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OPERATIONS OF THE 701ST TANK DESTROYER BATTALION

Period - 24 March 1943 to 11 April 1943: El Guettar

The 701st T.D. Battalion was now detached from the 9th Infantry Division and attached to the 1st Infantry Division, and the march to Gafsa began. A nuisance raid by two enemy twin-engine bombers halted the column for a while. Flares were dropped and the road was bombed and strafed about 1 1/2 miles west of Gafsa. There were no casualties, however, and the Battalion arrived in an area three miles east of Gafsa. Here, at 0210 hours, March 24th, the 701st Tank Destroyers bivouaced for the night.

By 0910 hours, all, except for the trains, were ready to move again. Lt. Col. King led the column in his half-track. The companies fell into line and left as was most convenient from the bivouac points. The Battalion rode approximately ten miles to the destination five miles east of El Guettar. Here the 701st relieved the 601st Tank Destroyer Battalion, and took up their vacated defensive positions in the Djebel El Ank area. At 1045 hours, enemy guns started shelling the 701st positions but there were no casualties.

Division ordered Reconnaissance Company to function as forward observers. This had been requested personally by General Roosevelt of the 1st Infantry Division. Lts. Smith and Sumner went out and spotted an enemy position of 6 mortars. This information was quickly sent to Lt. Clarke, relayed to Lt. Col. King in his half-track Co.P., and then passed on to a 155mm battery assigned to this fire mission. The mortars had been shelling anything coming through the pass which led to the enemy held valley beyond. After several rounds, the enemy mortars were reported effectively silenced.

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A supply dump was next reported, and it turned out to be an ammunition dump as there was a terrific explosion when one of our shells dropped in for a clean hit. Another gun position, containing three or four enemy mortars, was then uncovered. This was a very unfortunate occurrence for the occupants. A few shells were directed into this target and all was quiet in this position.

Under the cover of darkness, infantry tanks, and some artillery moved through the Battalion area to take up new positions. This movement was covered by fire from the heavy guns in the rear. During the night, an enemy plane dropped flares and tried to draw fire, but the ground troops outfoxed him by refusing to open up.

Through the early morning hours of March 25th, Division Artillery kept up a barrage to cover the forward movement of two battalions of infantry, one battalion of Rangers, and a battery of artillery. Artillery duels and forward infantry action broke out in the afternoon as a message was received warning the Battalion to be alert for possible enemy armored attacks.

From 1615 hours to 1715 hours, Battalion positions were shelled by the enemy. The deep wadis and gullies provided excellent protection for the troops, but four casualties were sustained and one jeep was destroyed; Pvt. Jensen and Menine were killed, and Roberts and Peters were wounded; all these men were from "B" Company.

Due to the excellent work and results of our reconnaissance elements and perfect functioning of our communications system of relaying information to higher headquarters and artillery batteries, the C.P. became a miniature clearing-house of information throughout the day.

On March 26th, our forces were shifted during the morning hours to consolidate positions. Little activity was noted. While light winds created a mild sand storm, Lt. Col. King traveled to Division for orders. On his return the C.P. hummed with activity as officers of the Battalion were called to receive instructions. Information was to be obtained for units of the 1st Infantry Division. At 2000 hours, enemy artillery shells

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were peering the road about 100 yards to the right of the C.P.

News that the Battalion was now a part of the 1st Tank Destroyer Group, to operate under its direction, was received on March 22nd. However, our status with the 1st Infantry Division remained unaffected. The Command Group moved as directed by 1st T.D. Group, and the whole Battalion, with the lone exception of tanks, was dispersed through the area of Dj. El Ank valley. The following morning, before dawn, Lt. Col. King, Lt. Morrison, and some of the officers of T.D. Group, and others reached a forward observation post and set up communications prior to the infantry attack which was to be launched on this front by American forces. The mission of the 701st T.D. Battalion was to protect Division's left flank from attack by enemy armored forces. Artillery activity flared up during the day and large formations of Allied bombers were observed overhead. Reports of satisfactory progress by American forces fighting on all sectors of the front came in as Lt. Col. King returned from the OP that evening. American troops renewed the offensive on the following day. Again Lt. Col. King and others went to the OP. At 1455 hours, Me-109's, Focke-Wulfe's, and Stukas swooped down to bomb and strafe the Battalion area, concentrating near the Command Group road. 20mm shells and machine gun fire damaged three ambulances and a truck. A wounded man was killed and a driver was wounded in one ambulance while eight others were wounded in the other vehicles. Allied fighters interrupted the raid and dogfights resulted. One Focke-Wulfe 190 and an Me-109 were downed in a trail of smoke. No Allied planes were lost. Lt. Col. King returned with his assistants, and it was learned that enemy tanks had attacked and attempted to break through the pass southeast of the Command Group location in the south valley. The area was held by the 9th Infantry Division and 1st T.D. Group, and the attack was repulsed. In the meantime, "B" Company had been detailed to provide patrols and a listening post for the 18th Combat Team.

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On March 30th, Lt. Col. King and his party changed the locality of the OP to a spot more forward. At 0810 hours, a flight of enemy planes roared overhead and cut loose with machine gun fire. No one was injured, but slit trenches were kept busy as air activity continued through the day. "C" Company had moved forward with advancing American infantry to protect their flank. Lt. Lewis' Platoon shelled enemy artillery and infantry in Sakket Valley, west of Sakket, as it also observed for the rear artillery. "A" Company also became active when it was given the detail of patrolling and acting as a listening post for the 18th Combat Team. Enemy planes renewed their activity in the morning of the following day. Flares and bombs were dropped to the rear of the Battalion area, but no one was injured. Lt. Col. King and the observation group continued to visit the OP during the day. With "A" Company being shelled and intense air activity all afternoon by the enemy seeking to ferret out American artillery positions, the Battalion had an exceedingly busy time. However, no damage was sustained. At 1910 hours, eight Ju-88's attacked the neighboring artillery area. Twelve Spitfires came sweeping out of the clouds and sped along to chase the fleeing Junkers into a flight of patrolling P-40's. In the resulting dogfight three enemy planes were sent down in flames without loss to the Allied fighter craft. Our observers and reconnaissance mission officers returned to give the tallies for the Battalion's day. Two enemy gun positions had been silenced and one vehicle was destroyed. Another vehicle had been damaged.

At 2245 hours, a message was received from 1st T.D. Group informing the 701st that 100 enemy vehicles, including two batteries of field artillery and tanks, were observed moving northwest on the trail leaving the Gabes-Gafsa road at Y-5363. One Company and an attached platoon from Reconnaissance Company were sent to the vicinity of Y-3968 for coordination with the 16th Infantry. Its mission was to protect the right flank of the 1st Infantry Division against armored attack. Another company/^{less a platoon} was moved to the vicinity of the crossroad at Y-2373, while the platoon went into position on the high ground in the vicinity of Oued El Keddab.

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