

by Al Russel

AN ABBREVIATED HISTORY OF THE
629th TANK DESTROYER (T.D.)
BATTALION DURING WORLD WAR II

The 629th Tank Destroyer Battalion was cadred by elements of the Anti-Tank Company (ies) of the 28th Infantry Division (Pennsylvania) in 1940-41. The Battalion participated in various large scale maneuvers throughout the United States using wooden facsimiles of weapons and light trucks in lieu of non-available tanks for training purposes. In early 1943 the Battalion moved to the Desert Training Center (Camp Ibis) near Indio, California. There the Battalion trained on the M-3 Half-Track which mounted a 75mm cannon as its main armament. The Battalion participated in several desert training maneuvers on the Half-Track before these vehicles were replaced by the M-10 Tank Destroyer. The M-10 mounted a 3 inch gun as its main armament. This weapon was vastly superior to the 75mm having a muzzle velocity of 3450 feet per second (fps) with a hyper-velocity armor piercing shell as compared to 1900 fps for the 75mm and about 2900 fps for the 76mm. In August, 1943 the Battalion moved to Camp Maxey (Paris), Texas where it continued training on the M-10 while receiving its full complement of personnel. Camp Maxey was a welcome respite after the excruciating heat and dust of the desert and the first time the men had been out of tents and into barracks in many, many long months. As about 90 percent of the personnel were from the East Coast (primarily Pennsylvania, New York and the New England States) it was the first time they had eaten yellow watermelon for which Paris, Texas, is justly famous.

After several months training at Camp Maxey the Battalion was declared "Combat Ready" and preparation for overseas movement initiated. In late December, 1943 the unit was moved by train to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey. In the evening hours of the 28th of December the Battalion was moved by truck to the New York Port Of Embarkation (POE) where it boarded a British Transport ship. In the early hours of the 29th the ship sailed out of New York harbor and a few hours later joined a huge convoy bound for England.

The trip across the Atlantic was uneventful for several days. Then the ship developed engine trouble and came to a complete dead stop in the water. The rest of the convoy steamed on which was standard operating procedure. The British crew worked feverishly to repair the engine and almost 24 hours later they succeeded. During the interim several submarines were sighted within a half-mile of the helpless vessel. Fortunately they were identified as Allied submarines, probably sent to protect the ship until it was repaired. Once the ship was again underway the Captain poured on the coals and caught up with the convoy about two days later.

Amid cheers, whoops and whistles from all the boats in the harbor the convoy docked at Liverpool, England on the 9th of January, 1944. The Battalion was immediately moved by train and truck to an abandoned Royal Air Force base on top of a hill about a mile from Maiden Newton and six miles from Yeovil. Yeovil was a manufacturing site for the famous British Fighter Aircraft "Spitfire". This made it a prime target for the German Luftwaffe bombers. As the Battalion's camp was so close to Yeovil it many times received bombs meant for Yeovil that were off-target. Co-occupiers of the camp were the famous 5th Artillery (Alexander Hamilton's own) which had supported the 1st Infantry Division in Africa and Sicily.

In late April, 1944 the Battalion moved to the Salisbury Plains, setting up two man pup tents across from the famous Druid ruins at Stonehenge. There the Battalion had more unrestricted terrain in which to train. It was also able to move to the coast for live firing exercises out to sea.

When the invasion commenced on 6 June, 1944 the Battalion was alerted for immediate movement to France. All the track and wheeled vehicles were water-proofed and the Battalion was moved under cover of darkness to the Port of Bournemouth. There it boarded LST's (Landing Ship, Tank) for the trip across the English Channel. The M-10's were secured by chains through their tracks and attached to iron rings welded to the LST's hull. The only places for the crews to sleep were on the back deck of the TD's, inside in the crew compartment or in the space between the hull of the LST and the TD tracks. Most of the crews chose the latter because they could stretch out and it was more comfortable. The risk was that the chains might snap in heavy seas and anyone sleeping in this area would be crushed between the tracks and the LST hull.

En route across the channel a tremendous hurricane hit the convoy. The storm lasted several days making headway impossible. It also tore up "Mulberry", the portable pier that had been secured at the invasion site to expedite the off-loading of ships. On 1 July the Battalion streamed ashore at "Omaha Beach" amid heavy artillery fire and strafing and bombing runs by enemy aircraft. Several ships were hit including an ammunition ship that was blown completely apart. Upon landing the Battalion immediately moved inland several miles and bivouacked about three miles from the front lines.

The Battalion had been assigned to the First Army's (LTG Courtney Hodges) "V" Corps (LTG Gerow) as Corps Troops. "V" Corps could then attach, detach or reinforce any of the Divisions/Units within the Corps with the 629th or elements thereof where it was deemed necessary. This resulted in the Battalion being in almost continual combat from the time it landed in France until the war ended in Europe. For example, the 629th might be attached to an Infantry Division on the front line. After a period of combat the Division and its organic units would be relieved by a fresh Division and sent to the rear for necessary maintenance, replacement of personnel and equipment and rest and rehabilitation. The 629th would be detached from the relieved unit and attached to the relieving unit thereby remaining in combat. This arrangement also resulted in the Battalion not receiving credit for most of the enemy equipment and personnel it destroyed. As an attached unit it reported directly to the organic unit to which it was attached. All actions were reported to the organic unit which consolidated them into their after action report, normally not differentiating who was actually responsible for knocking out enemy tanks, other vehicles and personnel.

After a few days becoming acclimated to the area the Battalion moved into combat. For the next month the Battalion saw action supporting various Infantry Divisions to include the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th. This was bitter hedgerow fighting and the Battalion participated at St. Marie Igles, Carentan and Mortain. The latter was the scene of particularly heavy fighting. The 30th Infantry Battalion of the 4th Infantry Division had been trapped for several days by the 99th Panzer Division and had suffered more than 50 percent casualties. Several relief forces had been repulsed until finally a breakthrough was achieved and the 30th Battalion rescued. During this battle the 629th and the 99th Panzer suffered heavy losses. The 629th had about half of its total complement of 36 Tank Destroyers disabled or destroyed while the 99th Panzer was almost completely decimated. It never regained its effectiveness as a fighting force during the remainder of the war.

After further heavy fighting in the hedgerows, a breakthrough from Normandy was finally achieved. With the 629th participating, a drive to liberate Paris was launched. Moving swiftly a spearhead over-ran all German resistance and reached the environs of the city. At this point the Allied Forces were halted and the honor of liberating Paris given the First French Armored Division commanded by General LeClerc. Once the city was liberated, a victory parade was planned. Because the Germans had paraded down the Champs D' Elysee with two vehicles abreast when they captured the city the Allied Forces decided to parade down the same route with four vehicles abreast. The day of the parade was sunny and warm and thousands of Parisians lined the parade route. The crowds were so dense that vehicles were forced to stop to avoid running over the people. Whenever they stopped the people would swarm over the vehicles, clambering over the tanks, jumping into turrets, kissing the G.I.s and presenting them with flowers, wine and cognac. By the time the parade passed the reviewing stand at the Arc D' Triumph, many of the participants were tipsy from the "Good Cheer" bestowed on them by the Parisians.

Shortly after the liberation of Paris, a spearhead of the 5th Armored Division, with the 629th attached, struck toward Luxembourg. Striking through Northeastern France, the spearhead quickly over-ran German pockets of resistance and by-passed enemy units that were overwhelmingly surprised by the rapidity of the U.S. advance. Upon reaching the outskirts of Luxembourg on September 11th, the spearhead ran into heavy enemy resistance. This consisted of dug-in anti-tank weapons, tanks, some artillery and enemy infantry. The U.S. Forces were moving along a highway that led into Luxembourg and traversed a ridge. The German positions were in a shallow valley on the opposite side of the ridge. The enemy opened up with an artillery barrage and the U.S. Forces quickly dispersed. Lt. Col. Glen Cole, commander of the 629th, immediately positioned a platoon of T.D.s and a platoon of M-4 tanks along the ridge line overlooking the German Forces. Being on the high ground and firing down gave the U.S. Forces the advantage. A firefight ensued that lasted until dusk with the T.D.s and tanks destroying most of the enemy force. The remainder retreated under cover of darkness. The following morning the spearhead entered Luxembourg and were greeted with cheers, tears and the inevitable bottles of wine by the Luxembourgiters who were delirious with joy at being liberated after four years of German occupation. The next morning the spearhead continued its drive with elements of the 629th in the forefront. Several kilometers outside Luxembourg the lead units ran into an ambush at a cross-road. Two M-4's, a personnel carrier and a troop carrying truck were immediate casualties. The two lead T.D.'s immediately maneuvered off the road and returned fire. A Panzer, hiding in a barn about 1600 meters away, was spotted as it moved out of the barn to fire. The T.D. that spotted it fired three armor piercing rounds at it as it moved back into the barn. Two of the rounds hit the Panzer, putting it out of action. The third round went completely through the building and hit a Storch observation aircraft that had gone unnoticed hiding behind the barn. The aircraft was demolished. Action stalled until that evening when the Spearhead Commander mounted a flanking attack which forced the enemy forces to retreat. The spearhead continued its drive toward the German border, finally being stalemated at the Siegfried Line.

The next three weeks the 629th, then attached to the Fourth Infantry Division, attempted to breach the German defensive network on the Line. Although one company of T.D.'s knocked out 39 pillboxes in one day the enemy forces re-occupied them during the night. This necessitated knocking them out again the next day. After this happened several times the Fourth Infantry had its Engineer Demolition Squads blow up any pillbox that had been knocked out. After several weeks of fighting on the Siegfried Line elements of the First Army broke through and captured Aachen, the first German city to fall to the Allied Forces. During this period the 629th lost several T.D.'s to anti-tank weapons and suffered moderate personnel losses.

The fall of Aachen created a gap in the Germans defensive posture. General Hodges, the First Army Commander, seized this opportunity to exploit the break in the enemy defenses and began pouring troops into the breach. One of the first objectives was to capture the town of Schmidt. Schmidt was shaped like the figure "8" with a road running along a ridge connecting the Western and Eastern portions of the town. The town itself sat on a relatively high plateau surrounded by wide open terrain at the edge of which was a dense forest. The 28th Infantry Division (Pennsylvania) with its organic artillery, T.D. and tank battalions was given the mission of capturing Schmidt. Using the forest as a jumping-off point the Division attacked across the open terrain. The German defenders, having the high ground advantage, inflicted heavy casualties on the attacking force. After several days of fierce fighting the town finally capitulated. Elements of the 629th, along with the infantry unit to which it was attached, arrived on the scene near the end of the battle. The area was one of absolute carnage. Burned out hulks of tanks and T.D.s littered the landscape. Most had advanced only a few yards from the forest before they were knocked out by the German gunners. Bodies of (as yet unrecovered) infantry were strewn across the terrain. The Western part of Schmidt had been completely secured. The fresh troops ran into sporadic resistance when they moved into the Eastern portion but this was quelled in short order.

After the fall of Schmidt both sides began digging-in for the winter. Elements of the 629th were moved to various areas near Wintersfelt, Germany in early November. There the Battalion began performing its secondary role of indirect artillery support for the dug-in front line troops. The Battalion performed this mission for almost a month. Fire missions were fired at all hours of the day and night. Targets included enemy vehicles, troops, mortar and machine gun emplacements and counter-battery against German artillery positions. Thousands of high explosive (H.E.) shells were fired by the T.D. crews during this period. When the order came to move they were completely exhausted by the continuous activity and lack of sleep.

On the 5th of December, 1944 the Battalion was attached to the 83rd Infantry Division in the Hurtgen Forest. The 83rd was attempting to cross the Rhine river and capture the town of Duren on the East bank. This would enable the 5th Armored Division to debouch across the plains beyond Duren and strike toward the Rhine river. The bitter cold and heavy snow hampered the attacking forces and casualties on both sides mounted astronomically. At one point there were so many bodies littering the ground that a truce was agreed upon so that both sides could recover their dead. One obstacle in the path of the attacking troops was the small village of Strass, located on the West bank of the Rhine, directly opposite Duren. A platoon of the 629th, a platoon of M-4 tanks and a company of infantry were ordered to attack and secure the village. Unknown to the attackers the defending force had at least eight tanks, tank destroyers, anti-tank guns and at least one company of infantry concealed in the village. The enemy allowed the attacking force into the village and then ambushed them. In the battle that followed all of the friendly T.D.s and tanks were destroyed and most of the infantry killed or wounded. At least five German T.D.s and tanks were destroyed along with most of their infantry. Only twenty-eight of the attacking force survived and most, if not all, had been wounded. Radio contact had been lost with the unit and it wasn't until a survivor slipped through the lines during darkness that the plight of these men who were hiding in a cellar became known. Another attack was immediately launched which resulted in another T.D. being disabled with a track blown off, several M-4 tanks destroyed or disabled and numerous casualties among the accompanying infantry. The one remaining T.D. set up a road block in the event of a German counter-attack that night or the next morning with some of the surviving infantry providing security. The next morning another attack was launched with a light tank (M-24) Reconnaissance Company from the 5th Armored Division. These vehicles, with their 37mm guns, were no match for the German 88mm. When two or three

were knocked out in the first five or ten minutes the Commander wisely withdrew. On the fourth day after the initial assault Strass was finally secured and the twenty-eight surviving members of the initial attacking force rescued.

The German counter-offensive known as the "Battle of the Bulge" began on 16 December, 1944 shortly after Strass had been captured. The seriousness of the German threat resulted in many units being repositioned to stem the German offensive. The 629th was ordered to move from the Hurtgen Forest to the Ardennes about the 22nd of December. In a hastily executed road march of about 100 miles it arrived in the Ardennes on Christmas Eve. Passing through St. Vith, Malmedy (scene of the massacre of American troops) and St. Lo, the Battalion was attached to the 75th Infantry Division which had set up a defensive perimeter near Bastogne. For the next several days skirmishes and some anti-tank battles took place. The Germans had captured some M-4 tanks near Bastogne which they painted with the iron cross and used them against the U.S. Forces. This worked for a short time until the U.S. Forces caught on and knocked out anything that appeared from the direction of the German lines. By the end of December it was apparent that the German offensive had lost its impetus and the Allied Forces had aborted the Nazi onslaught.

In early January, 1945 the 629th was reattached to the 83rd Infantry. The Allied Forces began a drive to regain the ground that had been lost in the German offensive. A Regimental Combat Team (RCT) of the 83rd with elements of the 629th attached, an M-4 tank platoon and supporting artillery attacked Bihain, Belgium on the 9th of January. The town was finally secured on the 1st afternoon of the 10th. At the Beginning of Morning Nautical Twilight (BMNT) on the 11th the Germans counter-attacked under cover of an intense artillery barrage with five Mark 4 tanks and an indeterminate amount of infantry. One T.D. was immediately knocked out but the remaining T.D.s quickly disposed of the enemy armor, destroying all five Mark 4's. The enemy infantry suffered a like fate at the hands of the RCT and German resistance ceased.

Later that month while the Allied drive continued the 629th was ordered to a rest and rehabilitation area in Belgium not far from Bihain. This was the first hiatus from combat for the Battalion since the preceding July. For the first time in months the battle weary T.D. crews had the opportunity to bath, wash their clothes, eat a decent meal and relax. Needed replacements were received in men and equipment, long overdue maintenance performed on the T.D.s and integration and training of the new personnel into the short-handed veteran T.D. crews accomplished.

After their ten day rest and rehabilitation period the 629th rejoined the 83rd Infantry in the Hurtgen Forest. The Division had succeeded in crossing the Rhine river and capturing Duren, which was completely demolished. Bulldozers had to clear the streets of rubble before even tracked vehicles could pass. East of Duren resistance became sporadic and the Division, with its supporting troops, continued its drive to the Rhine.

In early March, 1945 the Battalion was detached from the 83rd and attached to the 99th Infantry Division. The Battalion was also notified that The M-10s would be replaced by the new M-36 which mounted a 90mm gun. While the T.D. crews were busily readying the new vehicles for combat the 629th was ordered to move to the Remagen Bridge which had been captured that day (7 March, 1945). Arriving at Remagen in the early morning hours of 8 March elements of the Battalion began moving across the bridge. Enemy heavy artillery and small arms fire was raking the bridge incessantly and casualties to the crossing force were horrendous. A bridgehead on the East bank of the Rhine was finally secured after heavy fighting and troops and equipment poured across in a constant stream to continue the drive into the heartland of Germany.

After the bridgehead build-up, the U.S. Forces launched several spearheads emanating from Remagen. One such spearhead headed South along the East bank of the Rhine. A major obstacle in its path was the town of Bad Honningen. After three days of concentrated attacks by the 99th Infantry and attached units the city capitulated. A Task Force composed of a company of infantry mounted in trucks, one platoon of the 629th, one towed 3 inch T.D. platoon, a platoon of M-4 Sherman tanks and two radio jeeps struck South toward Coblenz. Moving swiftly, the Task Force over-ran many small towns before the German troops could mount an adequate defense. Squads of infantry were left to secure some of the towns where it was thought the enemy might mount a counter-attack. Within a few days the Task Force had moved so far and so fast that radio contact with higher headquarters was lost. Eventually, a Radio Relay Team was successful in reestablishing contact and the Task Force was ordered to halt in place. It halted midway between the towns of Hammerstein and Stein at a German hunting lodge on the banks of the Rhine. This was about fifteen miles from Coblenz which General Patton's Third Army captured a few days later.

The 629th regrouped shortly after this and spent a few days in bivouac performing maintenance and receiving replacements of sorely needed personnel and equipment. Still attached to the 99th Infantry (which by then had been attached to the Third Army) a major offensive to end the war began in the industrial Ruhr Valley. One major city in the path of the attacking forces was defended by a strong German contingent. The Commander of the U.S. forces contacted the German Commander with an ultimatum. Either he agreed to declare the city an "Open City" as of 9 A.M. the following day or the U.S. forces would demolish it. When no word was received from the German Commander a platoon of the 629th with supporting infantry and artillery began a probe into the city just prior to 7 A.M. the next morning. Just within the outskirts of the city a T.D. encountered a Mark VI "Tiger Royal" tank positioned at a street intersection. The T.D. fired three hyper-velocity armor piercing rounds at the Tiger, hitting it on the turret and track. The Tiger returned the fire but missed the T.D. Artillery was called in and the Tiger tried to maneuver out of the intersection but its left track was off. The supporting infantry surrounded it and the crew surrendered. Shortly after the city was declared an "Open City" as of 9 A.M. and the German forces given 24 hours to vacate. As the Germans moved out the U.S. forces moved in. The forces passed each other in the narrow streets in tanks, trucks and on foot. As they passed each side warily eyed the other, gripping their weapons and waiting for someone to start firing. At dusk, the last remnants of the German force cleared the city and the American forces occupied it completely.

Two days later the spearhead continued its drive with a platoon of T.D.s and a platoon of M-4 tanks at the forefront. Moving down a broad thoroughfare lined with trees a few miles from the city the lead elements were startled to see a large force moving in their direction. As they got closer several German staff cars flying white flags from their fenders were observed. Behind the staff cars, in perfect formation, marched thousands of German soldiers with their rifles slung muzzle down indicating surrender. As the lead elements of the Task Force passed the enemy troops the following infantry quickly took them under control. They were disarmed and then sent to a hastily rigged Prisoner of War (P.O.W.) camp in the rear. It was later determined that the entire German Corps responsible for that area of operations had surrendered.

The American offensive continued. Wurzburg and Nurenburg, both heavily damaged by air power, fell to the American forces. Some elements of the attacking force crossed briefly into Czechoslovakia but returned to strike South toward Munich. Heavy resistance was met at the Danube River at a small town where the Spearhead was attempting to erect a foot-bridge across the river.

Armor elements halted on the road leading into the village while the infantry flushed out the few remaining enemy troops in the houses. German artillery, tank and automatic weapons fire from the far bank of the Danube was unrelenting. Suddenly a caravan of jeeps came roaring up. The lead jeep stopped beside a T.D. and General Patton, Commander of the Third Army, leaped out. Completely oblivious to the heavy enemy fire he strode to the top of an adjacent hillock which afforded a commanding view of the terrain and enemy defenses on the far bank of the river. He was followed closely by several other General officers from the other jeeps. Seemingly unconcerned about his exposed position on top of the hill the General used his swagger stick to point out enemy defenses to the other officers. After several minutes discussing the situation he walked briskly down the hill and climbed into his jeep. The other members of his entourage followed hurriedly. When all had returned to their vehicles the jeeps turned around and left the area. Shortly after the Spearhead moved into the village and the Tanks and T.D.s took up firing positions facing the German positions across the river. A T.D. platoon and an M-4 Tank platoon, although several hundred yards apart, decided to coordinate their efforts by radio after two M-4s had been knocked out. Whenever one unit spotted an enemy tank or anti-tank position its map coordinates would be radioed to the other unit. Both units would then concentrate their fire on the enemy position until it was obliterated. Where it was not possible for direct fire weapons to penetrate an entrenchment artillery would be requested to assist. At one point a T.D. crew saw puffs of smoke arising from the forest on the far side of the river. The crew was puzzled initially until it was determined that a train was making the smoke, probably carrying supplies to the beleaguered German defenders. Not being able to see the target because of the trees the T.D. Gunner used "Kentucky Windage" to fire a mixture of armor piercing and high explosive rounds where he thought the engine would be when the shells arrived. After firing eight or nine rounds a huge explosion was heard and seen. Apparently at least one round had cleared the trees and hit either the boiler on the engine or a box car of ammunition. In either event the train was stopped.

After three or four days of heavy fighting most of the enemy defenses had been eliminated. Engineer troops had been attempting to build a foot-bridge across the Danube the whole time. Although they suffered extremely heavy casualties they finally accomplished their mission. Infantry was rushed across to secure a bridgehead until a bridge capable of holding armor vehicles was built. Once this was accomplished the drive toward Munich resumed. The city capitulated on the 16th of April which, ironically, was Hitler's birthday. By then all German resistance had virtually disappeared and the remaining days until the war ended were spent in mopping-up operations.

With the war ended the 629th was ordered to occupy several towns on the recently established East-West border. The mission was to set up outposts/observation posts at logical crossing points to stop any Germans in the Russian zone from crossing to the West. Russian observation posts with the same mission were usually established in the East zone about 100-150 meters from the American positions. The 629th continued this mission until October, 1945. By then most of the personnel had been sent home and the unit was deactivated.

POSTSCRIPT: The Tank Destroyers were actually a "hybrid" organization. Their basic arm of service was Field Artillery even though the majority of them fought in armored vehicles in close support of the infantry. Every crew member was cross-trained in field artillery (indirect fire), tank tactics and infantry tactics. Every crew member was also trained to assume every position on a T.D., from Assistant Driver To Driver to Loader to Gunner and T.D. Commander. All in all, considering their versatility and training, the T.Ds were probably the best prepared troops to go into combat.

Because the 629th was assigned to "V" Corps initially and attached and detached to various Divisions, Regiments, etc., hard figures on its accomplishments are difficult to establish. Usually the organic unit was credited with any personnel/vehicles, etc., destroyed by an attached unit.

The 629th Table of Organization called for 36 tank destroyers in the Battalion. There were three line companies, each with three platoons with four T.D.s in each platoon. Approximately fifty-four T.D.s were completely destroyed in combat. Many others were disabled but repaired and returned to action. Personnel-wise it is estimated that only 5 to 10 percent of the Battalion's combatants who landed in France survived the war unscathed.

On the plus side of the ledger it is estimated that the Battalion destroyed 108 German tanks and armored vehicles, an untold number of anti-tank weapons, machine-gun emplacements, pill boxes and miscellaneous other material to include several aircraft. It is not possible to determine the number of personnel casualties the Battalion inflicted on the enemy but it is safe to assume that in almost ten months of continuous heavy combat in five campaigns the toll exceeded several thousand.

ADDENDUM: The Author of this brief history was drafted in January, 1943. After training at Camp Hood he was assigned to the 629th in May, 1943. He was initially trained as Assistant Driver and Driver. Shortly after the unit landed in France he became Gunner and eventually T.D. Commander. Due to his assignment, his overall knowledge of the Battalion's actions was extremely limited. Most of the information supplied above is based on his personal experiences and discussions with fellow members of the Battalion during and after the war. Also, accuracy of the information contained herein is subject to the vagaries and whims of memory after 44 plus years.