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Operations Of Company "B", 701st T.D. Bn.

Period - 27 Sept. '42 to 12 Feb. '43

It was on September 27, 1942 that Lt. Clark and 27 enlisted men from "B" Company left on the advance detail from Downpatrick, County Down, Northern Ireland. Track vehicles under Lt. Edison left for the new station on October 2nd. The following day Captain Ellmann and 65 enlisted men departed by train while the remainder of "B" Company followed immediately with wheeled vehicles under Lts. McKnight and Whitsit. Captain Ellmann's group arrived at the new location, Hankelow Court, England, on October 4th. Lt. Clark and his advance party already had the house ready for occupancy. The next day the wheeled vehicles arrived after a trip via Larne and Stranraer, and Lt. Edison arrived with the track vehicles and drivers the same day.

Lt. Smith with members of the 2nd Reconnaissance Platoon, Reconnaissance Company pulled into Hankelow on October 13th. The platoon was attached to "B" Company for future operations. Now the personnel assembled in England amounted to six officers and 203 enlisted men. The latter figure now included 15 replacements received on October 9th, 23 men of the attached Reconnaissance platoon, and 5 first-aid medics. Vehicles consisted of eight 75mm self-propelled guns, four 37mm self-propelled guns, four 3/4 ton weapons carriers, three half ton weapons carriers, six 1/4 ton "peeps", three 2-1/2 ton trucks, one trailer, and seven motorcycles. In addition to heavy weapons, "B" Company possessed 38 .50 caliber machine guns, 26 .30 caliber machine guns, 56 tommy guns, 170 rifles, 10 caliber .45 pistols, and 18 Very pistols.

Pay day fell on October 9th. The usual aftermath was in full swing and four AWOL's disappeared to return the following day.

Lt. Whitsit and the 3rd Platoon, less three men AWOL and the drivers, left Hankelow for H.M.S. "Mison" at Weyness Bay, Scotland, October 10th. What remained of the company, including the three AWOL men, entrained at Nantwich, October 13, for Liverpool where they boarded H.M.S. "Derbyshire". This portion

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of the company along with 2000 other personnel, remained on the "Derbyshire" for 25 days. Several days were spent in Liverpool Harbor, some time was then put in off Kent Allen Station, Scotland, where a practice landing, in which "B" Company did not participate, was attempted, and finally the convey was assembled off Clyde.

On October 26 The "Derbyshire" crept out of Clyde Harbor along with 60 companion vessels. The stormy seas made it rough going for several days, especially for the men in the bow of the ship. "B" Company's musical talent emerged with violins, guitar and ukulele to furnish entertainment for the entire assemblage on ship. This lasted throughout the voyage. November 2nd turned out to be a memorable day as the destination was made known. Combat Command "B", of which "B" Company was a part, had the mission of taking and holding Tafaraoui, La Senia, and Oggas airports, and of proceeding against Oran from the south. Field Order No. 1 disclosed that the 3rd Platoon would accompany "A" and "B" Companies of the 1st Battalion, 13th Armored Regiment, in a flying column against Tafaraoui. The remainder of the Company was to proceed against Oggas unassisted. With high morale, the next few days were used to busily prepare for the operation ahead.

The convey steamed past the Rock of Gibraltar on November 7th, and anchor was dropped off St. Leu at 0900 hours, November 8th. Lt. Whitsit and his platoon led off for the Company at 0600 hours when they disembarked with their vehicles from the Tank Landing Craft "Misea". They sped out in a "Flying column" at 0845 hours and were bound initially for Tafaraoui Airport. Under the command of Lt. Colonel Waters, the column also consisted of a company of the 6th Infantry and two tank companies of the 1st Battalion, 1st Armored Regiment. The 503rd Parachute Battalion was unable to land at the airport at 0100 hours as originally planned. However, the column cut through local resistance to take the airfield. By 1400 hours paratroops and fighter planes were ordered in. Before these elements could arrive, French fighter and bomber planes swept down on the column. A 500 pound bomb scored a direct hit and

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completely demolished a half-track. The Company's first wounds were sustained by the enemy's mortar and machine gun fire. Shortly after sundown, long range fire of the 3rd Platoon neutralized an enemy seven gun mixed battery which had been shelling the field from the northeast. By this time planes had landed and many prisoners were taken. It had been a highly successful day.

Meanwhile, the remainder of the Company disembarked from the "Derbyshire" in LCI's at about 1600 hours. The vehicles were landed, one at a time, from water landing craft.

On the 9th, the 3rd Platoon saw more action. An enemy tank concentration was engaged and smashed at St. Lucien. Two tanks were destroyed by 3rd Platoon guns at ranges in excess of 2000 yards. After this encounter the Platoon withdrew to Tafaraoui.

The 10th of November found the 2nd and 3rd Platoons proceeding against La Senia from the south in the face of heavy sniping and artillery fire. An enemy shell struck a self-propelled and set it aflame. Sgt. Redison, Shelton, Dunham, Whipple and Lantry were killed; Stearns, the driver, was wounded but fought with outstanding gallantry throughout the day. The 3rd Platoon then bypassed La Senia and was among the first to enter Oran.

The 2nd Platoon was ordered to take La Senia, but was withdrawn when opposition proved heavier than expected. However, the command half-track did not receive the withdrawal message and proceeded alone into La Senia. Its crew was composed of Lt. Edson, Corporal James D. Petrie, T/5 Milton J. Russell, I/S Gerald Weinberg, Pfc J.C. Gardner, Pvt. Wilbur H. Willis, a tankerman who had just escaped from his burning tank, and an interpreter. The vehicle headed against heavy sniping and artillery fire through La Senia to a point three miles beyond. Here it broke down after being damaged by a road block. An enemy truck column had halted on the road and its occupants opened fire at the "B" Company vehicle from all directions. After a fight of several minutes, eight of the enemy surrendered and some forty others gave up shortly thereafter. Lt. Edson, assisted by the interpreter,

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arranged that four ~~convoy~~ trucks would tow the half-track and carry the prisoners back to La Senia. Here Lt. Edison and his crew, without assistance, made arrangements for the surrender of some 300 French air and infantry personnel to Colonel Robinette when he later arrived.

With the fall of Oren, the campaign in Algeria ended. Combat Command "B" had proved itself to be an excellent tactical unit. General Oliver, by walking unconcernedly through heavy artillery fire south of La Senia, had won the ungrudging admiration of his men. "B" Company had established an excellent reputation for itself. Lt. Edison was awarded the Silver Star for "Gallantry in action", or out-Yorking Sergeant York. Colonel Waters secured a captaincy for Lt. Whitsit.

"B" Company assembled near Tafaraoui Airport on November 13th, and headed for Tunisia with "C" Company three days later. That night they bivouaced near Orleansville. The following evening found the bivouac area at L'Arba, south of Algiers. Cyclist Henry Kirscher was injured when he crashed into a railroad crossing bar. He was removed to a hospital at Algiers. On the evening of November 19th, the Companies were outside Setif and moved to the environs of Constantine by the following evening. Then, on November 21st the 1st Platoon of "B" Company went on to Feriana while the other proceeded to Souk Ahras. Here new orders sent "C" Company in the direction of Tunis and "B" south to Tebessa, which was reached at 2300 hours. A supply truck was lost enroute but, loaded with ammunition and personnel equipment, it continued to Feriana and rejoined the 1st Platoon.

After only an hour of sleep, the Company departed for Gafsa, which was to be attacked at dawn. The movement took place at 0300 hours on November 22nd, and missed the mines which were planted by the enemy at a road block. Except for sniping, Gafsa was occupied without resistance. In the afternoon the Company again attacked, this time against an enemy tank column moving on Gafsa from the east. Deployed at 1600 hours at El Guettar, the enemy was not suddenly by our reconnaissance. Three enemy tanks were destroyed by the guns

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of the 2nd Platoon, one at a range measured to be 350 yards, before darkness ended the battle. One "peep" was lost but no personnel casualties resulted. The Company, minus the 1st Platoon, then moved back to Feriana.

After a few hours of rest on November 23rd, the Company left Feriana and met the enemy just before reaching Sbeitla. Led by the 2nd Platoon, "B" Company destroyed eight tanks, took 70 Italian prisoners and a considerable amount of equipment. The 75mm S/P, in which Lt. Edson was acting as gunner, accounted for three enemy tanks after it had been disabled by 47mm fire. Corporal Bonvenuti, severely wounded by mortar fragment, was the only "B" casualty. After the town was cleared of the enemy, the Company withdrew to Kasserine.

On November 24th, French artillery and infantry moved into Sbeitla as "B" Company returned to Feriana. The men were given a chance to rest up and hot cakes accompanied by cheers kept spirits high.

Lt. Colonel Raff was awarded the Legion of Honor by the French and was made a full Colonel by Allied Headquarters. Captain Ellman and the entire company were awarded the Croix de Guerre with palm. 2nd Lt. Edson was promoted to 1st Lieutenant. "B" Company was pretty proud that day, November 28.

On November 29th, the 1st Platoon was recalled from Gafsa, where it had been retained since the fight at El Gattar. Lt. McKnight and his 37mm guns were sent out at night to reconnoiter enemy positions around Sidi bou Zid and Faid Pass, but the mission could not be accomplished; the roads were little more than trails.

The Company left Feriana on December 1st at 2200 hours as part of a Franco-American force, including a heavy weapons company and a machine gun company of the 26th Infantry, and a company of French Infantry, with the mission of taking the pass at Faid. At 0730 hours of December 2nd American P-38's strafed enemy positions. The 2nd and 3rd platoons led the attack, supported by 50 French riflemen. American infantry mistakenly moved into hills two miles west. Reconnaissance and 1st Platoon were deployed to guard the approach to the Pass on the east. Our heavy guns dealt with one anti-tank gun and two artillery pieces, and moved on into the Pass. They were taken suddenly by heavy machine gun fire

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from high ground on both flanks. Sergeant Foster and Klepp were killed. Lt. Edson, Sergeant Patrick, Corporal Mile, T/5 Turi, Pentille and Howard, all of the 2nd Platoon, were wounded. "B" Company withdrew from the Pass - the tank was that of the infantry. Reconnaissance and 1st Platoon had been attempting to locate machine gun and mortar fire east of the Pass. At 1020 hours four P-38's flew over and one fired a burst of machine gun shots. T/5 Cole, Bryant and Youngman were killed; Corporal Logan and T/5 Levine were severely wounded. This case of mistaken identity was inexcusable and highly demoralizing. The Air Corps claimed that these vehicles were outside the bomb line.

French and American infantry attacked the Pass all day, but, when Lt. Clarke returned at 1700 hours to recover two dead bodies, the Pass was still strongly defended. The Company prepared to bivouac in a cactus patch near the pass that night. The 1st Platoon, upon orders from Colonel Raff, moved out after dark to occupy its former position and was met at 2100 hours by anti-tank fire from the enemy who had moved down from the mountains. The Platoon fought all night out of contact with the rest of the company. T/5 Hawley and Davidson were killed, and T/5 DeLuzac was wounded; Frasier was last seen severely wounded, and could not be found the following day. Several casualties were believed inflicted on the enemy.

The 3rd Platoon moved to the assistance of the 1st on the following morning. The 2nd Platoon later moved out to deal with approaching enemy tanks and truck column, and succeeded in smashing two trucks. At 0900 hours seven enemy planes attacked bivouac positions with light bombs and 20mm gun fire. T/4 Patterson, Cpl. Petrie, and Pfc's Gooding and Caspers were killed. T/5's Wren, Patrick, Pfc. Upchurch and Baker were wounded. Small arms proved no good against aircraft when fired from a vehicle or other exposed positions. Strafing was extremely deadly; two half-tracks and one 3/4 ton were badly damaged. At 1300 hours the Company moved to a new bivouac at Sidi bou Zid. Meanwhile, 120 Germans surrendered at the Pass. Patterson, Petrie, Hawley, Cole, Gooding, Bryant, Youngman and Davidson were buried at Sidi bou Zid. Pfc. Caspers died at the Pass. 10

and was buried there.

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Lt. Clarke, accompanied by Pvts. Wetsel, Barga, and Decker, left in a half ton for the Pass to pick up the bodies of Foster and Klepp. En route, the vehicle was attacked on open road near Faid by four enemy raiders which strafed the truck four times. The vehicle could be listed as a total loss. In the afternoon of December 4th, Reconnaissance and 3rd Platoon took up security positions around Lesouda.

Foster and Klepp were buried at Sidi bou Zid the following day. By now the Company was being bombed and strafed daily. Men remained close to their fox holes and moved vehicles and supplies only by night. Our own aircraft, based at Yeuks-les-Bains, was too far in the rear to afford adequate protection.

Allied Headquarters clarified "B" Company's mission on December 8th. It was to protect Yeuks-les-Bains and to obtain information of the enemy in its sector. By December 10th, the Company had resumed its position in reserve at Feriana. It was raining hard and the return march was on roads made almost impassable by the mud. The next day 1st Platoon returned to Feriana as the Company established a bivouac in a large olive grove one mile south of town.

Lt. Clarke left by plane for Algiers to obtain mail on December 18th. Then Telergua, Bone, and Souk el Arba were visited; thence by truck to Guelma and Souk Ahras, but no mail. Lt. Clarke's return to the Company came on December 24th.

Christmas Day arrived, and thoughts were mainly of home a year ago. Services were attended at the "hotel" in town or in the olive orchard.

News that the enemy landed two gliders, carrying 16 men, and succeeded in blowing the bridge 20 miles south of Feriana came in December 29th. The shadowy figures of Generals Robinette, Ward, and Clark visited Feriana on successive days; this forgotten theater of operations was waking up.

The first mail received by the Company since leaving England was delivered January 2nd. The next day the Company was alerted. Attached to French forces, it left Feriana at 1330 hours for Jebel, and at 2100 hours continued to Hadjeb

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of vision and 10 miles beyond. The enemy was not three miles to the front. The Platoon remained in this forward position for about days, without protection, but no camouflage. The enemy did not press any attack, however. Private Luri was accidentally killed the next day. He was buried in the Company plot at Sidi bou Zid.

On January 5th, the 3rd Platoon, with an attached anti-aircraft platoon, moved to a position just vacated by the 601st T. D. Battalion. From January 6 to the 17th, 2nd Platoon was out on six occasions to occupy the forward position, but the enemy attack never materialized. The Platoon then performed a new function; artillery fire, covering the advance of French infantry, was laid down. Enemy aircraft, with emphasis on fighter planes, were extremely active. Everyone took a personal interest in his fox hole or slit trench. These shelters seemed to miraculously grow deeper after every strafing and soon contained ingenious innovations such as magazine racks and "racks" for a cup of tea, whiskey - even if imaginary - and other prized possessions.

"Der Tag" finally arrived. On February 12th, "B" Company rejoined the Battalion and Lt. Smith's Platoon returned to Reconnaissance Company.

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