

This halftrack personnel carrier, restored by Military Trucks, is strictly no frills. It is similar to one A.G. Salfen traveled in during World War II. The 601TD 13N has seating for 13. Again, no frills, metal seats with thin pads. A gun mount in the center held a 50 caliber gun. The vehicle will be delivered to a collector in Yakima, Washington.

Half-track brings back memories

By Joy Beckman

(This story covers, in a very small way, the history of the 601st Tank Destroyer Battalion as it moved from England through Africa, Tunisia, Sicily, Italy, France, along the Rhine River and into Austria. Jim Grunke, owner of Military Trucks north of Weiser, acquired a half-track and knowing that A.G. Salfen had used the vehicles during World War II, suggested the story. Much of the material was taken from a booklet written by 1st Lt. Edward L. Josowitz.)

Major A.G. (Ambrose G.) Salfen was 31 when he left the U.S. Army in 1946. He had been wounded twice. "You were promoted a lot faster in wartime than in peacetime," he related.

Born on a farm at O'Fallon, Mo., 30 miles west of St. Louis, he attended Catholic schools in O'Fallon and graduated from the University of Missouri College of Agriculture.

Having spent his college years in ROTC, he was commissioned a 2nd Lieutenant Feb. 2, 1942.

Following a refresher course at Fort Sill, Okla., Lt. Salfen was assigned to the 601st Tank Destroyer Battalion at Camp Blanding, Fla. in April 1942 and then sent to Fort Benning, Ga. to study communications. Two weeks later he got orders to report to Indian-town Gap, Pa., where the 601st was training for combat.

By August 1942, Salfen was aboard the Queen Mary which was traveling without escort as it zigzagged its way across the Atlantic Ocean, heading for the British Isles. "They paid the men when they got on board and crap and poker games were rampant. This was done in part, to keep the men from getting seasick and to keep their minds off the fact that any minute we might be sunk by a German sub," said Salfen.

They spent five days aboard the QM, sleeping in shifts, spending countless hours in PX and chow lines.

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ed down in pup tents."

The half tracks were to knock out enemy anti-tank guns. They carried ammo, personnel and equipment to the front. Some were used as mobile radio-equipped company headquarters. Sleeping bags were attached to outside rails.

Dec. 17, 1942 they began the 800 mile trek to Tunisia, the real beginning of the African Campaign. The tactical march through the grim vastness of the Atlas Mountains, during blackout, was nerve-racking and exhausting. The roads were tortuous, bordered by precipices. It rained or snowed at least once a day.

"Bom Bom, cigarette, Choo-Gom" moochers turned up in the most isolated places at all hours and every little Arab knew enough to accompany his mooch-chant with the Churchillian V-for-Victory.

Dec. 21, when they hit a temporary destination, Souk El Khemis, Tunisia, German planes came in like flies at a picnic. That day the Tank Destroyers shot down their first Kraut plane.

Because of German air superiority, they seldom saw a U.S. plane. All windshields, headlight glass and shiny tops of vehicles were removed to eliminate reflections during blackouts. Life was one continuous wild, wet, cold blackout drive from one danger spot to another with few halts for food or sleep.

Two by two pieces of angle iron, with a hook on top, were welded vertically to the front bumpers of jeeps and three-quarter ton trucks at a height to catch and break wires calculated to break necks. They lost a lot of personnel, especially at night. A German welcome mat.

March 25, 1943, at El Guettar, Tunisia, the 601st Tank Destroyer Battalion was cited for outstanding performance in combat. Although greatly outnumbered and outgunned, they traded shot for shot, doggedly holding ground.

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Lt. Salfen was made Commander of Company "B" during the Salerno Landing Campaign.

Sept. 8 a news flash proclaimed "Italy Surrenders," a joyful announcement for war-weary fighting men.

Jan. 20, 1944, tactical elements of the 601st were loaded aboard LSTs and LCTs and on Jan. 22, the Battalion made its third D-Day landing, at Nettuno, Italy, with the Third Division. The first man they saw, riding his bike to work in Nettuno, hadn't even heard of the landing.

No one expected troops to land from the south on Anzio Beachhead, adjacent to Nettuno. The obvious approach was from the north. Winston Churchill, prime minister of England, suggested the idea.

However, German planes arrived quickly and were over the harbor day and night. Dogfights with the 99th Fighter Squadron were a dime a dozen and Germans were blasted out of the air.

German troops, coming from France all the way up to the Austrian border, moved in the fifth night. In the meantime, the Americans were gearing for battle.

Lt. Salfen earned his Captain's bars at Anzio Beachhead.

However, the Americans were in a strategically poor location. The beachhead was overlooked by a high land area where the Germans could bombard the enemy on the plain below.

The night the Germans arrived, 600-800 Rangers with the U.S. forces were sent to infiltrate enemy lines near Cisterna. The Germans, on the alert, let them through. All but about 10 were either killed or captured.

A quote from the book written by Lt. Josowitz: "On Jan. 30, two destroyers from Capt. Salfen's Company made a wild dash up 'Broadway' in an attempt to help the desperate Rangers who were in their ill-fated attempt to take Cisterna. A minefield, just short of Isolla Bella, tore the tracks off an M-10 Destroyer, blocking the road. The tank crew walked back."

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town Capt. Cal., where the 601st was training for combat.

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Landing at Gourrock, Scotland, they were loaded into small boats and taken to Wishaw where "the yanks were given a reception seldom equaled." Every home was opened to them.

They arrived at Tidworth, some 60 miles from London, during the night of Aug. 10, 1942. They were the first U.S. ground troops in England. Everything was blacked out. Many got lost.

Tidworth Barracks were former British Cavalry barracks with cold and colder water. They trained on the plains of Salisbury. "The British had just taken a whipping at Dunkirk and during the blitz the Germans were bombing the hell out of them," said Salfen.

The British were low on equipment and ammo. They were using wooden bullets with brass heads to train troops.

Most of the American troops were in England from August to about Thanksgiving.

Oct. 21 the Reconnaissance Company separated from the Battalion to accompany the Fighting 1st to Africa. They landed at Arzew on D-Day and aided in the defeat of Oran, in Algeria.

The first night in Oran troops slept on sidewalks and were awakened in the morning by the whack of falling oranges, dropped out of windows by natives who were saying, "hello."

Later, they bivouaced at St. Lucien, Algeria, surrounded by Vito peddlers and howling dogs.

A battalion was made up of 800 men and broken down into five companies. Gun Companies A, B and C had two platoons of 75mm guns on half-tracks and one platoon of 37mm towed weapons. There were also a Headquarters Company and Recon Company.

Officially, Lt. Salfen was Communications Officer for Battalion Headquarters. Unofficially, he was in charge of moving Lt. Col. Baker's tent and contents, including a wood-burning stove. "He liked to live in comfort," related Salfen. "I had to set up the stove and stove pipe whenever we moved. He had a 20 by 20 tent that would have slept 10 or 12 men. The rest of us got into long johns, wrapped in blankets and bed-

sleep.

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Twenty-seven of 37 guns were knocked out and the Germans approached to within 100 yards. Four hundred enemy casualties were left on the field and 37 German tanks were destroyed, other German armored vehicles were towed away, disabled.

By mid-April, 1945, the Germans had lost aerial superiority and the Battalion was able to make its first long march, to Roum El Souk, in daylight.

As they moved into Michaud all German resistance in Africa collapsed. Thousands and thousands of Nazi soldiers, many of them members of the proud Africa Korps, came rolling down the road in their own trucks, looking for someone to surrender to. May 9, 1943 fighting was over in Africa.

Lt. Salfen was attached to "B" Company after the African Campaign.

A makeshift prison camp at Mateur, Tunisia, held about 2,000 Germans to every American guard.

Then began warm, pleasant days for some of the men on the beach at Bizerte, Tunisia. Good meals, good movies, women, and Vito that flowed like wine. The "going home" rumor grew stronger. Tank destroyer personnel swam in the Ancient Carthaginian sulphur pool at Gafsa while British Spitfires provided overhead cover.

Near Tripoli, Lybia, the Battalion had been given M-10 Destroyers, with three-inch naval guns and open hatches, to replace the half-tracks, better known as "Purple Heart Boxes." Lt. Salfen was in another area when this took place.

July 28, nearly half the Battalion took off by ship for Sicily. (At this point they became a part of the 3rd Infantry.)

In Sicily, near Palermo, Lt. Salfen guarded prisoners before rejoining his unit in Africa. They boarded ships for Salerno, Italy, in August of 1943.

"The Italians were ideal prisoners," reminisced Salfen. "They were cheerful. One fellow had a marvelous voice and he would entertain us in the evenings."

Salerno Landing was miserable. There was mud and mountains. The enemy drove the men crazy shooting their screaming mimis. The gun held seven or eight rounds and once fired continued to fire until empty. "They produced a whistling, weird, screaming sound," recalled Salfen.

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"I always felt sorry about that," said Salfen. "The troops were supposed to follow them through and we simply weren't ready."

Anzio Beachhead was 11 miles deep at the widest part and some 13 miles long, left to right, looking inland. At one time a marshy area, Mussolini had previously had the area drained, via a network of canals. The Germans, from their vantage point above, blasted the beachhead night and day.

"It was pure hell," reminisced Salfen, commander of "B" Company. "My Superior came by one day to see how things were going. He looked me over and told me I looked like hell. He told me that if I didn't get some sleep I would not be an effective leader."

There were frequent barrages from "Anzio Annie," a huge gun, permanently stationed in a tunnel on railroad tracks. "They would roll her out periodically and let us have it," related Salfen.

Rear areas took an unprecedented pounding. Thousands of rounds of ammunition were fired. One round passed clear through the thick stone wall of a castle and landed in a division surgeon's bed, then failed to explode. He couldn't speak for three days.

"When we'd been on Anzio about three weeks, a droning plane flew over one night, dropping parachute flares. They were so bright you thought it was the end of the world. It exposed everything. It was kind of like swimming in a creek naked and having the whole town show up," laughed Salfen. "They would drop them to check on our activity, so they'd know where to strike."

Toward the end of the four-month conflict both sides were feeling the results of a long battle. Most days were quiet. With the fall of night the very bowels of the earth poured forth men in tanks, trucks and jeeps. Flares were dropped to expose targets.

"During the days that last month we cooked, slept and washed clothes during the daytime. Every man was responsible for his laundry, most generally washed in the all-purpose helmet or spread out on a rock near

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water. We generally had two sets of underwear and two of fatigues. When they reached the point of no return we were issued new ones," recalled Salfen.

They could see the Germans on the other side of the canal going about their daily chores. One intrepid American climbed on a vehicle and waved to a German soldier. He waved back.

' There were some farm houses left on the beachhead and cattle, whose owners had long since departed, were left to wander. One day a yearling was spotted, fairly fat. The cow was dead. Question, how to go about killing that calf? You couldn't light a match after dark, much less fire a gun. Idea. They crowded it into a shed and cut its throat. It took five or six men and they were pretty nervous but they had fresh meat on Anzio.

As weather improved, cycling and horseback riding became popular sports behind the lines. Small stills became the rage and underground movies were well attended.

Salfen recalled that during air raids, when the guards at the supply dump would take cover, the men would "requisition" extra Captain Salfen's "B" Company overtook and knocked out some 200 vehicles.

Strasbourg, France, was a wonderful

rations, among other things. It was also a good time to purloin a machine gun to mount on your M-10 Destroyers and vehicles for more fire power.

"The Germans kept trying to find weak spots in our defenses. The beachhead began shrinking. We had to fight to save our lives. There was no other alternative," declared Salfen. "There were no troop ships to pick us up. We were also short on supply ships. The U.S. was also fighting in the Pacific and preparing to fight at Normandy Beachhead. It became a question of whether we would die fighting or retreat and drown."

It became the biggest concentration of men, guns, tanks and destroyers in the world. The beachhead force got so big and powerful, breakout became inevitable. After months of cussing, fuming, raging, fighting, dying, praying and wishing, they were ready to take the Germans.

The enemy was dug in stone caves and could be routed with nothing but small arms, bazookas and grenades. The doughboys had to get through land mines, booby traps, artillery, mortar and machine gun crossfires. They either dug the Germans out or killed them in their holes. There was no mechanical substitute for guts.

It was at this point that Salfen was wounded. It was May 1944. A tank turned around and a track set off a German land mine. He was hit in the legs. A tank operator had become disoriented, probably because of dust, and went up the wrong drive. Salfen told him he'd have to change directions. He spent three weeks in the hospital at Naples, Italy, missing the tour of Rome taken by most of the Americans.

The Americans had taken Rome on June 4 while he was still in the hospital so when he got out a superior saw that he got a jeep and driver so he could view a city he was not likely to visit again.

According to the Josowitz booklet, "most of the men visited the Vatican and less holy places. It was a clean, beautiful city full of lovely girls and it had hardly been touched by war."

It wasn't until May 24, some four months after landing, that American armor smashed its way to La Villa, Pone Rotto and Cisterna. They were four of the most trying, terrible, exasperating months in the history of modern warfare.

They were on their way to Rome.
The D-Day landing at Collobiere, in southern France, was peaceful, the Germans had taken off. It was August 15, 1944.

There was a fever about the war in southern France, a wild inspiring patriotic fever that got to everyone sooner or later. There were torchlight parades and beautiful girls who "insisted on kissing the liberators."

The highway along the Rhone River was jammed with everything the Germans were leaving behind. Everybody had a field day.



Lt. A.G. Salfen, left, was pictured in hospital garb in Naples. He had been injured by a land mine. His cousin, U.S. Air Force Capt. Hanley, had dropped by for a visit.

place. There was plenty of liberated champagne and cognac.

Fighting in the Colmar Pocket, near the Swiss border, was vicious, bloody and costly. It was bitter cold, with snow on the ground.

A previous assault had knocked out Capt Salfen's radio and he was outside the M-10 giving hand signals when a mortar fragment hit him in the foot.

He was sent to a field hospital, operated on and sent to a hospital in Paris for two weeks.

"B" Company, minus its injured captain, moved to Pont-a-Moussan for rest and rehabilitation. The M-10s were exchanged for M-36s and the crews had to be retrained.

The destroyers headed for the Rhine, on the way into Nuremberg, West Germany. Augsburg fell without a struggle. Task forces pushed toward Salzburg, Austria. Salzburg fell. That was the last assignment for the 601st.

VE Day found half the battalion drinking champagne "liberated" from Hitler's Berchtesgarden cellars. It was duly noted that for one who did not imbibe, he certainly kept a well-stocked cellar.

Capt. Salfen was sent from Paris to a VA hospital in Thomasville, Ga., where he spent from February to November. He was then sent to a VA hospital in Daytona Beach, Fla., and discharged from there in March 1946. He then spent some two and one-half years in the inactive reserves and was discharged as a major in 1948.

Salfen earned seven medals and citations: Silver Star, Purple Heart with cluster, U.S. of America ribbon, Presidential Unit Cita-

Salfer and his wife, Betty, died in 1981. Anzio Beachhead is a cemetery for American soldiers who died in World War II. It is a place where 7,000 Americans, from all over the world, are buried.

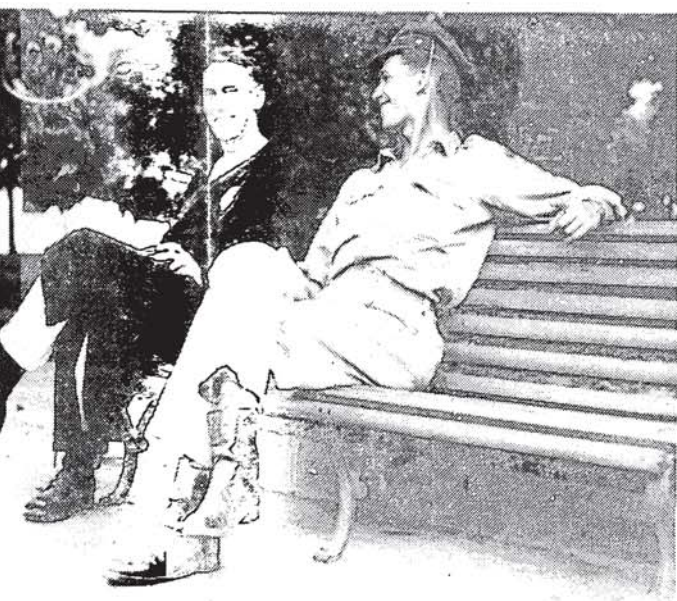
"We were together for almost 10 years. We were family. We were more than just another man; we were another man than we were to our family. I hadn't seen the United States in 10 years, nor had they. We went back to the states, we stayed a unit," said Salf.

The 1,800 men in the 601st Central Postal Directory made four D-Day campaigns, made four D-Day landings, fought 546 days in actual combat, suffered 79 casualties and lost 110 men.

For the past several years, the group has held an annual reunion, than which was called instigated by Bill Harper. "That man puts a lot of time and effort into doing this for all of us, and we appreciate it," said Salfen. "I don't think him I don't think we'd be meeting him if I was like a lot of others. When I was young, I just wanted to forget. Now, I want to live from our jobs and ready to trade in those old memories."

At the 1988 reunion Salfer met (Sgt.) Pete Dykstra, a man who carried him off at Colmar Pocket. "They talk for three days," said Betty, that Pete's first comment was much thinner A.G. was, "I just weighed as much when I was off the field as you do now." a big, sturdy farm boy from Regretfully, Dykstra died of following the reunion.

Later this spring, when the family reunions are held in Watertown, NY, Betty and I, 75, will be there. There will be hugs and tears.



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tion, American Campaign ribbon, WW2 Victory Medal and the European-African Middle Eastern Campaign ribbon.

Salfen and his wife, Betty, visited Italy in 1981. Anzio Beachhead is now off limits to civilians but they viewed the cemetery where 7,000 Americans, from all branches of the service, are buried.

"We were together for almost four years. We were family. We were closer to one another than we were to our own families. I hadn't seen the United States in four long years, nor had they. We went as a unit and we stayed a unit," said Salfen.

The 1,800 men in the 601st fought eight campaigns, made four D-Day assaults, spent 546 days in actual combat, suffered 683 casualties and lost 110 men.

For the past several years the 601st has held an annual reunion, thanks to a phone call instigated by Bill Harper of Texas. "That man puts a lot of time and money into doing this for all of us, and I really appreciate it," said Salfen. "If it wasn't for him I don't think we'd be meeting. I suspect I was like a lot of others. When I got out I just wanted to forget. Now we're retired from our jobs and ready to travel and renew old memories."

At the 1988 reunion Salfen was overjoyed to meet (Sgt.) Pete Dykstra, the big, handsome man who carried him off the battlefield at Colmar Pocket. "They talked off and on for three days," said Betty, who reported that Pete's first comment when he saw a much thinner A.G. was, "I just wish you'd weighed as much when I was packing you off the field as you do now." Salfen was a big, sturdy farm boy from Missouri. Regretfully, Dykstra died of a heart attack following the reunion.

Later this spring, when the 601st meets in Watertown, NY, Betty and A.G., now 75, will be there. There will be handshakes, hugs and tears



Lt. A.G. Salfen was pictured in Rome, in front of the colosseum. The year was 1944 and he had just gotten out of the hospital after being injured by a land mine.