush party returned, bringing with them, not bodies but several very nice German machine pistols and the identifications of the men who had carried them. I didn't stop to think about how these Germans had been bypassed or how many others were still around. We gathered our Platoon, divided it into six man squads, agreed upon certain recognition signals and started to belly crawl along the canal and inland where we eventually came to an out-fall which was practically dry; a large diameter drain which permitted us to move ahead on hands and knees into the dark interior. The smell of sour grape wine was heavy in our nostrils. The noise we made must have aroused all the

sewer rats in Italy. The drain became larger in diameter and we crawled into a stone lined conduit of some sort. I've never figured out the distance we crawled and later stoop-walked until we came to another enlargement in the conduit which permitted us to walk erect although slightly stooped. We could hear the muffled sounds of heavy firing above ground. We had been moving slowly but steadily inland for almost two hours. The sounds of firing had diminished. We came to a metal grating which seemed to have seen recent use. My single water-proofed flashlight was a god-send but the batteries were running low. I could hear voices to our front and overhead- speaking German. What to do now? I motioned two of our german speakers to the front and we decided to investigate before walking the entire Platoon into a POW camp. Moving slowly we entered what appeared to be a huge stone room filled with wall to wall casks of fermenting grape wine. We had crawled into an Italian winery and from the appearance of things, well in front of our own lines into the midst of the German army. Several tunnels branched off in different directions. I motioned for each man to check out a tunnel. The dim light from above gave us enough illumination to see where we were going and that was about all. First contact would bring us all together at the point where we had entered the vault like wine cellar which must have been half the size of a football field. My luck held and I walked right into a single German in the act of relieving himself. He was quickly dispatched and I took his documents, Soldbuch, badges of rank, a medal, a machine pistol with a bag of clips, several hand grenades and a beautiful fighting knife. I returned to the others and was nearly stabbed by one of our own. The German had come down into the cellar from a large door entryway via a raised platform, but I realized they had to bring these wine casks in from another direction. Surely we would find this entry and then attempt to make use of it to escape back to our lines. One by one the three tunnel rats returned; each bringing with him his share of the German Wehrmacht to include a live one, a prisoner, but what in the hell would we do with him? Oberleutenant GERD SHLISSMAN was one scared son-of-a-bitch! He spoke no english but came close to a faint when I spoke to him in excellent German. He agreed to assist us in leaving the winery by a 'back door' after darkness. He agreed to becoming a POW, and hoped we would kill him mercifully without torture.

Darkness once more and the third day. We had passed a day and a half in the winery without food. The water in our canteen bottles had been used hours past. The Rats of Tobruk had nothing on the Rats of Paestum! We determined to leave here at dusk. Our German POW was tied in a cat's cradle with a promise that we would first emasculate him before other more horrible things if he betrayed us. I had taken his IDs and pistol. He was my build, perhaps a bit heavier. I changed uniforms with him, forgetting for the moment that I would be shot as a spy if we were captured. The journey out of the winery through a veritable labyrinth of tunnels took several hours of slow going. We emerged from a hidden exit on the reverse side of a slope which appeared to be covered with German troops and equipment, all moving away from the beach area. We could discern the sounds of our 30 caliber machine guns and rifle fire from the sharp staccato bursts of the German weaponry. Our mortars and artillery were banging in all around. In the pre-dawn darkness we began to pick out a few stragglers. One by one they were killed. Their uniforms and equipment were taken by each of our Platoon. We could be mistaken for German soldiers except that we did retain our uniforms beneath the German uniforms we had taken. We decided to remain close together and gradually move away on an angle towards the advancing Americans. Until now there were no injuries or casualties among us. During the pre-dawn light we spotted an advancing American patrol. We called out to them and immediately received rifle fire as the patrol took off in the direction from where they had come. Like mad men we chased after them but they did outrun us. We topped a slight rise and spotted a German SP gun camouflaged in a field. There were a few German soldiers to be seen and we suspected others to be in concealed and camouflaged positions waiting for the Americans to come over the rise to their front. We determined to use our heavy 'artillery' the one and only bazooks rocket and I elected myself for the job. After all, Second Lieutenant's were less valuable than an experienced Platoon Sergeant! Staff Sergeant "Fats" Everett is one of the few I shall name; he agreed that I would be the expendable one; I'd take out the Self-propelled gun just as the American troops hove into sight over the rise, and the remainder of the Platoon would open up with every machine pistol and carbine they had. Things don't always go according

to plan, but this time the entire episode resolved itself just as the unwritten, unprepared script called for. The Americans, elements of the 142d Infantry advanced in small loose formations, supported by Artillery and Tank Destroyer fires. The self-propelled German gun turned out to be a 105mm gun mounted on a large half-tracked vehicle in addition to a bevy of emplaced MG 42s and numerous riflemen firing from prepared fire pits. The Americans received a withering fire in concentrated doses. One Tank Destroyer moving swiftly forgot his basic weave and fire tactics, running at full speed directly towards the SP gun and received a direct frontal hit. Then came the surprise! Three MG 42s and half a dozen machine pistols opened up on the German rear and flank. The startled Germans saw themselves facing men in German uniform firing directly into their ranks at close quarters. Out of nowhere a single rocket grenade slammed into the backside of the SP gun platform, disabling the gun, immobilizing the crew. Germans everywhere began to surrender with hands in the air. The advancing Americans took over with minimal casualties- however, the misfits of the Ranger Platoon were forgetting one important fact! They too were outfitted in German uniforms. Fortunately for them, a quick witted artillery Observer had noted the intense fire being delivered into the rear of the German positions, noting also the uniforms of the men who were doing the damage! I had been wounded slightly by a mortar fragment but managed to tear off the German Oberleutenant's jacket to reveal the US Uniform beneath. A mixed bag of forty nine prisoners was taken, excluding several of my cursing German uniform dressed TDers who finally managed through their choice epithets plus dog-tags and other ID to reveal themselves in their true colours. A post-mortem critique was conducted and the final identification was made by Colonel Van Pyland, CO of the 636th TD Bn, who stated, "Turn 'em loose! Those crazy bastards belong to me!" The tunnel complex beneath the winery was explored by the 36th Div., Recon ^{Troop} ~~Company~~. Much valuable OB information was obtained plus a cache of machine pistols, grenades, panzerfausts along with several very frightened communications personnel who were only too happy to furnish

additional information such as codes, radio frequencies, overlays for battle maps yet to be used by the Germans and an invaluable list of German forces dispositions to a depth of fifteen kilometers. This, the first of many escapades engaged in by the 636th TD Ranger Platoon earned a citation, two purple hearts and two silver stars. There were two casualties, one was 'Tex S---' who received a single well placed 9mm machine pistol bullet through the left cheek of his a-- and didn't know it until the action was over and he began to take off his German uniform. We learned a lot during those first hectic days and one most important thing, we learned to work together, rely upon one another, listen to ideas, and then abide by a final decision to go forward and do the job. Our many weeks of hot sun drenched training with no frills and few breaks in the Arzew staging area had paid off- BUT THIS IS NOT WHAT TANK DESTROYERS ARE TRAINED FOR?

As for myself, the fool stunt with that single bazooka rocket earned me the sobriquet, Bazooka Red, a name that stuck with me long after hostilities had ceased. I had been told that in order not to miss hitting that SP gun, I had crawled to within twenty feet of the damn thing and fired point blank into his gun platform with the rocket loaded, wired and ready for blast off. So much for a name! Colonel Pyland paid us the dubious compliment of a job well done, just as if this had taken place under his divine guidance. His words to the assembled Platoon several days later, "Well boys I don't know how you figured it out because not a damn one of you has seen combat the way I have, but the Regimental S-2 and S-3 have decided to give you a few of the harder nuts to crack!"

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