

Following report w received from 899th TD Bn 12 July 1944.

Three for one in favor of a Tank Destroyer of C Co., 899th TD Bn. That was the score at a road junction southwest of ST JEAN DE-DAYE yesterday when German armor tried to break through the Ninth Infantry Division with Mark V, Panther tanks. They were destroyed by an M10 Tank Destroyer commanded by Sgt. Herschel F. Briles, Colfax, Iowa.

The first Panther was destroyed early in the morning while German infantry were attacking the 1st Bn. of the 47th Inf. Cpl. George A. Kegyes, Jr., Cleveland, Ohio, who mans the 3" gun was the first to notice the Mark V, but he didn't recognize it because of the shrubbery and branches tied on it as camouflage.

"Look at that hedge moving down the road", Cpl. Kegyes shouted to the destroyer commander. Sgt. Briles raised his glasses then shouted, "That's some kind of a \*JERRY' vehicle. Give him hell!"

The first shot was a direct hit on the side of the turret with a high explosive shell which shattered a large hole in the turret. By this time the target was identified as a tank, so the next round was an armor piercing shell which penetrated the bottom part of the turret, and the Panther started smoking.

Later Jerry tried to push another Panther by the crossing, but it was hit in the suspension system and ran into the ditch and overturned. The crew was taken care of by the supporting infantry.

Late in the afternoon the third Mk V was noticed by the assistant gunner, Pvt. Emmitt F. Murphy, Trumann, Arkansas, when it turned at the road junction and started in the direction of the M10.

The first shot was a direct hit on the front, but it ricocheted off the thick sloping armor for which the Panther is famous. The M10 fired again and so did the Mark V. The 3" shell hit the lower part of the gun shield and glanced downward, shattering the top plate over the driver and assistant driver. But that was the last round the M10 fired. It had been hit on the right front and was on fire, but with two fire extinguishers and a water can the crew was able to put out the fire.

The Mark V was smoking but just to make certain Lt. Glen D. Sweeten, Roger, Arkansas, ordered the second destroyer of the section, commanded by Sgt. Fonda B. Fisher, Gand Valley, S.D., to finish off the smouldering tank. It took two round to set the Panther ablaze.

Later in the afternoon the 1st Platoon of C Company, 899th, destroyed two more Mk V's as they came over a hill to attack our infantry. Both were destroyed before they could return a shot.

The three Panthers destroyed by Sgt. Briles's destroyer gave his crew a total of five(5) enemy tanks. Two Mk IV's in Tunisia, and three (3) Mk V's in Normandy.

By Clarence L. Heckethorn  
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HEADQUARTERS, SECOND INFORMATION  
AND HISTORICAL SERVICE  
APO # 830 - U.S. ARMY

*May. Heckethorn  
arty. Sect.*

15 December 1944

PANZER COUNTERATTACK

at LE DESERT, 11 July 1944

(All map references in this narrative -- FRANCE 1/25,000, ST. JEAN DE DAYE. Sheet No. 34/16 N.W. See sketch "A" appended, also.)

First serious counter-thrust to hit the American invasion forces after they had successfully crossed the Normandy beaches came during the first hours of 11 July 1944. In the "boisage" terrain that surrounds the village of ST. JEAN DE DAYE, nine miles south of ISIGNY, the Panther tanks and grenadiers of the SS PANZER LEHR Division -- one of the top-ranking Panzer units in the enemy's mobile reserve -- struck in an attempt to split the junction of the OMAHA and UTAH beachheads. Initial objective of this counterattacking force, later learned from an enemy PW, was to secure and hold St. JEAN DE DAYE.

Taking advantage of an exposed flank, the well-camouflaged armor and rifle troops of the Panzer Division slipped into the sector of the Ninth US Inf Div, and were repulsed only after 18 hours of confused and bitter fighting. Prominent in the counter-action were the M-10 tank-destroying vehicles of A and C companies, 889th TD Bn, who had fought German armor in the North African, Tunisian, and Italian campaigns. Unit citations were won by A and C companies for their part in this action. (as of 11 Dec. 1944)

MAJOR CLARENCE A HECKETHORN, then a captain commanding C company of the tank destroyers, circulated amongst the platoons of his company (attached to the Ninth's 47th regiment) during the action. His observations, notes and comments provide an accurate source of information on this action in which tank and anti-tank tactics were tested by fire. This is HIS story.

Prelude to this action was the crossing of the VIRE ET TAUTE canal by the 30th US Inf Div on 9 July 1944. This division forced a bridgehead at 458779 in the face of heavy small arms, artillery and mortar fire, then hammered its way southward, securing the village of ST. JEAN DE DAYE.

The Ninth Division, resting in a bivouac area near CARENTAN after ~~its~~ its task of cutting the base of the CHERBOURG PENINSULA and the drive on CHERBOURG, moved on the 9th of July to an assembly area at 442803, arriving there at 2000 hours. There they waited for the 30th to secure the bridgehead across the canal. When ST. JEAN DE DAYE had been secured by the 30th, the regiments of the Ninth crossed in the 30th's wake with the mission of enlarging the bridgehead and pushing southward on the right flank of the 30th.

The 39th regiment was the first of the Ninth's rifle units to cross. With A company of the 899th TD Bn attached, this regiment moved south to ST. JEAN DE DAYE, and from there was committed in a southwesterly direction.

The 47th regiment, second of the Ninth's units to cross, followed the 39th, slipped to the west near ST. JEAN to take up positions for advancing on the right of the 39th.

The 80th regiment, in division reserve, crossed third. It went immediately to an assembly area in the vicinity of LES LANDES (765-435). C company of the 899th TD Bn was attached to the 47th regiment, and B company to the 80th.

COL. SCHMIDT, commanding the 47th, moved his regimental CP across the canal at 1800 hours on the 10th of July. (Route followed by the regimental echelon and the unlettered companies is shown in sketch "A") This CP was opened at 448754 at 1800 hours. Simultaneously, CAPT. HECKETHORN opened his TD company CP 100 yards to the west.

The first platoon of the C company tank destroyers was attached to the first battalion of the 47th; the second platoon to the second battalion, and the third platoon to the third battalion.

Terrain in the vicinity of ST. JEAN DE DAYE formed the transition between the flat marshlands that surround the mouth of the VIRE RIVER and the more hilly, multi-hedgerowed and wooded "bocage" terrain generally characteristic of the NORMANDY area.

The ample road net consisted of good but narrow third and fourth-class roads. These roads were lined with high-banked hedges which handicapped the enemy armor. One PW, captured after his tank had been hit and burned by a thin-skinned M-10 tank destroyer, complained bitterly about the unwise tactics his superiors had used in attempting to employ tanks in such terrain. He pointed out that the Panther had a gun that was very effective at great ranges, and at such ranges they were safe from "ambush" flanking fires that threatened them there at the corner of every hedgerow. The narrow "sunken roads" provided partial defilade for the big tanks, but they frequently got wedged into "tight" passages, and found that the high hedges restricted the firing of their long-barrelled 76 mm. cannon.

#### Q COMPANY'S PART IN THE ACTION

It was 1605 hours when CAPT. HECKETHORN arrived in the area which was to be the new regimental CP. As he reconnoitered for his company CP, he visited the 47th's PW enclosure to obtain any recent information from the interrogators. One of the officers in charge showed HECKETHORN the prisoners. "These are a much better German than we have been fighting," he pointed out.



### PANZER THREE

A few minutes after his visit to the PWE, HECKETHORN sent the following message to the CO of the 899th TD Bn, MAJ. HOYT K. LORANCE. "Situation changing slowly -- Artillery, mortar and small arms fire has been heavy, so heavy that Bn CO's believe it is our own falling behind our lines."

This conviction had been noted by the captain during a meeting of the battalion commanders that had been called at 1615 hours by COL. SCHMIDT. During the meeting they complained of the artillery, expressed the opinion that it was some of our own fire. They were also disturbed by the traffic congestion in the regimental area. Vehicles of the 3rd Armored Div and the 703rd TD Bn formed most of these road snarls.

Last message that CAPT. HECKETHORN sent to MAJ. LORANCE at battalion on the 10th of July was transmitted at 2315 hours. It read; "No. 7 - PW reports enemy withdrawing to 458701. Expects help of DAS REICH (division) tomorrow." This, the first indication of a Panzer counterattack, resulted from one of the company commander's routine visits to the PWE to ascertain recent information from the interrogators there.

As darkness came on the evening of the 10th, elements of the 47th's third battalion found that their advance had progressed more rapidly than had that of the 39th regiment on their left. An exposed flank or gap was thus left unguarded between the left flank of the 47th and the right flank of the 39th. (see sketch "A")

Shortly after 2000 hours, COL. SCHMIDT, CO of the 47th, voiced his concern over this weak-point to the CO of his third battalion, LT. COL. CLAYMAN. And in an effort to cover this flank, one rifle company from the third battalion was assigned the mission of covering it -- a distance of approximately 1800 yards.

Shortly after 0300 hours on the 11th of July, CAPT. HECKETHORN was awakened by his first sergeant, SGT. GORDON O. PAGE, who told him that enemy infantry was infiltrating in the vicinity of the TD company's third platoon, 400 yards south of the regimental CP. The sgt also said that elements of the 47th's regimental anti-tank security had just withdrawn towards the CP, reporting heavy small arms fire near the cross roads guarded by the four M-10's of HECKETHORN's third platoon.

"There was evidently some misunderstanding in the anti-tank coordination with the regiment's AT company," said HECKETHORN in commenting upon this turn of events. "We expected the AT people to cover a crossroads at 443746, which was about 200 yards to the south of my third platoon's position."

"But when they started to withdraw we found that they had been in position about 150 yards to the west of the road junction that our third platoon was covering." He added that this failure of coordination was undoubtedly the result of the third battalion's AT officer, 1/LT. \_\_\_\_\_ death on 9 July 1944. The lieutenant had always been a mainstay in coordinating anti-tank defenses with the TD people, but a sniper's bullet had gotten him the day before in CHARLEMAGNE.

HECKETHORN ordered that all the personnel of his CP be alerted, and directed a hedgerow skirmish line to be organized just south of his CP. Having done this, he radioed LT. GLEN SWEETEN, leader of the third platoon on SCR "600 series" channels to determine the situation in SWEETEN's area. The lieutenant told him that there was a lot of small arms fire in the vicinity, but that it was "nothing to get excited about"; that he intended to hold fast.

At 0310 hours, the 899th TD Bn's CO sent the following message to HECKETHORN. "Alert your company. Four enemy tanks going NE at 457734." This substantiated the previous reports received by the company that the enemy was infiltrating through the gap on the left of the third battalion. This tank warning had originated from the first platoon of A company of the TD Bn, attached to the Ninth's 39th regiment.

As daylight lit the scene, the extent of the infiltration by the enemy armor and rifle troops became more apparent. It was about 0700 hours when SGT. CRADDOCK from C company's third platoon came limping into CAPT. HECKETHORN's CP. CRADDOCK had been wounded by shrapnel in the face and hands. He reported that small arms fire continued in the vicinity of the crossroads, 400 yards to the south, and that as daylight came the artillery and mortar fire became more intense. He was sent to the first battalion's aid station, about 300 yards to the northwest, for treatment.

At regimental headquarters a flurry of confused reports on the situation to the south finally provided a discouraging picture of the problem that confronted the 47th.

Contact with the third battalion had been lost, and COL. SCHMIDT realized that this meant that the enemy had infiltrated between his leading elements and the regimental CP. Fortunately, he still had his first battalion in reserve, and at 0850 hours he directed that the first move from its reserve position to attack down the road 439753-439743-437736-435727. The mission was to contact the third battalion, secure the regimental front and ~~flank~~ left flank, and mop up the isolated spots of enemy resistance within the regimental area.

"It was fortunate that the CO had that reserve battalion poised for such a use," commented CAPT. HECKETHORN. "Usually, all three battalions of the regiment were committed all the time. I think that this was about the first time that one had been held in reserve. If it hadn't been there, we'd have been out of luck."

Twenty-four hours later, when the action had become more stabilized, members of the third battalion's aid station were able to give an accurate description of the enemy infiltration attack that had over-run them. The Germans came in with their armor from the direction of LE DESERT--on the "exposed" flank. Four-hundred yards north of LE PERREY, where the aid station had been set up, they came upon the medics and their patients. K rations, cigarettes and water were taken but they were reluctant to touch the jeeps that were parked near the aid station. The thermite grenades that had been taped to the steering column of these vehicles were thought to be booby traps by the Germans -- so they didn't touch the vehicles.

825-7101

## PANZER FIVE

When it became necessary for the enemy to cross any open ground, such as the fourth-class road at 436734, they would make a bunch of the medical personnel cross the open space before them. Then the Germans would follow, keeping the medics covered all the while.

Unceasing artillery continued to drop near the regimental CP. At 1045 hours one concentration struck directly in the center of the command post area, blowing up the S-3's 1 1/4-ton trailer that was loaded with maps and overlays. COL. SCHMIDT decided that his command post should move to the rear to escape this artillery fire. He sent his S-1 to reconnoiter a position near GOUCHERIE (448764), alerted his staff and the tank destroyer CP as to his intended move.

CAPT. HECKETHORN had just gotten the vehicles of his CP started on their way to the rear when his radio operator informed him that LT. SWERTEN had reported that the third platoon had just knocked-out a "large enemy tank at CR 443748." The captain sent his CP on toward the rear, said that he'd find them later, and went forward in his jeep to inspect the third-platoon's kill.

HECKETHORN went to the crossroads, 400 yards to the south. There he found that SGT. HERSHALL BRILES' M-10 had knocked-out a Mk V Panther. This, C company's first 'kill' in the NORMANDY campaign, was struck just as it rounded the west corner of the crossroads. It was carrying several German riflemen, while a few more moved alongside it on foot.

"It looked like a piece of the hedgerow as it moved forward," described SGT. BRILES later. "It had camouflage all over it, and it was difficult to tell that it was a tank. My crew had a round of HE in the breech. We shot that at it, and strangely enough it penetrated the thick armor on the left, front of the turret. The blast blew off all the camouflage and gave us a clear target for our next round of AP. The AP went through at a point about two feet below where the HE had struck. That's because we used the same range and deflection, but the AP round is heavier."

Closer inspection of this tank was later made by VII corps' AT officers. They found that the Panthers were covered with ~~semmerit~~ (an anti-magnetic, linoleum-like substance) which had a rippled surface to reduce glare; the green-gray color blended perfectly with the hedgerows. Over this was chicken wire supporting natural camouflage. The result was as perfect a camouflage as could be obtained.

Eager to get a close look at this first victim, CAPT. HECKETHORN attempted to approach the KO'd tank on foot. When he was about 60 yards north of it, one of our own fighter-bombers, evidently thinking that this German armor was still operating, slammed a 500-pound GP bomb about 50 yards south of the tank. These intentions of the friendly aircraft discouraged the captain from approaching nearer.

*Handwritten notes in left margin:*  
Capt. Heckethorn  
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"Those air people were fine, though," commented HECKETHORN. "They were bombing all that morning in the rear of our own troops. It was amazing the way they could pick out the German armor and leave our people alone. Later we found a Panther at 437736 that had been blown apart by one of those 500-pounders. We heard that a P-47 slammed one onto the ground about six feet behind this tank at 1245. The explosion just blew the whole stern of the tank apart."

"We found it wise to keep our air panels prominently displayed all day," said the captain. "That undoubtedly helped in preventing the air people from making mistakes."

It was about 1115 hours when the company commander returned to the third platoon's position. There he was given a radio message that had just been received over the radio in his jeep. It was from the TD Bn headquarters. It warned of enemy tanks accompanied by infantry that had been seen near the town of LA SCHELLERIE (456747), and that they were proceeding in a northerly direction.

The captain later learned that this warning had been picked up by one of the 610 radios that the battalion used to monitor the channels of the division's air OP sub planes. This was a handy arrangement for making the battalion's tank-warning net more effective.

Making a quick map reconnaissance, the company commander decided that a bridge to the north of LA SCHELLERIE at 453753 was the critical point from which to challenge this new tank threat. He ordered S/SGT. CARL P. THORNTVEIT (now a 2/Lt.) to take the first section (two M-10's) and the 10-man security section of the third platoon and proceed north to cover this key bridge. This left LT. SWEETEN with two M-10's at the third platoon's position.

"There were no rifle troops up in that area," explained CAPT. HECKETHORN. "That's why I gave SGT. THORNTVEIT the security section. He was on his own in holding that bridge."

It was about 1130 when the captain turned his jeep towards the north to find the new location of the regimental CP. Two hundred yards north of the third platoon he found that a jeep and trailer, carrying ammunition, had been hit by artillery and were burning. This necessitated his detouring back through the third platoon, and up the road net to the west and north. (see sketch "A")

Arriving at the new CP, HECKETHORN was told by the regimental executive, LT. COL. EASTBURN, about the tank warning from the division's air OP in the vicinity of LA SCHELLERIE. He told the colonel that he knew of the situation there, and described his move in detailing one section of the third platoon to cover the bridge.

"Swell!", said EASTBURN. "That's just what we wanted."

Neon found the first battalion of the 47th half way to the third battalion. Moving in a column of companies, they were sweeping down the road that was their axis of advance (see sketch "A") with the leading rifle company deployed on both sides of the road -- the rest of the battalion following in column. Two M-10's from C company's first platoon were moving in the interval between the first and second companies-in-line. While the remaining two M-10's marched in the column interval between the third and fourth companies.

At 1330 hours, as HECKETHORN munched a K ration at his CP, a second radio message came in from LT. SWEETEN's third platoon. "Two more Mk V's KO's. One M-10 lost." The captain immediately left in his jeep to see the latest victims of the two M-10's that had regined at RJ 444749.

LT. SWEETEN described the action to HECKETHORN upon his arrival at the third platoon. Hero of the action was SGT. HERSHAL/ BRILES.

BRILES had been out of his M-10, moving along the hedgerow in the direction of the Panther that had already been knocked-out at the crossroads. He was about 35-40 yards from his vehicle when he heard his crew yell, "Hey Briles! Look out!" Looking up he saw the turret of another Mk V that somehow had crept by the first 'kill' and was moving in towards the third platoon. He was almost directly in the line-of-fire between his own M-10 and the enemy tank. He signalled his crew to open fire, yelled "Go ahead - Fire!" and dove into the shallow ditch that runs along the hedgerow at this point.

The heavy armor of the Mk V almost nullified the high velocity of the M-10's three-inch gun, even at this exceptionally short range of 120 yards. It took five rounds to 'kill' the Panther. The first AP round ricocheted off the bow armor. The second, too, was a ricochet, but it was deflected downwards after striking the cannon mantle on the enemy's turret, penetrated the drivers' compartment.

Simultaneously with the strike of this second round, the Mk V fired at the M-10. This round slammed through the entire length of the tank destroyer, finally was deflected down and into the ground as it struck the motor mounted in the stern. PRIVATE BRODT was killed instantly by it, and CPL. KEGYES and PFC WILLIAM M. MURPHY were wounded.

Seeing that BRILES' M-10 had been hit, SGT. <sup>Fondt</sup> FISHER -- on the opposite side of the road -- commanded his M-10 to open fire. His first round, the fourth to strike the Panther, was a ricochet; and the fifth slammed through the under section of the bow armor, setting fire to the ammunition and finishing off this tank.

As SGT. FISHER watched his killing blow strike home, he spotted some more movement to the south. It was about ten yards beyond the remains of the first Panther. He fired about ten rounds at the obscure target, later found that it was another -- the third -- Panther. The M-10's fire had torn into the tank's suspension system and it had been run up against the bank on the east side of the road. It was in good condition, and the TD's crew kept it covered with fire for the rest of the action, in order to allow the ordnance people an opportunity to closely study the mechanics of an undamaged Panther.



## PANZER EIGHT

BRODT's death was the first instantaneous death that C company had had during their work in the Tunisian, Italian and Normandy campaigns. *(Some died days after being wounded and others were injured seriously, however).*

"That broke our streak of luck," commented CAPTAIN HECKETHORN. "From that day on we took casualties more heavily than we ever had previously."

SGT. BRILES, after crouching in a ditch for a moment, saw the German tank fire just as it was hit from the second round from his M-10. Later he said that in his estimation, the AP round fired the enemy cannon. Crawling up to see if the Panther had scored a hit with its single round, he saw his own tank burst into flame. Two of the three occupants, CPL KEGYES and PFC MURPHY, jumped out of the tank. Both of them were wounded.

Making an instantaneous decision, BRILES started back towards the burning vehicle in a running crouch. As he scuttled along the side of the hedge he resolved that the M-10 had to be saved. Leaping onto the blazing vehicle, he groped through the flames for the fire extinguisher which hung on its bracket inside the open turret. When this extinguisher was spent, he dashed over to SGT. FISHER's M-10, borrowed another extinguisher, and returned to complete the dousing of the fire.

BRILES' prompt action in the face of heavy enemy fire, prevented serious damage to the vehicle. For this act of gallantry he received the Silver Star.

It was about 1500 hours when CAPT. HECKETHORN completed his observations of the action at the third platoon's area, and returned to the regimental headquarters. As he arrived at his CP he found that another message had been received shortly after he had left to investigate the action described above.

"Three Mark V's knocked-out at 440744," it read. It was from LT. WILL's first platoon -- the one that had been advancing with the relief column of the first battalion on its way to make contact with the third battalion.

At first CAPT. HECKETHORN thought that through some misunderstanding the M-10's of the first had observed the three kills of the third platoon, and after shooting at them had reported them as their own 'kills'. The coordinates that accompanied the message indicated the tanks to be in the same general locality as the ones that SGT. BRILES' and SGT. FISHER's M-10 had KO'd.

He hurried down the road to check this last message, and at 1600 hours had ascertained that these were, in fact, three more Mark V's that had been shot up by the M-10's in the first battalion's column.

questioning the four crews of the first platoon's destroyers, he found that as the battalion had moved down the road in column (see sketch "A") with one rifle company deployed at the front of the column on both sides of the road; the members of the first two M-10's in the column saw two Panthers materialize from a lightly wooded area to their left front. The enemy armor started towards a group of houses that were on the left flank of the advancing riflemen's skirmish line. Before the tanks could flank the American rifle troops and open fire, the two M-10's blasted their three-inch guns into action, and knocked them out. CPL. DANIELS in the first M-10 was credited with the first "kill", and CPL. PHILLIPE ~~PHILLIPS~~ with the second -- both at a range of about 170 yards.

It was about 1445 when the three-inch guns of the destroyers accounted for these two tanks. One of the Panthers was split up the left side by an AP round that had struck the flank armor near the front corner. As the dust settled from this flurry of shots, one of the observers in the M-10's spotted some more movement on the fourth-class road to the east. Both M-10's opened up on it, and a third Panther was found sprawled against the hedgerow there about ten minutes later. All three of these enemy tanks had been blasted before they could open fire on the M-10's of the first battalion's column.

This was C company's sixth and final "kill" in the counterattack. In three hours and fifteen minutes, the tank destroyers had met some of the enemy's strongest armor -- had knocked out all six Panthers sighted, losing only one M-10 and sustaining three casualties.

Indicative of the enemy's attitude towards the effectiveness of the TD battalions and their tactics was the statement made three days later by a PW. This Panzerman had been captured after his tank had been KO'd by the crew of SGT. BRILES' M-10 in the action described above.

"The German tankers aren't worried by bombing," said this member of a Panther's crew. "But we don't like the TD's -- even though three of their rounds bounced off my tank before it was finally destroyed."

The first battalion continued on its way towards re-gaining contact with the third, following this last brush with the Panthers. No other tanks were seen by the M-10's of the first platoon that continued on with the column, but their three-inch HE fire was used to knock-out strongpoints built up around a few German automatic weapons that remained behind our lines.

"Before nightfall the first had hooked up with the third," described CAPTAIN HECKETHORN. "And everyone was more or less happy. A few remnants of German troops remained behind our lines, but they were shot-up as they tried to withdraw into their own territory."

*"A" COMPANY OF THE 299TH HAD KNOCKED OUT SIX MARK IV'S AND ONE MARK IV DURING THE ACTION FOR A TOTAL OF THIRTEEN ENEMY TANKS AND SEVERAL MACHINE-GUN NESTS, A SP. GUN AND PRISONERS (INSERT NOTE ON THE MOVEMENT OF THE 47TH FOLLOWING THE COUNTERATTACK)*

Capt. HECKETHORN offers the information that the second battalion of the 47th moved into the BOIS DU ROUSSET early on the 14th of July, to take an objective that had previously caused them some trouble & fear.

The S-2's of the division, regiment and battalions were convinced that the BOIS DU HOMMET was a hornet's nest of secret weapons and whatnot. Intelligence information had indicated that the Germans had kept a close guard on this patch of woods for the past three years -- allowing no civilians in the area. However, the second battalion of the 47th, accompanied by the 2nd platoon of C company 89th TD Bn, swept through the woods on the next day with little trouble. Only opposition ~~was~~ was a few German infantrymen who had become separated from their outfits and had hidden there.

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*This is the draft of an article I wrote long ago relative to the Panzer Counter-attack on July 11, 1944, and ~~other~~ subsequent events. You may find some of the comments useful.*

It was July 9, 1944. The 899th Tank Destroyer Battalion was in an assembly area in the southeastern sector of the Cotentin peninsula, Normandy. The men and officers of this veteran unit were enjoying their first rest since the D-Day landings on Utah Beach.

The 899th, the first T. D. battalion to land in France, had fought with six different divisions from June 6 to July 2. It had been in the line continually with the Fourth Division, 82nd Airborne, 90th, 101st Airborne, 79th, and finally was attached permanently to Major General Manton S. Eddy's Ninth Infantry Division.

The T.D. battalion, which had a major part in <sup>stopping</sup> Rommel's Tenth Panzer Division at El Guettar, North Africa and fought briefly in Italy, had expected to meet the famous panzer divisions in Normandy. Instead it had destroyed only a few scattered Mark III's and Renault tanks. The M-10 tank destroyers had provided close support to the infantry units, using their three-inch guns as assault artillery against pillboxes and fortifications on Utah Beach, across the Cotentin peninsula, and the landward front surrounding the seaport of Cherbourg.

*This battle occurred March 23, 1943.  
"B" Company of the 899th took a beating the morning of that day.*

Panzer units, equipped with powerful Mark VI Royal Tigers and sleek Mark V Panthers, had been encountered by the British and Canadians, but the Americans, in Normandy, had yet to meet a German heavy tank.

But they didn't have long to wait!

Movement orders came late in the afternoon of July 9 for the 899th to pass through the city of Carentan and occupy an area near St. Jean de Daye, which that day had been taken by the 30th U. S. Infantry Division. The 899th occupied positions with the three regiments of the Ninth--"A" Company with the 39th Infantry, "B" Company with the 60th, and "C" with the 47th.

At 1600 hours on the following day the regiments, with their attached tank destroyers, moved two miles forward in a southeasternly direction. There they came under small arms fire and heavy artillery and mortar fire.

Simultaneously the elite Panzer Lehr Division, which had clashed with three crack British divisions in the battle for Caen, was moving west from the Tilly area en route for St. Jean de Daye. Thus the curtain was soon to rise on the first American-German armored battle in France and the first serious counter-thrust to hit the American invasion forces.

Panzer Lehr was the pride of the Wehrmacht, and its initial objective was to spearhead a counter-attacking force and secure and hold St. Jean de Daye, and then to split the junction of the Omaha and Utah beachheads. At the time of the invasion, Panzer Lehr was at full strength with more than 1,000 modern tanks, <sup>(other,</sup> and tracked vehicles. Its personnel which had served as school troops, was handpicked and considered the best trained in armor tactics. Lieutenant-General Fritz Bayerlein, who was with Rommel in North Africa, commanded Panzer Lehr. Only one month prior to the invasion Colonel-General Heinz Guderian, Inspector-General of German Armored Forces, confidently advised Bayerlein,

"With this division alone you will throw the Anglo-Americans back into the sea",<sup>2</sup>

True, Panzer Lehr had been mauled by Montgomery's armored and Infantry divisions since June 8 when it arrived at the front. But it still was a powerful fighting force composed mainly of Panther tanks with their almost impregnable sloping frontal armor and long-barrelled, high velocity 75mm guns. The division also had numerous self-propelled guns and a few Royal Tigers which packed that famous weapon of World War II--the 88mm cannon.

darkness

With the approach of darkness on the evening of July 10, elements of the 47th Infantry's third battalion found that their advance had progressed more rapidly than had that of the 39th regiment on their left. An exposed gap thus was left unguarded between the left flank of the 47th and the right flank of the 39th. Shortly after 2000 hours, Colonel George W. Smythe, CO of the 47th, voiced his concern over this weak point to the CO of his third battalion, Lieutenant Colonel Donald C. Clayman. In an effort to cover this flank, one rifle company from the third battalion was assigned the mission of covering the gap--a distance of approximately 1800 yards.

But in the darkness of that damp and misty night, the grenadiers and two columns of heavy tanks of Panzer Lehr found the exposed flank, smashed through the American lines and over-ran the aid station of the third battalion, 47th Infantry. At 0310 hours, Major Hoyt Lorange, CO 899th, sent a message to his companies, warning them of four enemy tanks moving northeast in the area of the 39th Infantry's command post. The tank warning originated from the first platoon of "A" Company of the TD battalion.

A few minutes later "C" Company of the 899th reported enemy infantry infiltrating in the vicinity of the TD company's third platoon, 500 yards south of the regimental CP of the 47th. Unceasing artillery fire continued to drop near the tank destroyers in defensive positions covering the narrow, sunken roads that extended along the side of the hedgerows. Artillery fire also fell in the vicinity of the 47th's CP, and one concentration struck directly in the center of the CP area.

<sup>2</sup>From Invasion--They're Coming by Paul Carell, translated by E. Osers. Copyright 1963 by George C. Harrap & Co., Ltd. and E. P. Dutton, Inc. Reprinted by permission of the Publisher, E. P. Dutton, Inc.



blowing up the S-3's one-quarter ton trailer loaded with maps and overlays. Colonel Smythe ordered the CP moved farther to the rear. At this point the extent of the infiltration by Panzer Lehr became apparent. A flurry of confused reports reached regimental headquarters, providing a gloomy picture of the difficult task confronting the 47th, and ~~contact with the third battalion had been lost.~~

As the hazy overcast was lifting from the area, one of the gun crews of Lieutenant Glen Sweeten's third platoon of "C" Company noticed some movement to its front. Part of the hedgerow at the crossroads appeared to be moving. A high explosive round was in the breech, and the gunner aimed and fired. The blast blew off the camouflage and revealed a tank, while providing a clear target for the next round of armor piercing ammunition. The AP projectile penetrated the side of the Mark V Panther, marking the first "kill" for "C" Company.

By mid-morning the overcast had passed, and out of the clouds came P-47 fighter-bombers, their crews scanning the hedgerows for targets. They bombed and strafed throughout the day. The destroyer crews had displayed their brilliantly colored orange panels, and the pilots were able to pick out targets from among the mass of German and American troops and equipment. It was a masterpiece of coordination between the <sup>UNITED STATES</sup> American air force and ground troops. Later it was learned that a mile south of "C" Company's positions fifty more German tanks were waiting to exploit the breakthrough that never came. They were discovered and given a thorough blasting by the fighter-bombers.

At 1300 hours, Lieutenant Sweeten's platoon reported two more Panthers knocked out. Hero of the action was Sergeant Herschel F. Briles, who had won a Silver Star at El Guettar in the Tunisian campaign. / Briles was out of his M-10 reconnoitring along the hedgerow in the direction of the Panther that had already been knocked out at the crossroads. He was approximately 35 yards from his destroyer when he heard his crew yell, "Briles! Look out!" Looking up he saw the turret of another Mark V that somehow, had crept by the first "kill" and was moving in towards the third platoon.

Sergeant

/Briles was in the line-of-fire between his own M-10 and the enemy tank. He signalled his crew to open fire and dived into the shallow ditch that ran along the hedgerow.

The heavy sloping frontal armor of the Panther nearly nullified the fire of two destroyers' three-inch guns even at the exceptionally short range of 120 yards. It took five rounds to finish the Mark V. The first two rounds ricocheted off the bow armor. The third also was a ricochet, but it was deflected downwards after striking the cannon mantle on the Panther's turret and penetrated the driver's compartment.

Simultaneously, with the strike of the third round, the Panther fired at the M-10. This round slammed through the entire length of the destroyer, finally deflecting down into the ground after passing through the motor mounted in the stern.

Seeing that Sergeant Briles' M-10 had been hit, Sergeant Fonda Fisher, on the opposite side of the road, commanded his crew to open fire. The first round, the fourth to strike the Panther, was a ricochet, and the fifth penetrated the under section of the bow armor, setting fire to the ammunition.

As Sergeant Fisher watched his finishing blow strike the Panther, he spotted some more movement to the south. It was about ten yards beyond the first Panther at the crossroads. Ten rounds were fired at the <sup>camouflaged</sup> obscure target. Later it was discovered that the M-10's fire had torn into the suspension system of another Mark V, and it had run up against the bank on the east side of the road.

Sergeant Briles, after crouching in the ditch for a moment, saw the German tank fire just as it was hit by the third round from his M-10. Crawling along the ditch to see if the Panther had scored a hit with its single round, he saw his own destroyer burst into flames, and two of the three remaining crew members, both wounded, jumped out of the M-10.

Sergeant Briles started back to the burning vehicle in a running crouch, realizing there was another member of his crew in the burning destroyer. He leaped on the blazing vehicle, found the fire extinguisher hanging on its bracket inside the turret and sprayed the flames. When this extinguisher was spent, he dashed over to Sergeant Fisher's destroyer, got that extinguisher and finished the job, but he found the remaining crew member was dead. The destroyer was saved, and most of its parts were salvaged ~~by the ordnance people.~~

While Lieutenant Sweeten's platoon was blasting Panthers, the first battalion of the 47th was advancing south to make contact with the third battalion, which had been separated from the regiment the night before. Moving in a column of companies, the first battalion was sweeping down a road that formed the axis of advance. The leading rifle company was deployed on both sides of the road, while the rest of the battalion followed in column. Two M-10's were positioned in the column interval between the third and fourth companies.

As the battalion moved along the road, crews of the first two M-10's saw two Panthers charge out of a lightly wooded area to their left front. The tanks started toward a group of <sup>buildings</sup> farm / that were on the flank of the advancing riflemen's skirmish line. Before the Panthers could open fire, the two M-10's fired their three-inch guns and knocked out both tanks. Seconds later, the M-10 crews observed some movement on a narrow fourth class road to their left flank. Both TD's opened up, and a third Panther was finished before it could fire.

This was "C" Company's sixth and final "kill" during the first day of the German counterattack. In less than four hours the tank destroyers had knocked out six Panthers and one machine gun nest, losing only one M-10 and sustaining three casualties.

"A" Company of the 899th, which had been fighting with the 39th Infantry had a slightly more impressive performance. The three platoons of "A" Company destroyed six Panthers and one Mark IV tank, one self-propelled 75mm gun, three machine gun nests and two anti-tank emplacements. "A" Company suffered four casualties.



It had been an exceptionally good day for the Ninth Division and the tank destroyers. By evening the first battalion had linked up with the third battalion of the 47th Infantry, and the front was stabilized.

For this action, "A" and "C" companies were awarded Presidential Unit Citations for "extraordinary heroism and outstanding performance of duty".

*I understand  
you have  
a copy  
of this  
citation*

Company "B" missed most of the tank action, being attached to the 60th Infantry Regiment in reserve, but this company collected its toll on the following days. The 60th moved into the attack July 13 and spearheaded a drive to the south. In the fighting, "B" Company destroyed four Panthers, five Mark IV's, two self-propelled 75mm guns, nine anti-tank guns and captured more than a hundred prisoners. *DURING THIS PERIOD,* ~~In this action,~~ "A" and "C" Companies knocked out two Mark V's and six Mark IV's.

The first front line bombing by U. S. heavy bombers was executed by the Ninth Tactical Air Force on July 25. This massive explosion broke the front wide open, and American forces surged into central France.

After the bombing, Panzer Lehr, as a fighting force, existed no more. General Bayerlein reported his division had been annihilated. And so on July 26 the once elite Panzer Lehr Division, which was to hurl the Anglo-Americans into the sea, was scratched from the German order of battle.

And the 899th...with the Ninth Division, it fought across France and Belgium and into Germany, through the Siegfried Line, the Hurtgen Forest, across the Roer and the Rhine and was in central Germany at the end of the war. Staff Sergeant Briles was the most decorated of all its members, having added the Congressional Medal of Honor to his list of decorations. He won the highest of American medals during the Hurtgen fighting for twice, within two days, risking his life under enemy fire to remove wounded men from their burning tank destroyers.