

## **History of the 6<sup>th</sup> Tank Destroyer Group - by Rob Haldeman**

1 – Sept 1942. HQ Company, 6th Tank Destroyer Group activated at Camp Hood, TX.

The Unit's Historical Record mentions September 16<sup>th</sup>, as the date of its actual formation. All men were transferred from other units. 13 officers and 48 enlisted men. They would later be numbered at 15 officers and 53 enlisted men. I would believe this number would change throughout the unit's time together. I have spoken to many families about their family member's military career's and many of them relate stories of being in other units. From the beginning, the unit was commanded by Branner Pace Purdue, a West Point Graduate who had enlisted and served in the 8th Infantry and the 1st Engineer Regiments prior to attending West Point. He is listed on the unit's payroll record for October of 1942.

8 – Jan 1943. Moved to Desert Training Center, Camp Young, CA

I have an article on the Desert Training Center, which tells of the history of the area and provides some good background into the conditions and atmosphere there. The article is from a British magazine called "After the Battle". In the magazine's issue #132, there is an article entitled "Patton's Desert Training Center" by Francis Blake, Dwain Oliver and Lt. Col. John Shaw Lynch. The 6th Tank Destroyer Group is listed as having trained at the center, the HQ of which was located 26 miles east of Indio, California. The center itself was stretched over a broad expanse of desert in southeastern California and western Arizona. The Group trained under Major General Charles H. White's IX Corps

July 1943. Camp Ibis/Camp Young, CA (Payroll Records)

31– July 1943. Transferred to Camp Maxey, TX and attached Third Army

Payroll records from December of 1943 identify an important change, which happened sometime late in 1942 or sometime in 1943. The unit's commanding officer Col. Branner P. Purdue was replaced with Col. Logan Carroll Berry who had been in the Tank Destroyer Tactics Center. Col. Purdue took his place in the Tactics Center.

16 - Jan 1944. Staged at Camp Kilmer, NJ

29 - Jan 1944. Departed from NY Port of Embarkation

While I have no "official" information regarding the ship that the men sailed in to cross the Atlantic, I have done my share of research on the subject. The website "WWII troopships.com" lists only one ship leaving on the 29<sup>th</sup> and ending up in England on the 5<sup>th</sup> of February....that ship was the Aquitania. It was one of the few ships that would make the crossing alone. Most sea crossings were done as a group for safety but the Aquitania's 23 knot top speed was a match for almost any enemy vessel. You may recognize her two sister ships, the Mauretania and the Lusitania. The Lusitania had been sunk in WWI. All three ships were part of the Canard line of luxury cruise ships. Many such liners were converted during war times to serve as hospital, troop and supply ships. At the end of WWII, the Aquitania was returned to the Canard line having steamed over 500,000 miles and carrying 300,000 troops. Dad remembered being under deck for the entire cruise, all windows being painted black or covered and allot of sick soldiers. You must remember for many of these men, it was their first experience on the high sea. Master Sergeant, Carl Butya of the 628<sup>th</sup> Tank Destroyer Battalion and Edward H. McClelland of the 773<sup>rd</sup> Tank Destroyer Battalion, both recall the Aquitania, the voyage and landing at the Firth of Clyde in Scotland, 6 days later. The 773<sup>rd</sup> unit history as written by T5 Harry Hunter Morgan states that the ship was only slightly disturbed by two Luftwaffe planes which were turned away by the ship's anti-aircraft guns.

5 – Feb. 1944. Arrived in England, moved to Camp Packington Park, England.  
10-April 1944. Departed Camp Packington and arrived at Dorchester, England.  
As you can see by the dates, the 6<sup>th</sup> was in the Dorchester area (Dorset County) for over three months. During that time they, along with the 29<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, they were put in charge of district XVIII of the Southern Base Section and the marshaling areas located there. The U.S. Army in WWII official "Green Back" History Book - Logistical Support of the Armies: May 1941-September 1944 by Roland G. Ruppenthal identifies that the staging of OVERLORD (code name for the Normandy invasion) proved by far the most complex feature of the operation, and called for meticulous planning and an unprecedented degree of coordination and control. On its U.S. side the operation involved the loading of 130,000 men in the assault, initial follow-up, and preloaded build-up echelons alone. After these forces were deposited on the far shore the buildup machinery was to move another 1,200,000 men across the Channel within the first ninety days. For an indefinite period thereafter it was to continue to handle whatever additional formations passed through the United Kingdom on their way from the United States to the Continent.

They were charged with a formidable list of responsibilities: locating and constructing concentration and marshaling areas, feeding and housing troops, waterproofing vehicles, issuing emergency supplies, planning the movement of troops, locating and constructing the necessary roads, embarking personnel, equipment, and supplies, preparing ports and approaches, providing paved parking for thousands of vehicles, supplying recreational facilities for troops during their stay in the marshaling areas, setting up aid stations and hospital facilities for the care of the sick and wounded, and operating depots and dumps for the storage and last-minute issue of supplies. Of the two base sections, the Southern had by far the more complex task. It had to provide the bulk of the accommodations for the flood of troops arriving in the United Kingdom from the United States in the spring of 1944, and at the same time it had to prepare for the mounting of all the seaborne assault forces. Eight U.S. divisions were

quartered in the Southern Base Section area by January 1944. Within the next five months the number rose to fourteen, and the total U.S. military population of the Southern Base Section doubled, rising from approximately 360,000 to 720,000. This sudden growth in strength made it necessary not only to build new camps but to convert old buildings which had been rejected earlier as unsuitable for military purposes.

Mounting all the seaborne assault forces was a tremendous task for the Southern Base Section. The assault elements first had to be mounted for the rehearsals, TIGER and FABIUS I, which took place at the end of April and in the first days of May. Those troops were then to return in mid-May to the marshaling areas where they would remain awaiting final embarkation two or three weeks later. When they finally moved out to the ports their places would be taken by the initial build-up forces in accordance with priorities established by the First Army. Once that process had begun it was expected that the marshaling camps would always contain about two days' flow of troops and that troops would spend only from eighteen to thirty-six hours in them.

The Southern Base Section had been divided into four districts, numbered XVI, XVII; XVIII, and XIX. The entire coastal zone from Southampton westward was divided between the latter two, however, and those two districts were responsible for the mounting of all assault elements except the airborne troops. XVIII District, to the east, was to handle Force O, the OMAHA Beach task force, and XIX District to the west, was to handle Force U, the UTAH Beach force. The entire coast in the Southern Base Section zone, extending from Portsmouth westward, was divided into nine marshaling and embarkation areas, four of them falling within the XVIII District and five in the XIX. Of the four in the former, one area in and around Portsmouth and Gosport was operated entirely by the British, two around Southampton were to be used by both the British and Americans and were jointly operated, and a split area around Weymouth, the Isle of Portland, and Poole was operated solely by the Americans. All five areas in XIX District were U.S. operated. The nine areas (lettered from A to D in XVIII District and

from K to O in XIX District) had a total of ninety-five marshaling camps with a capacity of 187,000 troops and 28,000 vehicles. The number and size of the camps in each area were determined by the outloading capacity of the adjoining embarkation areas, of which there was a total of nineteen. For the organization of Area M, a typical marshaling and embarkation area lying between Plymouth and Fowey.

The XVIII District to the east contained many large camps, most of which had been constructed by the British and were easily converted. They had capacities ranging from 1,500 to 9,000 men, possessed large messes and recreation halls, and could be expanded fairly readily. Several large buildings used by civilian agencies were also taken over.

Harry Morgan's history of the 773<sup>rd</sup>TD Bn identifies that their unit, under command of 6<sup>th</sup>TD Unit, placed the battalion in Sub-Area "W". This consisted of Camp D-1 at Puddletown, Camp D-3 at Yellowham and Camp D-6 at Piddlehinton. These areas were commanded and staffed by A, B, Hqs., Rcn, and C Companies, respectively. Their duties were to clean, build, camouflage, staff and organize the camps for the purpose of feeding, supplying, entertaining, guarding and administering to the many combat troops that were to pass through on their way to the European Continent.

5 – July 1944. Departed Dorchester and arrived at Wareham, England.

21-July 1944. Departed Wareham and arrived Broadmayne, England.

23 – July 1944. Departed Broadmayne, England European Continent.

25- Jul 1944. Landed in Normandy

The 6<sup>th</sup> TD Group arrived July 25<sup>th</sup> which was the last day to received credit for the D-Day (Normandy) campaign. Bill Qualter of the 6<sup>th</sup>TD Grp, identified to me that there were still anti-aircraft balloons in the air and abandoned gliders in the

trees when they arrived. The balloons would make the skies unfeasible for low flying enemy aircraft and the gliders were used to quietly land troops on the Normandy landscape. There was minimal resistance if any by that time.

1 – Aug to 21- Sept 1944. The 6<sup>th</sup>TD Grp participation in the Battle of Brittany as part of Task Force A under Brig. Gen. Herbert Earnest.

Task Force A was formed on July 31<sup>st</sup>, 1944 under Brigadier General Herbert L. Earnest, commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> Tank Destroyer Brigade, which would act as the command element with the following combat units: 15<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Group (15<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Squadrons) and the 6<sup>th</sup> TD Group (705<sup>th</sup> Tank Destroyer Battalion attached). Engineer support was from the 159<sup>th</sup> Engineer Combat Battalion and the 509<sup>th</sup> Engineer Light Pontoon Company. It was these units that were charged to move along the northern coastal roads and secure railroad bridges to aid in the capture of Brest. Jonathan Gawne has an excellent section on Task Force A in his book "Americans in Brittany – The Battle for Brest". At the time the 1<sup>st</sup> Tank Destroyer Brigade was part of the VIII Corp under Middleton, Third Army under Patton and 12<sup>th</sup> Army Group under Bradley.

Probably one of the most important things that happened to the 6<sup>th</sup> involved its Commanding Officer. Since the inception of the unit, Col. Logan C. Berry had been in charge. He had formerly worked at the Tank Destroyer Tactics Center at Camp Hood before receiving his command. He can be seen sitting with his men in that shot of the officers having mess at Binegar Hall, while in England. He led these men through their training and crossing of the Atlantic. He had been with them while overseeing the Marshalling Yards in Southern England and had been with them during the crossing of the English channel. Now the unit was on the move as part of Task Force A. Only 3 days into the campaign and the Commanding Officer of the 15<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Group, Col. John R. Reybold is MIA (missing in action) and thought to be dead. Col. Berry is pulled from the 6<sup>th</sup> and

assumes command of the 15<sup>th</sup> Cav. Grp. Col. Frank T. Searcy assumed command of the 6<sup>th</sup> on August 3, 1944. He would ultimately be its commander until May 19<sup>th</sup>, 1945 when one of the junior officers would take command. Col. Reybold was later found alive but had been held as a POW (prisoner of war).

“Conquer” The Story of the Ninth Army states that at 1200 hours, 5 September 1944, assumes command of the VIII Corps, basically taking command of the Brittany Peninsula mission. Incidentally that was the same day the Ninth Army became operational under Lt. Gen. William H. Simpson. The XIII Corps had already become part of the Ninth, acting as the Ninth’s agency for executing the Army’s troop-processing mission in the United Kingdom.

In addition to the day by day documentation provided in the After Action Reports, Maj. Truman Alford wrote a detailed report of the difficulties they faced to supply the mission. The document I found was on microfilm at the Donovan library, located on the grounds of Fort Benning, GA. The copy I received was difficult to read. I hope to at some point have it re-typed in its entirety. For those of you that are really into this stuff, I also have a report done by Cpt. Allen R. Scullen who was Commander of Reconnaissance Co., 603<sup>rd</sup> Tank Destroyer Battalion in the Brittany Campaign. The unit was not part of Task Force A, but was attached to the 6<sup>th</sup> Armored Division which took an almost direct route to Brest.

Gawne’s book identifies that TFA would ultimately be assigned to a new Task Force much heavier in infantry. Elements of TFA would take part in the capture of the Daoulas, Crozon and Douarnenez Peninsulas. A job well done! Now that the Brittany campaign was complete, the 6<sup>th</sup> TD Group would function as the XIII Corps Antitank Section.

25 – Sept 1944. Departed vic LeFaou, France and arrived Camp DeQoetquidan, France to organize under Ninth Army. Distance traveled approx. 150 miles.

21 – Oct 1944. Left Camp DeQoetquidan, France and arrived vic Tongres, Belgium on 24<sup>th</sup>. Approximate distance 500 miles.

6 – Nov 1944. Departed vic Tongres, Belgium and arrived Hoensbroek, Holland. Approx distance 30 miles.

6- Dec 1944. Left Hoensbroek, Holland and arrived at Heerlen, Holland, distance 4 miles.

During the November-December time period, After Action Reports state that no units were attached directly to the 6<sup>th</sup> but the Commanding officer along with his S-3 (Operations personnel -1 Officer and 2 Enlisted men) and his Intelligence personnel -1 Enlisted man did command anti-tank function for the XIII Corp Artillery Staff. Units commanded were the 638<sup>th</sup>TD Bn (attached to the 84<sup>th</sup> Inf Div) which had M-18s, the 771<sup>st</sup>TD Bn (attached to the 102<sup>nd</sup> Inf Div) which had M10s, and the 814<sup>th</sup>TD Bn (attached to the 7<sup>th</sup>Armd Div) which also had M10s. At the time, each of these units was in the process of re-equipping with the M36 units. These units destroyed a total of 22 German tanks in that time period and a major threat by the German 9<sup>th</sup> Panzer Div. was stopped.

In addition to the tank destroyer battalions, one field artillery battalion (557 FA Bn) and two anti-aircraft artillery battalions (135 AAA & 141 AAA) fell under the command of the XIII Corps anti-tank officer. These units took a front line defense role in key positions in Lindern, near Beeck, in Wurm and near Prummern. Other units took positions in Linnich and near Gereonsweiler, Schophoven and vic Koslar.

In addition to their antitank command responsibilities, a portion of the unit operated the Corps Rest Center with a total guest accommodation of 421 personnel. It was located in Heerlen, Holland with at least a portion of the



facilities being housed inside a school. Its purpose was to provide Corps troops with a 48 hour rest and recreation period. These accommodations included sleeping quarters, 3 meals per day, shower facilities, entertainment (movies, USO shows and an orchestra), swimming in a warm water pool, lounge areas with activities, daily religious services, and medical and dental services. A total of 1414 guests had used the facilities since they were opened on December 16<sup>th</sup> until end of period, Dec. 31<sup>st</sup> 1944.

1-31 Jan. 1944. During this period, the operation of the Corps Rest Center continued, reaching a guest total of 6134 since opening. During this same period the 771<sup>st</sup>TD Bn and the 821<sup>st</sup>TD Bn were under XIII Corps control and the Antitank Officer. No action against enemy tanks occurred but direct support was given to front line elements. While in a defensive position, the TD Battalions provided harassing fire, interdiction fire and roving gun fire.

In addition to his antitank position, the 6<sup>th</sup>'s Commanding Officer became the Corps Rear Security Officer beginning on Jan 27<sup>th</sup>. With this change, his staff was increased to 3 Operations Officers and 2 Enlisted men.

1-30 Apr. 1944. During this time period the 6<sup>th</sup> TD Group Commanding officer continued his position within the XIII Corps as Antitank Officer and Rear Security Officer by utilizing S-2 and S-3 personnel from the unit. The 6<sup>th</sup> moved with Headquarters of the XIII Corps as follows: From Viersen on the 1st to Heiden. From Heiden on the 5<sup>th</sup>, to Warendorf. From Warendorf on the 7<sup>th</sup>, to Herford. From Herford on the 10<sup>th</sup>, to Stadthagen. From Stadthagen on the 13<sup>th</sup>, to Lehrte. From Lehrte on the 15<sup>th</sup>, to Klotze. As you can see, the unit was involved in a fast moving operation from the Rhine to the Elbe. Coordination of all actions was difficult.

Other activities included the operation of a phantom radio service between Corps Headquarters and liaison officers at each of the armored divisions. In addition to the 6<sup>th</sup>'s personnel, staff was augmented by officers and radio operators from other units. The unit also operated a mess for enlisted men that were in the immediate area of the Headquarters. Cpt. David Saltman became the liaison officer to the 5<sup>th</sup> Armored Division in the CCA (Combat Command A) and accompanied them during their spearhead to the Elbe. He was eventually transferred to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army Headquarters at a place called Bad Tolz, which was formerly a HQ's for Germans

In his comments from the April 1945 After Action Report, Col. Frank T. Searcy emphasizes the variety of jobs that were involved while in the combat theater for which they had not been trained. His feeling was that this tactical group headquarters is fitted to perform a great variety of missions as long as it is employed as an integral unit. It is only my opinion, but I believe Col. Searcy is making a statement about the high caliber of men he was fortunate to serve with and the difficult circumstances they were dealt.

1-31 May 1945. During this period the unit continued as in the month before and moved with Headquarters of XIII Corps. From Klotze to Peine on May 14<sup>th</sup>. Throughout the period all tank destroyer activities were devoted to Military Government duties, which included policing and patrolling areas and guarding designated targets and installations as well as housing and feeding displaced persons and operating a prisoner of war cage. At the beginning of the month, the Corps had under its supervision, five divisions and Corps artillery covering 8,000 square miles or an area approximately 90 miles square. Some personnel of the 6<sup>th</sup> continued to operate a mess for enlisted men in the immediate area of the headquarters.

19 May 1945. Commanding Officer Frank T. Searcy transferred out of the unit and on to the 1<sup>st</sup> Tank Destroyer Brigade. If you remember, this was the unit commanded by Maj. Gen. Herbert Earnest during the Brittany campaign. With the Commanding Officer leaving, Maj. Russell Newbury assumed command that same day. Prior to the change in command, Maj. Newbury was the S-3 (Operations) officer. In addition, 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. R.W. Sullivan Jr. transferred to the NUSA?

26 May 1945. I have no information of the reason for the change but as of this date, Maj. Maldo B. Johnson assumed command. Prior to the change, he was the S-2 (Intelligence & Security) officer.

28 May 1945. Cpt. Paul Ellis transferred to the XIII Corps and a Chaplain, Cpt. R.B. Richardson transferred to the NUSA.

31 May 1945. 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. R.L. Martin became the acting S-1 (Staff- Personnel and Admin.) officer.

Dachau, Germany – The only official documentation I have placing the 6<sup>th</sup> at Dachau is a photo of an I.D. card for Robert J. Arendt for the Dachau facility. On that card it also identifies Lt. Col. John A. Beall as the commanding officer. Lt. Col. Beall was placed in charge while the unit was stationed at Peine, Germany but the unit moved within days to a Headquarters at Bad Abling, Germany, about 60 miles southeast of Dachau. I also have personal testimonies of many of the men from the unit, including my father, and at least two Officers that were no longer in the unit. Both Jac Ulman and David Saltman were in the unit at one time but had been transferred out sometime earlier. Each visited Dachau for some official purpose after VE Day (Victory in Europe May 8<sup>th</sup>, 1945) and identified to me that the 6<sup>th</sup> was stationed there. Jac Ulman remembered being there in the summer and seeing Truman Alford who had been with the unit all

along. He was given a "sky jacket" as a gift. Many of the families I have spoken to, relate to me that their father's spoke of Dachau, but only in passing. It was not a place or a memory they wanted to dwell on. The Unit Photo section includes a photo of 6<sup>th</sup> member Glenn T. Coup standing in front of the PWE-29 (Prisoner of War Enclosure #29) at Dachau right next to the Eicke Platz (Eicke Square).

Aug. 1945        By this time the unit is listed in Stanton's Order of battle as being stationed in Dulken, Germany, which is more than 5 hours and 318 miles North-West of Dachau.

1- May 1946        Inactivated in Germany when redesignated 5<sup>th</sup> Constabulary Regiment

Stanton's book also identifies that the 6<sup>th</sup> TD Grp received Campaign Credits for Normandy, Northern France, Rhineland, Central Europe. My father's discharge confirms these same campaigns.