

## LIFE in an M-18 HELLCAT in COMBAT

by Phil Hosey, Co. A 704

# E.T.O. ECHOES

First let me state, "The opinions expressed here, etc." This will be told as I remember it, with apologies to the other gunners of the 704th Tank Destroyer Battalion.

We received our M-18's at Tilshead, England, and the first thing we noticed was the electric traverse. This consisted of a handle shaped like a wood-saw grip which pivoted right and left to turn the turret, with electric firing in the handle. This was a good idea, but the traverse was too fast; so it was good for big turret swings but never for leading one or two sight-graduations. Fortunately manual traverse was also available, a wheel about one foot in diameter left of the gunner's chair. Manual firing of the 76 mm gun was done by lever, about one foot long with a knob, to the gunner's right. To fire, one would lean forward, looking into an eye-high rubber-cushioned sight, traverse with the left hand, and fire with the right. Elevation was controlled by a wheel eight inches in diameter below the firing lever. The tank commander would call the range, the loader would put an HE or AP into the breech, and away she'd go. We traveled to the south of England and fired the guns on moving targets. All went well.

We didn't see much action until the Moselle River; then things began to heat up. The river crossing was to be made on a pontoon bridge on which the engineers labored all day. Unfortunately the Kraut artillery also labored hard, for they blew up the bridge as we approached. Immediately we were told to go upstream and ford the river. The spot was chosen for us; but being of a suspicious nature, we buttoned up the driver and assistant, and the three of us in the turret sat on its upper edge. The book says fording maximum is four feet. This looked like more. We plunged in, and soon the water was coming down the gun barrel and pouring in around the turret-traverse ring. When it rose to one foot below the turret top, I thought all was lost, for the driver and assistant were under one foot of water and so was the engine deck. Miraculously, the driver gunned the engine and it didn't stop, though water was pouring in on him and the assistant. Luckily this was the deepest spot of the crossing, so we made it. The book says height of tank is  $7\frac{1}{2}$  feet ... we must have forded at  $6\frac{1}{2}$  !!

Between Arracourt and Luneville we attacked a concentration of German tanks which had taken a position about one mile away, across an open field. Lining up three abreast, we positioned ourselves on a slight hill. Our infantry led the way across the field, with three M-4's intermingled. The Krauts let them get halfway across, then opened up with anti-tank fire from woods on the right. They immediately KO'd two M-4's and drove our infantry to ground. Two Panthers, a Mark 4, and an assault gun then moved from left to right across our line of fire and about one mile away. Sgt. Hicklin called the range at "2,000 yards, moving at about ten mph!" Our AP had a muzzle velocity of 2,700 fps, so it would take two seconds to arrive at target. They were

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traveling at fifteen fps (we hoped) which gave them thirty feet to travel (again, we hoped). Their lead tank was twenty feet long (from the book), so we led him one length for a center shot. All this was complicated by a tree line bordering the road that the Krauts were traveling. Trembling slightly, we laid on and fired. Voila! A hit!! Two feet in front of his rear drive idler. The hit was observed by Sgt. Gilbert in #3 Section (we were #2). We then picked the last tank in line and scored -- he began to burn, and two crewmen got out. Without changing gun settings, we hit the other two.

Received return fire from the left. They split the air about two feet above the turret, causing Sgt. Hicklin to duck into the ring mount. Thank goodness they called their range too long, though they did hit the ground abreast of us with AP, but to our left. We wanted to hoist Hicklin on our shoulders in appreciation but thought better of it.

The tank afire was a Mark 4; next was the assault gun (four crewmen unloaded); we may have knocked off the track or penetrated the engine compartment of the Panther (two crewmen unloaded); the second Panther stopped dead in his tracks, never moved again, and none got out. We couldn't see too well because of the tree line and the distance; but the 76 mm packed a good punch even at that range!

Philip W. Hosey, March 1992.