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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 6TH TANK DESTROYER GROUP,  
AS PART OF TASK FORCE "A", IN THE MARCH THROUGH  
BRITTANY PENINSULA TO BREST, FRANCE, 3 AUGUST  
9 AUGUST 1944

(NORTHERN FRANCE CAMPAIGN)  
(Personal experience of the Group S-4)

Type of operation described: A TASK FORCE  
OPERATION WITHIN ENEMY HELD TERRITORY CONFRONTED WITH  
DIFFICULT AND HAZARDOUS RESUPPLY

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THE OPERATIONS OF THE 6TH TANK DESTROYER  
GROUP, AS PART OF TASK FORCE "A", IN THE  
MARCH THROUGH BRITANNY PENINSULA TO BREST,  
FRANCE, 5 AUGUST - 9 AUGUST 1944  
(NORTHERN FRANCE CAMPAIGN)  
(Personal Experience of The Group S-4)

INTRODUCTION

This monograph covers the operations of the 6th Tank Destroyer Group, as a part of Task Force "A", in the lightning-like advance made by the American forces in the race for Brest, France.

In order to orient the reader and show him why a mission of this nature, at this time, was wise it will be necessary to briefly look at the overall picture in France from a high level viewpoint.

For almost two months, since the landing in Normandy, 6 June 1944, steady and ever increasing quantities of men, material, and supplies had been poured onto Omaha and Utah beaches. This necessitated the use of small landing craft to navigate in the shallow water near the beaches. Supplies and equipment arriving from the United States either had to be unloaded in England and reloaded into smaller craft for cross-channel journey or transferred in mid-channel from ocean going vessels to smaller craft. These methods were extremely unsatisfactory as well as being expensive and time consuming.

Cherbourg had fallen into Allied hands in July 1944 but not before extensive destruction of the harbor facilities had been accomplished by the Germans. This destruction meant that much work and considerable time would be necessary before these facilities could be repaired and made of service for large ocean going cargo ships.

The British to the north continue to encounter determined resistance from the Germans and gains were slight. This made the prospects for any port facilities to our north look gloomy.



To the south, at a distance of approximately 160 miles lay Brest, the second largest harbor in the whole of France. (1) (Map A) Brest, located at western tip of Brittany Peninsula, was capable of accommodating the largest vessels with excellent facilities. A good railway and highway system linked Brest with the interior of France. If Brest could be obtained in such a manner as to prevent the Germans from destroying these harbor facilities and several long highway and railway bridges it would greatly facilitate the supply problem of the allies.

In the meantime the concentrated effort of the American forces at St. Lo had been successful and the American Divisions were now starting what was later to become one of the most successful exploits in the history of warfare. This success, along with the opportunity now at hand, placed an even greater burden upon our already overburdened facilities at Cherbourg and the beaches (Omaha and Utah). The task of supplying our rapidly advancing armies through the existing ports might soon equal the task of filling a storage tank through an inverted funnel.

#### PHASE I. ORGANIZATION OF TASK FORCE "A"

The Third United States Army, Commanded by General George S. Patton, Jr., became operational on the continent on 1 August 1944 (2). General Patton immediately conceived that a task force highly mobile, strong in armor and armament, and capable of sustained shock action could break through the enemy resistance and once behind the enemy lines into Brittany Peninsula could seize important objectives and prevent their destruction by the enemy. General Patton wasted no time in putting his idea into an order for only a few hours had passed from the time his army had become operational before orders

to the units that would comprise Task Force "A" (1).

(1) A-7, P. 4; (2) A-7, P. 2; (3) A-7, P. 2

Units comprising Task Force "A" would assemble in the vicinity of La Repas not later than 020700 August 1944 and would consist of: 1st Tank Destroyer Brigade, Commanded by Brigadier General Herbert L. Earnest (Now Major General), 6th Tank Destroyer Group, 15th Cavalry Group, 705th Tank Destroyer Battalion, 159th Engineer Combat Battalion, and the 509th Engineer Light Ponton Company (4).

Prior to the time the 705th Tank Destroyer Battalion had been with the 5th Armored Division but was specially selected for this mission. This selection was based upon the desire of having an additional Tank Destroyer Battalion equipped with the M-18 chassis and the 76 MM Gun, a vehicle especially adapted to high mobility either on a highway or across country (5).

The 6th Tank Destroyer Group closed in the assembly area, near La Repas, (Map A) by the prescribed time, 020700 August 1944 (6).

#### PHASE II. PREPARATION FOR THE TASK FORCE MISSION

Immediately after the deadline for closing into the assembly area, Colonel Logan C. Berry, Commanding Officer, 6th Tank Destroyer Group, received notice to report to task force headquarters at 0730 this date for a meeting with General Earnest and that members of his staff, not to exceed three in number, could accompany him if desired. Colonel Berry selected his S-2, S-3, and S-4 to attend the meeting with him (7).

This was a meeting of all Task Force "A" unit commanders to explain the mission and issue preliminary instructions. General Earnest explained that the task force had the mission of advancing through Brittany Peninsula, securing key bridges along the Rennes-Brest railroad line, key highway bridges along the same general route (Map A) and destroying whatever

(4) A-7, P. 5; (5) A-9, P. 5; (6) A-7, P. 5; (7) A-7, P. 5;



enemy forces encountered without causing excessive delay in reaching Brest and the objectives enroute. He further stressed the importance of the mission, explaining that without these key railway and highway routes the port of Brest had little value, since if damaged, several of these bridges were of such length and construction as to require weeks to repair. Certain bridges were earmarked as being especially important, including three railway and two highway, located at St. Briec, two highway and two railway in the vicinity of Guincamp, and three each in and near Morlaix (8) (Map A).

All units were directed to draw six days emergency rations, sufficient gasoline and oil for 250 miles, and as much ammunition as could be carried, using every available vehicle. Baggage and impediments would be left under guard in the assembly area (9).

All units were ordered to be prepared to move from the assembly area by 030100 August for the start of the mission.

The meeting ended at approximately 0900 hours and Colonel Berry immediately held a meeting with his own command. The supply personnel had a tremendous amount of work to be accomplished and with only sixteen hours remaining prior to jumping-off time. Ammunition releases had to be obtained, road priorities had to be arranged, gasoline and lubricants had to be drawn in extra quantities, and six days emergency rations had to be obtained. To make the situation even more difficult the 76 MM ammunition and the emergency rations had to be trucked from Omaha Beach over roads that were damaged and much overcrowded (10).

Reference was made to (11) as to the situation and supply

(8) 1-10, P. 5; (9) 1-10, P. 6; (10) 1-10, P. 6;

vehicles dispatched to the various depots as rapidly as possible. Supply personnel worked day and night and by 030030 August the 6th Tank Destroyer Group was ready for the jump-off (11).

In the meantime, there had been a few last minute changes. These changes included orders that all task force personnel would wear impregnated clothing, also that the task force would operate under VIII United States Army Corps, commanded by Major General Troy H. Middleton (Now Lieutenant General). All troops had impregnated clothing in their possession, therefore, no special supply problem was encountered (12).

By 021800 August final orders had been issued for the leading elements of the main column to cross the IP at 030130 August and proceed by way of Avranches and Dol, (13) (Map A). Information received from higher headquarters indicated this sector of our route was clear and considered to be generally free of enemy since the 6th Armored Division was advancing along the same route as far as Dinan at which point they would turn south. This information further stated that the 6th Armored Division would occupy an assembly area mid way between Dol and Dinan on the night of 2 - 3 August and that this same assembly area would be occupied by Task Force "A" on the night of 3 - 4 August (14).

### PHASE III. THE JUMP-OFF

The leading elements of the 6th Tank Destroyer Group passed the IP on schedule and everyone seemed to breathe a sign of relief for at last the turmoil of the past 24 (11) A-10, P. 7; (12) A-10, P. 7; (13) A-7, P. 7; (14) A-3,



hours was now history. This feeling of complacency was doomed to be short lived, for after traveling a distance of approximately 15 kilometers, and reaching a point just north of Avranches, Task Force "A" encountered its first enemy action. Enemy planes suddenly dropped flares in the sky that appeared to be directly over our heads. Following this we underwent considerable bombing and strafing. We suffered no losses but an extra large bomb crater in the road plus extremely heavy traffic delayed our advance for about an hour and a half (15). This loss of time coupled with a 30 minute loss in Avranches, due to a mix-up in the time of road priorities, delayed the column a total of two hours by the time Avranches was cleared (16). Based upon orders received by task force headquarters that speed was of the utmost importance, and endeavoring to regain some of the time previously lost, the rate of march was increased to 35 or 40 miles an hour. This appeared to be a wise decision since the route was considered clear and all Tank Destroyers were M-18 vehicles capable of maintaining this rate of march (17).

The column continued to move at a rapid rate with the point, consisting of a platoon of Cavalry and a platoon of Tank Destroyers, leading the column at a distance of only two hundred yards. Vehicles within the point maintained approximately fifty yards interval (18). Here again the reader is reminded that the task force commander was operating under the belief that the 6th Armored Division had advanced over this route within the past twenty-four hours.

The leading elements of the column cleared Bague-Picard.

(15) A-10; (16) A-9; (17) A-7, P. 5;