



*The 817th Tank  
Destroyer Battalion*

**Chapter XIII**

**Combat-Unit History**

**December 1944 to July 1945**



## CHAPTER XII

(cont'd)

Enough fell short of the target and close enough to the Battalion bivouac to make everyone regard them with more than idle curiosity. No one will ever forget their blazing trails of light or the eerie sound of their motors as they winged on a destructive path westward.

After eight full days at Schalkhoven everything was set, and when orders came to move on December 9th to the Hurtgen Forest sector of the 9th Army front, the Battalion was ready.

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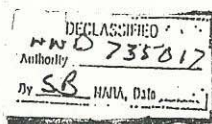
### COMBAT

December:

The month of December 1944 heralded the entry of the Battalion into combat. During the initial eight day period of refitting and readiness at Schalkhoven, the Battalion was alerted and unalerted several times. On the 4th of December an order was received alerting the Battalion for movement with the 78th Division, newly arrived in the ETO. This was under the 9th Army. Then orders came on the 5th assigning the 78th Division with this Battalion to the XVI Corps of the 1st Army. This change of units on paper was to be a common procedure, everyone was soon to find out.

Finally on December 9th orders came to move, not with the 78th Division, but to the V Corps sector and to be attached to the 8th Division. The Battalion moved out in a long, proud column, marching across the Albert Canal, down through Verviers and Eupen, across the dragons teeth of the Siegfried line, and into the Hurtgen Forest in the vicinity of Zweifall, Germany.

This initial combat mission had the Battalion attached to the 8th Infantry Division, with the mission of relieving the 893rd



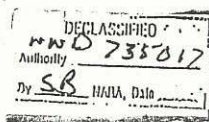
T.D. Battalion and the 644th T.D. Battalion and thence covering all possible tank approaches along the division front in the Vossenach-Gernsper-Hurtgen-Bergstein-Kleinham area between the Hurtgen Forest and the Roer River.

The night of the 9th December was spent in the eerie darkness of the Hurtgen Forest, the constant booming of Corps Artillery 155s and 240s kept almost everyone awake or touchy, while Major Rummele, Battalion Executive Officer, Captain Omenhiser of "B" Company and his three platoon leaders, plus Lt. Powell of "C" Company, whose platoon was to be attached to "B" Company, <sup>SP?</sup> proceeded to Bergstein to make a night reconnaissance of gun positions to be occupied the following night.

It was while on this reconnaissance that the first two casualties in the Battalion occurred. Lt. Schnieder of "B" Company was wounded in the hand by mortar fragments, and Lt. Powell was slightly wounded by fragments of an anti-tank mine set off by a passing half-track. Lt. Schnieder was evacuated, and Lt. Cannon, a recent addition to the Battalion, took over his platoon.

The next morning the Battalion Commander, Lt. Col. Bardes, went forward to the Command Post of the 644th T.D. Battalion with the company commanders and platoon leaders of "B" and "C" companies to establish command liaison and make arrangements for relief of the 644th that night. Later that morning Captain McKenzie and his two remaining platoon leaders went to Kleinham, while Captain Lowery of "A" company and his platoon leaders went to the vicinity of Vossenach, to reconnoiter for gun positions.

Most of this sector of the front was under enemy observation and intermittent, but heavy, mortar and artillery fire, so reconnoitering for the gun positions was not the simple task described in field manuals.

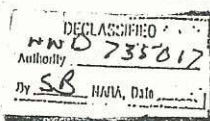




The reconnaissance completed, all platoon leaders, and company commanders, after a thorough baptism of fire and the ugly sights of the ruins of men and buildings caused by war, returned to their companies assembled in <sup>the</sup> forest. Just before dark the Battalion CP moved to a new location at Mulartshutte, near the Division CP, then under cover of darkness and amidst heavy fire, and even aerial bombing, the gun companies moved into firing positions on the night of December 10-11. By morning all 36 of the 3" towed guns were dug in and prepared for a determined stand. During the ensuing days all positions were constantly under enemy observation and fire, and the Battalion's two Reconnaissance platoons established observation posts to better the eyes of the Battalion.

The occupation of positions was an exceedingly hazardous undertaking and Division and T.D. Group staff officers were amazed that it was accomplished without loss of personnel or equipment. The terrain was particularly rocky and a severe blizzard was raging all the time; particularly in Kleniheta and Bergstein, <sup>every man</sup> was under mortar and "88" fire. In this area the enemy had each house, haystack, and road targeted in so there were no areas immune to fire.

For his outstanding leadership, displayed in this operation, Captain Omenhiser of "B" Company was awarded the Bronze Star Medal. The first display of heroic action came early in the dark morning of December 11th when Pvt. Crutcher of "A" Company entered an unmarked minefield while gathering <sup>(SP)</sup> revetment material and had his right foot blown off. Cpl. Stiven<sup>(SP)</sup>son and Pvt. Ambrose immediately rushed to his aid, but Pvt. Ambrose stepped on another mine and had his left foot blown off. Cpl. Stiven<sup>(SP)</sup>son tended to both men safely and brought aid through this dangerous minefield and had them evacuated. For their utter disregard for their own safety, both Stiven<sup>(SP)</sup>son and Ambrose were awarded the Bronze Star Medal.

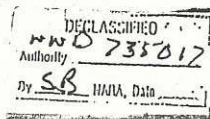


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While the gun companies and the reconnaissance platoons were daily sweating out enemy fire, the Battalion rear echelon had not forgotten them. An advance supply point was established in the forest just to the west of Hurtgen to facilitate the flow of rations, ammunition, and clothing to the men in the holes. The Battalion surgeon also set his aid station up at this point, within one mile of all company CPs. The Battalion rear echelon remained at Mulartshutte, but on the 15th of December, the Battalion CP moved to the vicinity of Germeter so as to be closer to the company CPs and facilitate control and communications. This move put the Battalion Commander and his tactical staff within easy reach of all company commanders.

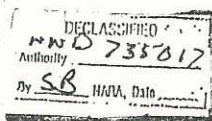
In the meantime, on the 13th of December, an incident occurred for which Lt. Col. Bardes was later decorated with the Bronze Star Medal. The action is best described in the words of the official citation: "On 13 December 1944 at about 0900 hours, the 817th Tank Destroyer Battalion received word that enemy infantry was infiltrating through our (78th Division) line in the vicinity of Vossenach, Germany. Lt. Col. Bardes immediately went to the 2nd platoon of Company "A" where the report originated and found two Non-commissioned officers of the 311th Infantry. Lt. Col. Bardes assembled the personnel of one reconnaissance platoon who were digging M-8 emplacements in that sector, sent a message to the CO of company "A" to assemble all available personnel in the CP area and immediately sent them to the platoon CP area and sent a message to the 311th Infantry requesting reinforcements. With a small force of approximately forty men assembled in the platoon area, Lt. Col. Bardes personally led the men to the area in which the enemy was reported to be infiltrating and sent out patrols to determine the direction of enemy fire and to locate the enemy.



The remaining men were employed forward and to the flanks as infantry. Meanwhile a reserve Company of the 311th Infantry came forward and took over the organized positions of the T.D.s and with the information furnished by the T.D. patrols, the infantry was able to move into the wooded areas and repel the enemy penetration. Lt. Col. Bardes had maintained constant communications with his platoon and company CP and by his presence on the ground was able to direct the T.D. troops and to advise the CO of the infantry company on the employment of his unit against the penetrations upon his arrival in the area." The presentation of this award was made by Major General Weaver, then commanding the 8th Infantry Division.

Tactically the situation remained static, but during the ensuing days all gun crews and reconnaissance QPs worked feverishly at further digging in and improving their positions. With concentrations of over 500 rounds of enemy fire landing in various company areas during several periods of short duration, no prompting was needed on the digging. "Dig or die" was the by-word. At the same time company, platoon, and battalion communication personnel were busy laying and repairing telephone wires, in all kinds of weather, day and night, and usually, in the company areas, under fire.

Notwithstanding the excellent gun positions and revetments dug by the men of the Battalion there were casualties in the Battalion. It was inevitable with the great volume of artillery fire that came into Klenihan, Bergstein, and Vossenach. "A" Company was fortunately in the area least fired into, but "B" company with the second platoon of "C" company attached, and "C" company itself, in Bergstein and Kleinham, respectively, took a severe pounding from the enemy. On the first morning in firing positions, T/5 Fink, T/5 Gilley, and Pvt. Mission, all of the 1st platoon of "C" company, in Kleinham were killed in action, or later died of wounds received that day. In addition to the killed, from the same platoon, Sgt.





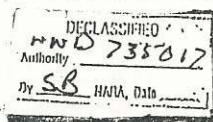
Piccone and Pte. Johnson were wounded by artillery fire and had to be evacuated. In Bergstein, Pvt. May of the 2nd platoon of "C" company was killed by artillery, but no member of company "B", in the same Bergstein area, was ever killed or even wounded. Down in the "A" company area, Pvts. Marco, Wray, and Greener were killed when they walked into a minefield near a knocked out American tank. All of the Battalion's casualties at this time were caused by artillery and mines and it was impossible to fight back against these enemy weapons. Everyone just hoped and waited for some of the enemy to put in an appearance so that they might fight back, but none ever came, and <sup>in order</sup> ~~it was necessary~~ <sup>it was necessary</sup> to carry out the Battalion's defensive mission, <sup>to</sup> just stay there and take it.

Each day, no matter what the weather or the dangers of enemy fire, the Battalion Commander and various members of his staff would <sup>to</sup> go visit the gun positions to check their protection and fields of fire and to do everything possible to improve the health, comfort and welfare of the men. The S-4, Captain Cornett, acquired overshoes for all men, which greatly reduced the threat of trench foot—a disease of the feet peculiar to the cold and wet conditions of the front at this time. To insure that all men in the "holes" had overshoes, the men of Headquarters Company gave theirs to the gun companies.

To add to the welfare of all, the Battalion's first pass quota sent one officer and eleven men to the 8th Division rest center at Eupen on the 16th. However this proved to be no rest at all for the threat of German Paratroopers as part of Von Rundstedt's Ardennes offensive sent the men out armed with carbines and rifles to scour the woods and check the roads. As a result of this German offensive there were some changes on paper, the Battalion and Division being transferred from the V to the VII Corps on the 19th. A similar change occurred on the 22nd when the Battalion passed <sup>to</sup> ~~at~~ the control of the XIX Corps and the Ninth Army. Still there were no changes on the ground.

Christmas had its good points and it also had its bad points. Turkey had been made available to all companies for a Christmas dinner at suppertime. Real turkey with all the trimmings was quite a treat. All during the previous day, Lt. Col. Bardes and Major Rummele<sup>had</sup> visited each company and platoon C.P. and all 36 gun positions to wish a "Merry Christmas" to all. As much as possible, every one did have a nice Christmas, although there were disappointments among the rumormongers when their biggest and best rumor~~ed~~, that Hitler was going to surrender on Christmas Day, fell through. But, before the day was over, there was a new mission to accomplish.

The pressure of the German counteroffensive was becoming even greater and it became necessary to shift some troops on this front. Soon after dark on Christmas night orders were received to relieve a part of the 772nd Tank Destroyer Battalion, to the north of Kleinham in the Gey-Strass sector. This extension to the north necessitated further shifts. While "A" Company remained substantially in the same positions, "B" Company withdrew its platoons from Bergstein and placed one in the Kleinham area, while the 2nd platoon of "C" Company reverted back to "C" Company. All three platoons of "C" Company then moved north to the Gey-Strass area and just before dawn of December 26th, completed the relief of the 772nd Tank Destroyer Battalion. In the meantime the other two platoons of "B" Company took up positions closer to the Roer river to the south of "C" Company at Bagheim. It was necessary for the platoon leaders of "B" and "C" Companies to reconnoiter for routes and positions in the dark and to literally sweep minefields with their feet. It was a hazardous adventure but again one accomplished without casualties. For the new set-up the 1st reconnaissance platoon established QP No. 5 overlooking the Roer River at Kreutzam and QP No. 4 covering the terrain between Bergstein and Bagheim. When everything was set, "B" Company had its CP at Kleinham and "C" Company at Gey. "A" Company's remained the same, in the forest, just west of Germeter.





While the original mission of the Battalion had been to support, with one company, an attack on Schmidt, and with the other two to hold off any counterattacks, the attack never materialized and the mission was actually converted to a defensive one. Now the mission of the Battalion was purely defensive. Deployed in depth along the northern flank of the Ardennes Bulge, the Battalion was ready to repulse any German armor that might seek to extend the "Bulge" to the north. None ever came, but the Battalion was always ready, not only in its primary positions, but with alternate and supplementary positions chosen and prepared for each weapon, from bazooka to 3" guns. Each day, of course, the gun positions were improved and communications and liaison maintained by each company with the unit it was supporting, "A" company with the 28th and 121st regiments, "B" company with the 13th regiment, all of the 8th Division, and "C" company with the 113th Cavalry Group which was attached to the Division.

Shooting down an enemy airplane is something which every man in the outfit wanted to do. T/5 Woodward of the 1st reconnaissance platoon was the first to do so. One day, 4 ME 109s showed up and straffed the road where Woodward was working near his M8. He first took shelter in a fox hole but after the planes had made a couple of runs he decided he'd had enough and dashed to the .50 calibre mounted on his M8 and let go a few bursts which brought down one of the planes and scared off the rest.

Perhaps the two luckiest persons in the Battalion were Capt. McKenzie and Lt. Kopelke of "C" company. On the 27th, as they were reconnoitering for new positions, their jeep was blown every which way. Neither officer was injured, other than a few scratches.

About this time of the month a number of changes were made in the officer personnel of the Battalion. Several new officers<sup>had</sup> joined the Battalion, with Lt. Hill and Jacoby going to "A" company, Lt. Cannon and Lt. Helring to "B" company, and Lt. Jordan was assigned as a liaison officer. On the 28th, Capt. Lowry was evacuated due to a recurrence of an eye ailment and Lt. Vogel, the Battalion reconnaissance officer, was given

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command of "A" company. Lt. Hofmann of "C" company replaced Lt. Vogel on the staff and Lt. Coburn took over Lt. Hofmann's platoon on December 30th.

The month closed with all companies improving their positions. "C" company had a platoon of 57s attached and was emplacing them. Each company was given an extra 3" gun to emplace, and the reconnaissance platoons, in addition to digging in their M8s also had a German Pak 75 anti-tank gun to emplace and man. In all, the Battalion now covered a front of some 17,000 yards with 39 three inch guns, 1 PAK 75, and 4 M8s.

The month of December saw the Battalion come a long way---from the peace and quiet of the marshalling area in Schalkhoven to the thunder and death of the front lines. All men were now real combat soldiers. All had been under fire and had seen ~~men~~ wounded and killed--<sup>in the Battalion and countless others in the Infantry.</sup> with 4 dead and 10 wounded. The actual physical clash with the enemy was all that remained to come, but they were ready for it. Perhaps the new year would bring this about. Everyone hoped so for they had worked hard to prepare a warm reception for any German Panzers that might show themselves.

JANUARYJanuary:

January proved to be a completely static month, for the Battalion, for, with the exception of one of Ren's M-8's, not a move of a platoon, company, or Battalion installation was made. All of the 36 guns of the Battalion remained in their new positions established Christmas night.

This, however, didn't mean that the men of the battalion were inactive. On January 2nd, the Battalion Forward CP moved from the forest west of Germeter to the forest just west of "Purple Heart Corner" at Kleinhau. Log hutments were built for the CP, and for the quarters of all personnel. Of course, this move necessitated the relaying of miles of telephone wire and the communications personnel were busy for days. Each gun crew further prepared its position and its quarters, and where furniture and other luxuries were available, some of the dug-outs were made quite elaborate. The security crews had their machine guns dug-in and they prepared positions from which to fire their bazookas.

The order from Division in December which required that alternate and supplementary positions be selected and prepared for each crew-served weapon, was further amended and called for plans of withdrawal to be made and for a reconnaissance of gun positions to be made along the division northern flank, southern flank, and along a line in the rear running through Stolberg to Mulartschutte. The plan was made by Major Hahner, the S-3, and the reconnaissance made by Lt. Hofmann, the Reconnaissance Officer. When the reconnaissance was completed the battalion Commander and the Company Commanders inspected the positions that had been selected and made themselves familiar with the routes thereto.

To increase the density and depth of the well-built defensive front, the battalion received and manned two additional 75-mm PAK German anti-tank guns between January 1st and <sup>5</sup>th, one going to "A" Company and the other to "B" Company; also, by the 18th, nine additional three inch guns were manned, equally divided among the companies.

Higher headquarters desired to test the efficiency of a piece of naval materiel in the form of the 3" illuminating or star shell. In order to cooperate, one of "A" Company's and one of "B" Company's 3" guns, in depth positions, were taken out and surveyed in by division artillery on January 5th. The firing of these guns proved to be the sum total of the Battalion's firing for January, "A" Company firing a total of 14 rounds between the 6th and 19th and "B" Company 25 rounds between the 14th and 18th. Although these crews couldn't see the results of their work, they were at least gratified by hearing their guns go off and knowing they were accomplishing something active.



The two reconnaissance platoons, the first in the north half and the second in the south half of the Battalion sector continued their good work in January. From QPs just back of the infantry front line fox-holes in Vossenach, Bergstein and along the Roer they reported every movement and noise made by the enemy. From QP 5 a strange sight was nightly reported which later proved to be the fire trailing from the tails of V-2s shooting upward from the Reich's Cologne Plain and targeted for England.

The Battalion received a better quota of passes during this month and bathing facilities were increased. Every two days an officer and three enlisted men were sent to the Ninth Army rest camp at Falkenburg, Holland for 48 hours. On the 20th the first quota went to Paris. Arrangements were made by the Headquarters Commandant for 48 men per day to bathe in Stolberg at the city baths. This was quite a treat and meant that each man could get a shower almost once every 10 days. After a bath and a change of clothes, there were doughnuts and coffee at the Red Cross Canteen.

All during January the weather was extremely cold and snow fell in abundance. The slushy ribbons that were roads in December were now the frozen highways of January. Everyone improvised stoves and coal was issued to the various units. Each Company made improved feeding arrangements and hot "B" rations were served to all men at least once a day, and usually twice. Everyone could see now where the Tennessee maneuvers of a year ago were beneficial, for everyone had learned there something of how to keep dry, warm, and in good spirits.

Of course, the colonel and his staff were out daily inspecting gun positions and living conditions and seeing that everyone was getting along well.

Numerous advancements and awards were made during January. 2nd Lts Tally and Floberg were promoted to 1st Lt on January 2nd, and on the 28th Lt. Vogel, "A" Company commander received his "railroad tracks," as did Lt. Terry, whose job as motor officer under a new T/O and E called for a captancy. S/Sgt Powers of "C" Company's 2nd platoon received a letter of commendation from Col. Biddle (commanding the 113th Cavalry Group) for excellence of his gun emplacements and the selection of his positions. On the 11th, Tec Gr V McBurnie received the first award of the Battalion, other than the Purple Heart, when Lt. Col. Barden presented him with the Bronze Star Medal for meritorious service rendered from 24 August, 1944 to 12 November, 1944. Lastly Sgt. Altimore of "C" Company received the Certificate of Merit for meritorious service while the Battalion was with ADSEC.

The new T/O and E, already mentioned in the paragraph above, was dated September 1, 1944 and called but for a few changes in a towed T. D. Battalion. The principal change was that the prime mover was to be the T 41 (an M-18 T. D. with the turret removed) instead of a half-track, and all company motor sergeants were made technical sergeants instead of staff sergeants. In addition of course, the Motor Officer was to be a Captain.

Although the month is called static, there was still some danger and excitement. Enemy artillery continued to come in, one shell taking a toll of 6 casualties, including one fatality, Pvt. Barrile, of the 3rd platoon of "C" Company. It was not unusual for shells to land in the gun emplacements but so well were they constructed that no damage to personnel, guns, or ammunition resulted from these hits. It was when the men were in the open that the danger came. Mines too took their toll. On the night of the 25th Lt. Robohn and his driver Pvt. Midzinski were in a jeep that hit a mine, instantly killing the driver and knocking Lt. Robohn out. The vehicle started to burn and only the prompt action of Pvt. Giminski, who was following, saved Lt. Robohn from fatal burns and death. Lt. Crowley of "A" Company had a little fun on the 19th when he spotted a Kraut vehicle and trailer across the valley from Vossenach. He immediately reported it and through a complicated phone hookup, not knowing either the gun positions or his own relation to the gun target line, directed the fire so accurately that the fifth round of artillery knocked out the vehicle.

The best bit of excitement came on the 21st when 200 paratroopers were reported to have dropped just after dark in the vicinity of Untermaubach and Obermaubach on the Roer River. "C" Company had one gun directly overlooking Untermaubach and knowing this, Brig. Gen. Weaver, Commanding General of the 8th Division telephoned the Battalion Commander to determine the credibility of the report. As fate would have it, the wires were out so the colonel had Lt. Hofmann hastily organize a patrol to go to the banks of the Roer and get this information. The Colonel <sup>and</sup> Lt. Hofmann, <sup>with</sup> ~~and~~ the elements of the CP, <sup>including 1st Sgt. Ryan, 2nd Sgt. and 4th Sgt. Burkhardt, 5th Major,</sup> and Recon, forming the patrol, proceeded to Gey where Capt. McKenzie, Lt. Tally, and a few more men were picked up. Then they all proceeded in vehicles to the hills overlooking the river. Here the road disappeared in the glistening drifts of snow and it was necessary to march the last mile on foot. A strong wind was blowing and considerable fire was going both ways overhead. In addition flares were constantly sent up by the enemy making every member of the patrol feel quite naked and exposed. Nevertheless, the last gun of



"C" Company was gained, and while the Colonel remained there in order to get a call through to General Weaver to inform him of the situation, the patrol led by Lt. Hofmann and Lt. Tally proceeded into the town to the very banks of the Roer River. Nothing but friendly troops, and a maze of minefields and barbed wire were found so the patrol returned. In the meantime communications were established and the Colonel was able to tell the General of the true situation at this point.

Well, that was about the biggest excitement of the month. Daily the gunners waited for a Panzer to show itself but none ever came and you can't shoot something that doesn't appear. So, the battalion ended the month with 53 consecutive days in the lines, without having fired a shot, except the star shell, but only because the enemy didn't appear. Everyone in these trying conditions and positions may be proud of the high morale and excellent spirits of the Battalion, and may feel sure that no German attack could have broken through the Battalion's stout wall of well-manned, well-prepared, 45 three inch guns.



## February:

Just as January was a static month for the Battalion, so February was a month of movement, and also a month of comparative rest.

During the first few days of February, the Battalion remained in its same positions but everywhere in the sector one could see the preparations being laid for the coming big spring offensive. Heavy artillery moved up just behind Hurtgen and Kleinhan and the "Long Toms" and 8 " howitzers poured tons of shells into already battered Schmidt and other Roer River defenses. The snows began to melt and the roads gradually disintegrated into ribbons of slush. The massing of scores of tanks in the area further chewed up the roads, making them almost impassable in the Battalion sector. But, traffic managed to roll and soon the area was filled with tanks, doughboys, and airborne troops ready to jump off at the given signal and begin the long delayed drive into Germany. To the South the last vestiges of the "Bulge" had disappeared and there was no longer a threat there.

As this mammoth concentration of supplies and personnel mounted in the sector of the Battalion one began to wonder just what the Battalion's part in this great drive was to be. On the 5th, they knew. The Battalion was relieved from the 8th Division and was attached to the 99th Division, which was then located in the Bulge sector. Immediately Lt. Col. Bardes, together with his S-3, Major Hahner; S-4, Capt. Cornett; Hq. Co. Commandant, Capt. Edgar; Lt. Redden, Reconnaissance representative; and Lt. Jordan, liaison officer, proceeded down the traffic-packed roads to the CP of the 99th Division. After a long, cold, wet trip they arrived at the CP located in Hunningen, Belgium, where they contacted the division staff and the division anti-tank officer, Capt. McCullom.

It was planned that the Battalion would move to relieve the T.D. Battalion then attached to the 99th Division. However, the 99th was itself expecting to be relieved and enter a rest area in a matter of 2 or 3 days. With this in mind it was decided that another T.D. Battalion sitting idly by, would relieve that battalion attached to the 99th and that the 817th would, still attached to the 99th, proceed directly to the rest area.

February: (cont'd)

When this party returned to the Battalion CP in the Hurtgen Forest, they found further orders, in conflict with those already received and assigning the Battalion to the VII Corps. However, after a day of confusion caused by this conflict in orders, corrections were made by higher headquarters and the Battalion was to carry on as planned. However, Corps clearance was necessary to put the Battalion on the crowded roads and move it. In order to be prepared to move on a moment's notice the Battalion Commander gave orders for all companies to pull their guns out of position and for the S-4 to turn in the 9 extra 3" guns which the Battalion had. This movement of guns and concentration in company assembly areas was accomplished with a maximum of speed and a minimum of confusion even though gun commanders were confronted with the problem of getting their guns out through mud and slush, and in several cases under cover of darkness, for the enemy positions still had not moved, and the Krauts could still directly observe many of the Battalion's gun positions.

Road priority was finally granted the Battalion on the 10th and early that morning the Battalion was on the move. After sixty consecutive days in the lines with never a platoon or company relieved by another outfit, the Battalion left the lines and wound its way down the tortuous roads of the Hurtgen Forest, through the semi-destroyed German villages, back across the Siegfried Line and into Belgium. Here they headed for Themister, a small village just 1/2 mile west of the main Liege-Aachen highway, about 10 miles from Liege. Here began a short but very welcome period of rest.

Here at Themister everyone lived inside, the officers and men alike being billeted in the homes of the Belgian civilians. This was quite a contrast to the log dugouts so recently occupied.

While at Themister all was not rest. All weapons and vehicles were given thorough maintenance and overhauling and a 1st Army Ordnance Inspection showed that they were in excellent condition. A training schedule was in effect covering subjects which the men had shown a deficiency in during their stay at the front.

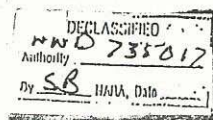


February: (cont'd)

There was rest however. Rest and recreation were well deserved and the men got it. Passes were authorized for Eupen and Verviers, and the Battalion sent convoys into Liege almost every night. Pass quotes to Paris and Brussels were also received and there was hardly a man who did not get to some recreation center. Of course, showerheads were available and everyone took advantage of them. Even the Red Cross finally came around.

Two ceremonies were also held while in Themister. The citizens of the town held a memorial service on the 13th, in honor of the Battalion's 9 war dead in the form of a Solemn Requiem High Mass in the village church. Of course most of the officers and men attended. On Saturday, the 17th, the village presented a colorful scene. The assistant division commander was to come this day to inspect the Battalion. For the occasion the villagers had cooperated by hanging out their Belgian and American flags. General Mayberry was quite impressed with the neatness and splended appearance of the men and in a brief ceremony in the village square, the general, flanked by two of the Battalion's 3" guns, delivered a short address and awarded several decorations to men of the Battalion. At this ceremony Cpl. Yeager of "C" company, Capt. McKenzie of "C" company, T/5 Slack of Medical Detachment, and Pfc. Olzak, Medical Detachment were awarded the Bronze Star Medal. After the general had concluded, the Battalion Commander spoke simply and impressively of the men of the 817th who had made the supreme sacrifice. Taps was sounded and with the fading of the notes the ceremony was over.

This rest was cut short however when orders were received on the 22nd relieving the Battalion from the 99th Division and attaching it to the 408th F.A. Group under the III Corps, effective the 23rd. This called for a move and on the 23rd the Battalion was again on the road, this time towards the long battered and recently captured Schmidt sector, overlooking the Roer River dams. While the Battalion was at Themister the Germans had destroyed the gates of these dams and caused a flood along the lower Roer, which was holding up the spring offensive in this sector. So, the Battalion had not missed any action during its rest. Now the Battalion was to take part in the offensive crossing of the Roer by firing indirect fire missions under the supervision of the 408th F.A. Group. Company "A" had positions in Schmidt itself, Company "B" just south of Schmidt, and company "C" to the west of Schmidt. All companies ran their own fire direction centers





February: (cont'd)

and the terms "splash" and "no fire line", among others, now were heard frequently in the gun company CPs and Fire Direction Centers.

While the gun companies fired, the rest of the Battalion was not idle. The two reconnaissance platoons furnished security for the Battalion CP, and also helped maintain the vital phone lines. Headquarters Company was busy supplying the 3" ammunition of which the Battalion fired 5920 rounds while in this operation. Artillery is supposed to be an easy job, but no one found the combination of grueling weather, enemy strafing, and incoming artillery, too easy.

So, the month of February, which first saw the Battalion along the Roer River ended with the Battalion again along the Roer but further south in a new sector, and in a freshly captured one. Artillery firing was not the Battalion's "meat" and everyone still hoped that the chance would come for some direct firing at enemy tanks or defensive installations. Perhaps that would come in March, especially now that the Roer River crossing was finally being successfully made during the last 3 days of February and all units were preparing to cross and advance further into Germany.

March:

March came in like a lion when orders were received on the first for the Battalion to spring into action. A T.D. Battalion is a panther-like organization and sitting idly on its haunches firing artillery missions is not to its liking.

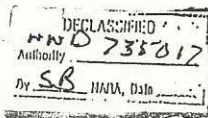
The orders detached the Battalion from the artillery and attached it to the 14th Cavalry Group, in order to support it in its drive from the Roer to the Rhine.

On March 2nd, the Battalion made its long awaited crossing of the Roer River at Nidiggen and began its participation in the celebrated advance from the Roer to the Rhine. "A" company and the battalion CP moved twice that day ending up in the town of Hochkirchen, where "A" company remained in reserve. Meanwhile, "B" company moved to an assembly position with the 18th Cavalry Squadron in the vicinity of Norvenich and "C" company went with the 32nd Squadron to Soller. Soon, all were to see action.

The "book" probably didn't call for the use of towed guns in this situation, but unorthodox but effective use of the towed guns by the spirited crews proved that towed guns could be used effectively.

On the 3rd, Captain Omenhiser moved his company into Gymnich and took up direct fire positions looking across the Erft Canal. That night Cpl. Namysnak and Pvt. Ball made the first killing and capture for the Battalion. Standing guard at their security outpost they saw four men moving towards them. The corporal challenged them. They stopped and froze in their tracks. Then, one of the shadowy figures hurled a grenade. Before the grenade hit the ground, Ball's tommy gun sputtered flame and death and one of the four men collapsed. Ball pulled the trigger again and another man fell. Instantly the remaining two raised their hands and shouted "Kamerad". What happened to the German grenade? It proved, fortunately to be a dud. So, after the incident, "B" company chalked up one Heinie dead, one wounded and a prisoner, and 2 healthy prisoners.

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March: (cont'd)

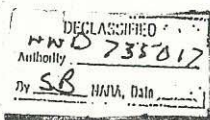
While all this was taking place, "C" company moved from Soller to Ahren, but encountered no opposition. Then, on the 4th, they were ~~ordered~~ to proceed to Liblar, where the "doughs" were still fighting the "Krauts". First, in order to get the towed guns in ~~to~~ the town they had to by-pass some of our tanks which apparently were hesitant about entering the town. This didn't stop the T.D. men in their thinskin half-tracks with their towed guns behind. The infantry's progress was being held up by an enemy pill-box. The TDs were called upon to destroy it. Lt. Powell moved two of his 2nd platoon guns forward. Sgt. Jahn, gun commander, and Cpl. D'Amicantonio, gunner, maneuvered the gun into a difficult position with utmost skill and shot AP into the point of enemy ~~resistance~~ <sup>resistance</sup>. The Krauts were quickly convinced that the place was too hot, and they jumped out into a nearby trench. They were soon finished off, when in a split second, Lt. Powell called for a mortar concentration on the position. This incident had all been witnessed by the Battalion Commander and he was quite impressed with this exceedingly good offensive use of the towed gun. This point of resistance neutralized, the battle moved on.

"A" company, originally the reserve company, had, meanwhile, moved into artillery positions at Pingsheim and was placing fire on German positions. They remained here until the 7th when they moved up on the road to Cologne (Köln) near Liblar. On the same day the Battalion CP. had moved into Köttingen along the Erft Canal.

Just a side glance at the big picture. On the 7th of March the 9th Armored Division of the III Corps of the First Army had captured the Remagen bridge over the Rhine so all of the well-laid plans were cast aside and new ones formulated to exploit this great achievement.

Two days after the Battalion C.P. moved to Köttingen, "A" Company moved to Dorf Pingsdorf for further artillery missions. The same day "B" Company, this time with the First Reconnaissance Platoon led by Lt. Redden, moved into Bruhl and "C" Company into Sechtem. To centralize its position with respect to the companies, the Battalion C.P. moved well up forward

45





March: (cont'd)

to Walberberg.

Opposition all through the sector had proved scarce-- Lt. Dushkin's Recon Platoon, on a foray across the Erft Canal had met none whatsoever-- and by the 10th the 14th Cavalry Group had completed its assignment by clearing its sector. The 817th was not to remain idle, however, for they were detached from the Cavalry and reverted to Corps control.

Orders were soon forthcoming and the Battalion moved to the vicinity of Bad Godesburg for an indirect fire mission with the 401st Field Artillery Group. This brought the whole Battalion up to the Rhine on the same day, although the Battalion Reconnaissance officer had been the first member of the Battalion up to the Rhine River, when he made a route reconnaissance to the Remagen Bridge on the 8th. Here at Bad Godesburg, the famous resort city where Hitler had conferred with French and British appeasement leaders in 1938, the two reconnaissance platoons established QR's along the Rhine and guarded the Battalion C.P. while "A" and "C" Companies took artillery positions in the hills to the west of the town and "B" Company prepared direct fire positions on the banks of the Rhine. Here the Rhine was only 300 or 400 yards wide. Too much exposure on his part cost Private Albanese of "B" Company a sniper's bullet in his leg. Indeed, "B" company's guns were so close to the water's edge that several of the gun commanders had merely to depress the tubes of their guns into the water to clean them.

While in these positions "B" company of course had the most fun and excitement for they could see what they were shooting at. They hit one half-track, 5 QPs, a large lodge housing enemy troops, and sank several barges which were reported to be housing snipers. The other two gun companies in the meantime poured round after round into enemy positions. Of course they couldn't see the damage done, but the aerial observers reported excellent results.

Headquarters company, and particularly its transportation platoon, was kept busy at all hours of the day hauling 3" ammunition to "A" company and "C" company.