

# HISTORY OF THE 608TH TANK DESTROYER BATTALION

## "THE LOST BATTALION"

It is the 1941 Carolina Maneuvers -- weary men dragging towed 75's and 37's through the sands under the hot, Southern sun -- wooden guns mounted on old car wheels -- a few decrepit old water-cooled machine guns -- a miscelany of broken-down jeeps and half-ton weapons-carriers moving into position, - this is the 8th Division Antitank Bn (Provisional). Our leader is a Major by the name of Ennis -- a light-haired West Pointer with a Southern drawl -- a man who wouldn't ask his men to do anything he wouldn't do himself.

The days are long -- one position to another -- always on the move trying to keep up with the 30th Infantry, the outfit we are supporting -- good weather, bad weather -- arguments with umpires -- artillery shelling and eventually of course the sirens on the airplanes told us the maneuvers were over.

There is a conference at a place called Fort Meade in Maryland -- The Carolina Maneuvers have given birth to a new idea -- the cordon defense was scrapped and the tank destroyer idea is born.

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Dec 15, 1941, in Fort Jackson, South Carolina -- There was a rumor about tank destroyers - some called it "Suicide Squad" -- Something new and strange. The cadre is being organized -- the sergeants are colling out long lists of names -- doughboys from the 13th and 28th Infantry -- artillerymen from the 20th, 43rd and 56th Field -- regular army, early volunteers, and national guard. They will be all one outfit now -- we are the 608th Tank Destroyer Battalion.

We are in a tent city, with the main office buildings in huts located out in the barren Carolina sands in the old KICA area. --It is here that we are first called the "Lost Battalion" --Our boss now is a cheerful and chubby Captain by the name of Moore -- the officers are mostly reserve and National Guard -- Abrahams, Smith, Simmons, Brown, Slater, Black, Burley, Adams, Boylston, Shirley, Wilks, Batson, Hendrix, Eward, Boutwell --(Some of them are dead now or gone to other battalions - some shavetails are Captains and Majors).

Things go along easily enough in the new battalion for about a month -- on January 14th there is a slight change, - enter a Major (Later Lt Col.) by the name of Ringsdorff -- he is a lovable old brute both loved and hated at the same time, with a distinct flair for the vernacular -- from scratch he is destined to build the outfit to fighting trim --

February -- we move from the sands into the woods, there to carve out our battalion area in virgin timber -- Pioneer Company is formed (that early ancestor of Reconnaissance Company) -- they are the men who do the hard work; who build the roads, strengthen the bridges, and play with dynamite --

The March winds blow in 400 recruits -- green recruits -- good, bad, and indifferent recruits - but most of them will make good soldiers. They are all Pennsylvania Dutchmen -- Yankees -- the usual arguments about who won the Civil War (War between the States), but the men finally agree that it is not necessary to start a separate battalion --It is basic training for these men -- thirteen long weeks -- calisthenics, drill, road marches,

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discipline and courtesy, articles of war, map reading, gun drill, field fortifications -- you're in the Army now, soldier -- the endless routine.

July -- the terrible, hot, hot days -- a historic hike to a place called "Tank Hill" to attend a review for Lord Louis Mountbatten, King of the Commandoes -- a hike through swishing sand with the thermometer hitting 104 degrees -- 94% of the men fall out, so the newly promoted Lt Col. Ringsdorff decides we are physically unfit - result: we hit the brush every day-- run five minutes, walk five minutes, run five, walk five -- every day -- all morning.

It is the beginning of September -- there is a rumor we are going to Tennessee Maneuvers -- instead we are to go to Camp Hood, Texas - to the new Tank Destroyer Center to receive our advance training -- there is something new in the air -- hurry and bustle -- flat-cars, gondolas, freight cars -- blocking crews nailing crews, wiring crews -- officers going around and checking everything -- On the 5th we roll out, destination -- Texas!

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Here we are -- the train pulls into a rather barren, rather sparsely settled place called Copperas Cove, and comes to a final halt -- we make our first acquaintance with Texas gumbo, that tenacious mud which cakes to your shoes and comes off easily - after a patient half-hour of labor -- The long line of vehicles makes its way into the new camp along sunken, mired roads -- We are about the first to move into the new barracks, the first to experience the dubious honor of tasting Camp Hood water - a murky creation that derives its taste from a well-used cement-mixer.

Extreme dry heat or muddy gumbo -- Killeen and Gatesville (compared to those warm nights in Columbia) -- we experience a thousand inconveniences, but they are as nothing, for this was to be our final drive before the big show -- we are ready for the real thing. -- The men work hard -- their mettle is measured on the firing range where our men earn the compliments of visiting English generals who witness the firing with Army Ground Forces General Leslie J. McNair. We break all existing records on .50 Cal. AA fire with 75% hits. -- Morale is high -- A half-dozen self-propelled 75's on half-tracks roll into the battalion towards the end of our AUTC training -- it looks as if we are ready -- One or two of the neighboring battalions pull out to go overseas.

New orders come down -- we are going to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, a large engineer and artillery camp (possibly for final touching-up on indirect fire before the big fight?) -- again the hurry and rush -- flat cars, gondolas, freight cars, box cars -- blocking, nailing, and wiring gangs -- officers and railroad officials check everything -- we pile aboard including a newly acquired batch of almost 400 recruits, and on January 8 we roll --

We move into the new large and sociable camp and get settled -- but things are not too well arranged with the officers housed about a mile or so from the men so they have to be hauled back and forth by truck -- and the barracks with the recruits away from the main buildings by about half a mile -- Motor Stables every morning (9th Detachment referred to it as the Holy Ceremony of Motor Stables - a sentiment not exactly shared by the men who had to perform the Ceremony) -- cold, cold winter days and nights -- a truck has to be dragged for ten feet before the rear wheels can move, the grease in the differential is so stiff -- men warming their hands by the hot exhaust -- or just shivering in the cold --

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In spite of the weather our vehicles are kept in excellent condition by Lt Col. Patrick, our new boss, the silent Scotsman who lays great stress on motor maintenance and military courtesy, - and who does not talk much. The newer officers who came out of Camp Hood's Tank Destroyer OCS beginning back at the end of October begin to come into their own -- men who know what the man on guard or k.p. feels like -- many of them get their start working with the 1st and 2nd Recruit Training Companies -- later are destined to take over all the Company Commander jobs and many other key positions. -- The new recruits, from Ohio and Indiana, from the factories and defense plants, are good men and they work hard -- finally they join the older men in the companies, get into their advance training.

April 9 -- the Battalion moves out into the field still on the Reservation for five or six days -- rainy and cold -- long lines of vehicles on the trek to Tennessee -- track-laying vehicles being blocked onto railway cars -- we roll into the maneuver area April 19 after a historic party at a place called - Cape Girardeau --

The Battle of Tennessee -- we usually operate with the 630th and 654th Tank Destroyer Battalions, all of the 2nd TD Brigade -- (Little did we know that the S-3 of that Brigade was to be our Battalion Commander later.) While some of us are umpiring with our neighboring battalion and former South Carolina friend, the 630th, most of us are involved in those gigantic weekly operations in which the TD's operate with an infantry division against the 5th Armored Division supported by the Blue infantry --

Tennessee mud -- Tennessee roads which are there but you can't get through them -- Roads which are supposed to be there but aren't -- Half-tracks stuck in a creek -- Tennessee slit-trenches, "the grave-digger's nightmare" -- Tennessee towns over weekends when there are no restrictions - Lebanon - Nashville.--

Occasional battles where we win -- battles where we are cut to ribbons and the Bn Comdr and Co Comdrs are lost or captured -- artificial casualties, and here and there a real one -- bivouac to position in readiness to firing position to rallying position -- slit-trenches, security, camouflage of vehicles, driving blackout -- motorcyclists unceasingly riding with death on blackout marches -- we argue with umpires, curse them -- and not always under our breath -- Circular 17 (later 44) -- ~~d---~~ the circulars, when men are hungry they must eat, when they are thirsty they will drink -- Sometimes it seems only a battle for the Generals.

Just before the last two operations, it is learned that our M-10's are coming in from Camp Forrest where the drivers have been taking a two-weeks course -- They arrive on the weekend just after Operation 6, a terrible problem in which the rear echelon was overrun by tanks and our firing companies were knocked to pieces -- Near the entrance to the area the Bn Comdr stands - proud, and many of us are watching as the big iron monsters grind their grumbling and dusty way into the tent area in slow and majestic file -- the gun commanders and drivers are dusty and a little tired, but they are smiling. -- In short order everyone is climbing on the iron animals, asking questions and riding around in the beasts -- The men are ready to go into the next battle with renewed confidence and heightened morale -- In the far future, they await the day, they will be ready when it comes --

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Operation 7 -- skirmishes -- Reds protect bridgehead south of the Cumberland River -- 27 out of 36 destroyers are wiped out, the Battalion is smashed even worse than it was in O-6 -- The 5th Armored Division is functioning with a vengeance.-- Operation 8 -- we guard an area north of the River against Blue attack from the south -- we are heavily engaged with the enemy when the sirens roar and the radio tells us that, for us, maneuvers at last are over.--

Back to a tent camp -- weeks of preparation, worries about alert regulations, POM, priorities, and paperwork -- property checks -- things become more serious, it looks as if this is it -- June 29, we pack up and roll again -- nailing, wiring, blocking crows, and a motor convoy -- destination, Camp Atterbury, Indiana, the first really northern camp the Battalion has ever touched -- a small and hospitable camp near a large and hospitable town -- Indianapolis. Now the real work begins -- firing every weapon we have on the range -- from the small arms carbine firing to the destructive 3-inch firing -- we are shooting the works, even to indirect fire with the 3-inch gun. Under the new Bn Comdr - Lt Col. Arbury - a man who has the reputation for working hard and playing hard -- the Battalion is sharpened up for the ordeal to come -- we are on the alert, and the last little details are being ironed out --

Scientia -- the men have the knowledge, they know what to do; Patientia -- they have the patience for which they have waited in some cases for two long years; Fortitudo -- they have the courage and the will to do it. In short, the men want action; they want to make the words on the Battalion crest mean something. -- Two weeks out of every month in the field, there to carry out regular garrison training -- but finally when the weather gets terribly cold the powers finally manage to keep us from being out in the field for the full two weeks. --

We go through a battery of tests -- firing tests -- tactical tests -- air-ground tests-----and we then receive the most unwelcome news that we are off the alert. But the Colonel does not relax in his efforts and there seems to be some hope we may be alerted again. Then it happens -- orders come down December 13, from Army Ground Forces, the details filled in by Second Army -- we are to be inactivated, the effective date set for December 20.

There is a strange and tragic irony in the fate of the 608th -- Dec. 15, 1941 -- Battalion activated; Dec. 15, 1942 -- Battalion ready to go over; Dec. 20, 1943 -- Battalion inactivated. But in spite of everything, we all know that the 608th Tank Destroyer Battalion has been a good battalion, and our well-trained men and officers will make other good battalions when they carry their training and their spirit to other organizations, more fortunate than the outfit which was once, and is now again -- "THE LOST BATTALION".