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The Employment of the Tank Destroyer Battalions with the
Infantry Division

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(This discussion on Tank Destroyer employment is submitted by an officer with four year's experience on this subject. Lessons learned are from personal observation and actual combat experiences in Africa, Sicily, Normandy, France and Germany)

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The role of the Tank Destroyer Battalion in direct support of the infantry has taken on many new aspects in the present campaign in France and in Germany. A gun and weapon, originally designed and referred to as "tank killers," now finds many new and varied missions to perform daily. This article deals only with the successes, mistakes and lessons learned. As far as the T.D. M-10 is concerned, although similar lessons have undoubtedly been ascertained in actual combat experiences by M-18 and M-36 units also.

The primary duty of the T.D. Bn with any division is the destruction and annihilation of the enemy's armor. The elimination of enemy tanks from any given sector of the combat zone will usually pave the way for a successful infantry attack and advance. The secondary role of the tank destroyers in combat is well-known, for artillery support (harassing; interdiction, counterbattery, etc.). A third role, but not third in importance or priority, the employment of the T.D.s to neutralize enemy O.P.s, church steeples, pill boxes, machine gun nests, enemy occupied houses, anti tank weapons, suspected enemy strong points, employment of the naval star shell to illuminate any given point of enemy held ground at night, racing motors to frighten and harass enemy nerves; these are the varied uses that the T.D. has been put to in the present campaign.

The purpose of this paper, then, is to discuss the problems of the T.D.s in combat, their support of the infantry division, their role on the offense, the defense, and a general summary of general lessons learned.

TANK DESTROYERS ON THE LINE WITH THE INFANTRY DIVISION:- Initially, the T.D.s should have been made an organic and integral part of each inf. division! This union should have taken place before the units came overseas, even at the time of activation. (This statement also applies to our tanks.) And what is the reason for this statement? It's this. Any units, working together, training together, maneuvering together, yes, even relaxing together on off hours - will know and understand each other's problems better! Tactics and techniques can be worked out and the "bugs" discovered. Officers and enlisted men will gain a working knowledge of each other's weapons, fire powers, abilities and limitations. In other words, a setup such as this would have relieved many T.D. Bns from their "orphan role" prior to combat or prior to being assigned to a division. Far too many T.D.s have been placed with a division a few days before combat, or even actually during combat, and lives are lost while lessons are learned! Too many T.D. Bns have trained alone (and done a good job of it too), but they have been compelled to work out their own problems, their own tactics and techniques, only to be assigned at the last minute to a division which may have different ideas as to their correct usage. Some divisions, for example, placed the T.D.s completely under the control of the artillery section; others under the infantry rule, others half way between! Coordination, cooperation, close liaison, and a thorough understanding of T.D.s and the infantry are obtained ONLY by long months of training together - or long weeks of actual combat. During these weeks of battlefield conditions, (when initially the T.D.s are "strangers" to their new parent unit), many lessons will be learned the hard way!!

One learns to understand and respect the abilities of others only through combat experiences! An officer will learn the traits and habits of the infantry battalion C.O. - generally speaking - under combat conditions. It is quite a problem for a new T.D. Battalion to join a new division - both then go into battle - and expect all to operate smoothly right away. It won't work!! You must learn your lessons quickly, work out problems of tactics and handling immediately, or men and material will be lost!

Of course, it is quickly admitted and acknowledged that the war against the Germans is well along, and probably most divisions have their normal T.D. support now and have a good working knowledge of each other's abilities. Some divisions did enter combat with a well trained T.D. Bn (one which had been with them for some time) - and better results must have been obtained initially! But others met their new division commander, staff and infantry regiments while action was going on, hurried introductions took place, and off to combat!! This problem of course is now "water over the dam." And very possibly the War Department had definite reasons for keeping many Tank Destroyer Battalions separate. But there were many headaches, "bugs," misunderstandings in France - because of this condition.

TANK DESTROYERS ON THE LINE WITH THE INFANTRY AND THEIR ASSOCIATIONS:- The following is not offered as the approved or school solution, but it is the method which the 813th Tank Destroyer Battalion was employed with the 79th Inf. Division. The closest possible liaison, network of communication and control, is required and most necessary for good teamwork! The T.D.s must keep abreast continually of all infantry plans, movements, etc., and conversely must tell all their plans. Both infantry and T.D.s must know at all times the other's dispositions, boundaries, schemes of battle, (whether on the offense or defense).

Each infantry regiment had one T.D. Company in support (not attached). The distinction between "support" and "attached" is finely divided, but an E.T.O. order several months ago called for "support only" from the T.D.s. Each regt., then, had 12 T.D.s in support, and usually allotted a platoon of four guns to each battalion of infantry. Thus, under normal conditions and with the T.D. Platoons up to strength, one officer and four M-10s were interwoven into the plans and maneuvers of each of the nine Inf. Battalions. At a time permitted, and the situation was such that wire could be laid, each T.D. platoon ran a telephone wire into the nearest Inf. company command post, which in turn gave it communications with the battalion, regt., and the remainder of the division signal network. Each platoon, in order to keep well up on any given situation, would place one enlisted man (preferably an NCO - there never were enough officers!) at the Inf. Bn C.P.

In the next higher echelon of command, the T.D. Company placed its command post in the same town or nearby the regt'l C.P., and always laid in by wire. The T.D. Bn command center, by division order, always set up in the same place as did the division and, in addition, a liaison officer remained at this C.P. at all times. Company officers checked in from time to time with their respective higher headquarters, and the T.D. staff (C.O., exec off. S-2, S-3, and the other Liaison officer), made continual "rounds" of the gun positions and the infantry command posts.

What all this represents is this:- the closest and keenest liaison and contact between infantry and tank destroyers (and it's up to the "junior" unit to maintain this effort), is none too good, and must always be improved! A lack of proper liaison and cooperation is nothing short of criminal!

TANK DESTROYERS ON THE OFFENSE:- T.D.s on the attack with the infantry bn, can prove helpful and effective in many ways. Of course the initial role is to get the enemy tanks! All suspected enemy tank positions, routes of approach and retreat, suspected and known hideouts, must be constantly watched. On the attack, the T.D.s must NEVER operate as one gun!! They must work in pairs or more! Time and time again this fact was driven home to us in France - one T.D. or one tank - on a strenuous attack - will eventually fall prey to a German anti tank gunner, bazooka or Jerry tank. (A marked increase in the useage of the enemy of bazookas and anti tank weapons showed his hand in an effort to stop our armor!) In our operations, one T.D. (or tank), must always cover and protect an adjoining T.D., both work together, move alternately and keep in mind that two can live a lot longer than ONE under battlefield conditions. This theory of supporting each other is well known and Very Old - but American gunners on tanks and T.D.s still, with a lapse of memory - will be sucked in by ONE GERMAN TANK - only to find another hidden away to cut them down! Never underestimate your enemy - and never assume he will operate one tank only - he knows better!

No platoon should ever be split up by the parent unit (the inf), so that it cannot operate in "twos" or "fours." Three perhaps working together is all right, but never ONE ALONE!

Another vital point which will prolong the life of the T.D.s (and its general support to the infantry) - close in inf support! It is most important that a platoon of infantry be assigned to the T.D.s, work together, sleep together, fight together - and both will live a lot longer. If the infantry commander cannot attach any infantry directly to the T.D.s, then make sure that close liaison is maintained, that the inf and T.D.s will move in any direction TOGETHER, and not leave one or the other "stranded."

On the attack, the T.D.s will do well to remain back a bit, and yet close enough to be a good supporting weapon. 500 to 800 yards behind an attack, and rolling along with it - will find the T.D.s performing effectively - and yet not running the chance of meeting an enemy A-T gun, bazooka or mines. The infantry must encounter these obstacles FIRST - let the T.D.s know where they are, and aid them in the neutralization process! Infantry protecting the T.D.s as they move forward, and the doughboys out in front (looking for the German defenses against our armor), and you should have a satisfactory working arrangement. The tank destroyer gunner can lend a lot of morale support to our doughboys by firing at ANYTHING which may resemble the enemy! Throwing a three inch shell at suspected enemy hideouts, strong points, occupied homes and so on will aid greatly in getting the attack underway, frightening the enemy, and bolstering our own men. Time and time again it was proven in combat, the sound of a racing motor, the wild and promiscuous shooting of all the armor's firepower had a devastating effect on the enemy, no matter which side employed this method of attack! It's hard on the nerves, there's no two ways about it, and the doughboys up front know this all too well!

Prior to any attack, another S.O.P. was a careful study of the ground and terrain over which we planned to pass. An understanding of the terrain, its possibilities and limitations, can either make it a storn barrier (or a successful stopping stone) to the infantry commander along with his T.D. platoon leader! In this regard, for quite a while in France, with its swollen rivers, swamps, muddy ground and all - both our armor and the enemy's could operate (ONLY on the roads, (which were many times none too good anyway.) Therefore either side (on the defense) could set up road blocks, mines, barriers and so on and know the other must come through that sector and be slowed down.

The few times that the ground did freeze over during the winter, found American and German tanks exploiting to the fullest, the wide open terrain. And conversely defensive plans were much more difficult for both sides. Even with the ground frozen, it was necessary to double check to be certain there were no bogs or sunken areas which would trap the attacking T.D.s.

With any American attack successfully completed, it immediately became necessary to CONSOLIDATE. The German likes to counterattack when you have reached your objective! He will take advantage of the normal confusion any attack carries, the possibility that communications are upset, that you are relaxed, or even hunting for souvenirs (still a popular Yank pastime!) There is no time to relax and let down! Foxholes must be quickly dug, new cover positions found, boundaries between companies, bns and regts doublechecked and lined in, avenues of approaching enemy tanks guarded, - in general - there's "no sleep for the weary." It's strictly a 24 hour job until relieved. The enemy will ALWAYS get his artillery and mortar fire lined up just about the time you reach your objective - so a word to the wise is sufficient!

The problem of tying in flanks (for infantry and T.D.s) is extremely important. There can be no guessing that "another company" is holding a certain piece of ground, a road net, a corner of a village - you must check it and find out. The Germans are pastmasters at the art of infiltration - and by their excellent patrolling and local "fifth column" or friendly civilian reports, will quickly know what ground you hold - or if you have left any loopholes! The Boche have a habit of attacking on boundary lines, or against new green troops - at a point where they know it will cause confusion and perhaps lead to the most success.

Hunting for souvenirs, relaxing after the attack, failure to get "lined in," hoping the enemy is "whipped" - has in many cases cost American lives and equipment. The price of carelessness and neglect in time of war is very dear, in human lives! Battlewise units on the line today know and respect the German abilities - and act accordingly - whereas inexperienced troops usually must learn the hard way!

TANK DESTROYERS ON THE DEFENSE:- T.D.s, on the defense, need not be right up on the front lines, literally among the foxholes of the infantry, to be effective. A covering position, back from the lines a bit at some strategic spot, is far more satisfactory. T.D.s, too far forward, risk the chance of being overrun by enemy infantry on a strong German attack. They'll either be overrun, or be forced to pull back. Once or twice, during this operation of "pulling back," or a strategic withdrawal, it was learned that the T.D. (or tank) cannot maneuver quite as simply as the individual doughboy. It takes time to "get off" the front lines - and the lumbering T.D. doesn't always come back as quickly as expected. Our armor has been picked off by the enemy, physically overrun by Jerry infantry, knocked out by German tanks - more than enough trying to stay too far forward on the defense - and then getting back "in a hurry." It can't be done every time, so the solution seems to be a covering position, behind the inf lines, in close support. The best spot for this "happy medium" behind the lines - and yet not too far back, must come from careful advanced planning and a study of the terrain.

The problems on the defensive are great. Depending upon the situation, of course - cover, concealment, protection, hull down positions, the correct spot - all had to be weighed carefully.

In open country, it was extremely difficult to find good cover positions close enough to the infantry to be of value - and yet remain concealed. The obvious answer is a hull-down position, concealment behind some barn, house, (etc.), and camouflage. Sometimes the T.D. stood out on the scenery like a "sore thumb" for want of a better position. It was felt for a while by the infantry - that the T.D. weapon - being large, sturdy and armored, could stand out in open terrain and "take it." It was quickly learned that steady artillery and mortar fire from the enemy soon wore down the nerves of the gun crews, the same way battle fatigue occurred among frontline infantry. Although the crews naturally enough had good protection - and a good sense of security - they still are only human, can stand so much - and had to be relieved.

This is all in line with the following thought - if the T.D.s are kept back a bit, (but still in a position to aid the infantry) - the crews and vehicles will last a lot longer. The danger of arty shells and fragments injuring the vehicles will be lessened. The crew will be able to operate longer - and be of more value to the doughboys ahead. (Our battalion had two cases where direct hits were scored by long range enemy arty on the front of the T.D.s - in each case none were injured and only a shaking up was the result - to the nerves of the crews. M-10s were not damaged to the extent that they could not be back on the line in a few hours.)

It should be S.O.P. for the T.D.s to be dug in (if time permits) in a stable defensive position. Engineer bulldozers can be of great assistance in this respect. (Even with dug in positions, it is still possible for an accurate German tank gunner to pick a T.D. off). Our battalion had two M-10s knocked out while defending positions in the Maginot Line (Seventh Army Sector north of Haganeu). All defensive positions, it should go without saying, must have mutual and supporting fire from another T.D., tank, or a nearby anti tank gun.

Two types of defensive setups (there are many more) proved to be the most beneficial. When defending a town, village or city - and the action if rather stabilized - we adopted the following policy:- Each T.D. was placed in position behind the front lines AND behind a house, thick wall, or some type of good protective cover. The crew then more or less took up residence in the house, rested, slept fairly well, stayed out of the inclement weather. One man from the crew (or an E.M. from the Battalion's Recon Company) established a "seeing eye" O.P. nearby - and watched the enemy territory. From this O.P. any enemy tank movements could be spotted and quickly called (phoned) to the waiting gun crews. The observer could then - on the appearance of enemy armor - lead the T.D. (over previously reconnoitered roads) to a firing point and engage the tank. As a result of this simple method, all strain of combat exhaustion, battle fatigue and their like were reduced to nearly zero! For the first time in any defensive setup it gave the crew a break - a chance to get out of the vehicle, relax, eat and sleep well - and still be readily available for any German thrust! Under this plan, all T.D.s were wired into their O.P.s, as well as to the infantry. So a well developed tank warning system was developed. No T.D.s were lost to the enemy while resting in this setup - and yet were always prepared for an attack by the Hun.

The other type of a defensive setup, in more or less open country and away from any villages - is the standard S.O.P. arrangement. Hull down positions, good camouflage, concealment behind woods, brush and so on - were effected. One distinct advantage here was the ability of the T.D. gunner to watch the terrain and be ready to fire at the enemy armor without moving his weapon. However, the crews were compelled to eat, sleep, live and fight inside the cold bodies of the armored vehicles. Physical ailments, colds, constipation and other troubles did show up under this type of "forced living" conditions. One gunner fired on a German tank at less than two hundred yards range - for the simple reason that the camouflage was so thorough and complete - the Jerry tank never knew where the shot came from. The T.D. was literally "buried" in a mass of wreckage, rubble and shrubbery (only the tube and sight could be noticed by the casual observer). The Jerry tank didn't even see this much of the deception!!

T.D.s, like any one else on the front line, must know a good "escape route" in addition to all the other plans, schemes and so on which are worked out. A great deal of planning goes into any defensive setup - it's a 24 hour job and no sleep for the weary if the job is to be done successfully.

It's wise and a time honored idea anyway, on the defensive - to keep a section or platoon back in reserve, an "ace in the hole." No matter how critical the situation may be at the front, a few extra T.D.s on hand will usually prove a godsend when a serious attack is thrown by the Jerries.

TANK DESTROYER REACTIONS IN GENERAL TO THE FIGHTING IN FRANCE:- All learn quickly that FEAR is a normal and natural instinct - and nothing to be ashamed of. In fact, fear, coupled with extra care and courage, makes for a better fighting man. The crack of German artillery shells, their mortar barrages, the clatter of the machine pistols and "burr" guns - all will work on the soldier's nerves and get him tense and strained. New men going into combat for the first time should be lectured on this subject - and know it's no disgrace to be afraid - the best of them are (experienced veteran doughboys).

Confusion in combat, the apparent SNAFU of things, changes of orders, counter orders, and so on all must be recognized as S.O.P. in battle. There is always a certain amount of confusion in an attack by either side - all should recognize this and learn to keep a cool head, when it appears that the whole situation is "bawled up."

Rumors and false reports in combat have a deadly affect on morale and plans!! They must be checked, doublechecked and weighed carefully before going to higher headquarters. New units in combat seem to report too quickly (and without careful investigation), "enemy tanks are overrunning us," "the town is clear," "we're surrounded by Jerries," "we are falling back," and hundreds of others. In many cases one or two individuals got rumors and incorrect reports started - they'll run through a command like wildfire!! One case is hereby given to qualify this point further.

A new regiment was on the line with our division - and in the heat of a strong German attack (designed to drive the American Seventh Army out of Haganeu) the S-3 phoned our command post about 0300 hours. "Your T.D. crews have abandoned their guns and are running away!!," he stated. The duty officer at the T.D. C.P. asked for further information on the subject - and promised to check up on it from his end too. It finally came out that the T.D. crews had become engaged in a fire fight with the enemy, both T.D.s were knocked out, so the report went - and their crews forced to leave the guns under pressure of enemy infantry surrounding them. The S-3 called up later and apologized for the incorrect report - all was forgiven. One erroneous report like this had tied up the telephone wires for over an hour (during an attack) trying to prove or disprove it!! Further proof that the mind will become confused in battle:- the T.D. crews suffered casualties, believed their guns were burning up and got out. Inspection a day or two later, when the attack had died down, showed that NEITHER of the T.D.s had been knocked out - but that enemy flare nearby led the crew to believe they themselves were aflame!!! - and a mortar fragment had wounded a crew member - so the rest figured they had been hit and got out! In other words, both the crew and this particular S-3 had reported facts erroneously - and tied up a lot of personnel and TIME trying to "untie" the mess! Don't make reports, especially in the heat of battle - unless you are very certain of the source and the correctness of them!!

There is a good bit of "buck passing" in combat in an effort to "tag" someone for mistakes. Watch out for it - admit your errors rather than waste time trying to get out of them!

A fatalistic attitude as regards getting injured or killed in combat is soon developed. "A miss is as good as a mile" attitude goes a long way toward keeping one's mental balance! American soldiers are remarkable anyway - they always like to figure it will be the one next to them who will "get it," not themselves!!! It's a good attitude to have, about the only one to keep a man going over a period of months. There is a good bit of feeling that one's "luck will run out" - and after quite a while in combat the average enlisted man and officer wonders when his will. A rest, if possible or a change of job will sometimes cure this "mental quirk."

ENEMY TANKS ARE GOOD! Never underestimate your enemy, and never underestimate his armor! The German tankers are well trained, know all the tricks, have been in the war a long time! The Mark 5 (Panther) and Mark 6s (Tiger and King Tiger - or Royal Tiger) are excellent weapons. The latter tank is a bit slow and lumbering, but has tremendous long range fire power and the improved sight. Many a shell has bounced off a German tank much to the consternation and disgust of the American gunners! The German tanks can get in that first shot at a greater range than we can!! Our gunners must usually hold their fire until the enemy tank gets in closer (for an effective "KILL"). The Mark 5 rates on top of all tanks, American and German - for heavy armor, excellent fire power, maneuverability, speed and so on. It's good, in fact very good - so don't underrate them for one moment!

German tanks on an attack will fire wildly at times with all their weapons, race their motors, and so on - anything to distract the nerves of the American doughboy in front of them.

When a German tank is knocked out - it must be S.O.P. to keep shooting until it BURNS UP. Too many Jerry tanks have been immobilized ONLY by our fire power - and are retrieved that night by the German tankers. Any German tank, once hit - must be burned up - or it may well reappear the next week or so in another fight!!

The Germans may be running short of tanks - but in their present attitude - on the defensive - they can meet our tanks with plenty of A-T guns and bazookas. Our infantry must spot these and either knock them out - or get help - to preserve our own armor strength!

CONCLUSIONS:-

1. The T.D. has proved a very effective weapon in the campaign against the Germans. Its original designation, as a tank destroying weapon, has been fully exploited and expanded far beyond one time pre-war days! T.D.s are called upon to do almost every job there is against the enemy. When no Jerry tanks are around, almost always the infantry colonels will find another job for them, another mission - to make use of their tremendous fire power and range.

Many times the T.D.s find themselves in an ironical spot too. On the line, the driver must turn over his motor every so often to keep the battery charged up. This noise of the motor will usually bring down enemy mortar and arty fire. So the doughboys "curse" the T.D.s. But if the T.D. leaves the line for almost any reason - maintenance, more fuel, more ammunition, relief and so on - the doughboys will cast a leary eye towards them and wonder "WHY ARE THEY LEAVING US ALONE!" They'll almost think something is wrong and maybe they better get out too! The T.D. has an extremely good boosting affect on the minds and morale of the infantry. They like to see them up there with them, makes them feel a lot better when the going's tough.

And it works both ways too. Gun crews like to know the infantry are nearby and "with them." If the infantry are forced to pull back, the T.D.s usually come out with them - and vice versa.

From a gun designed and referred to as TANK DESTROYER, it has become a three inch sniper, a powerful threat to the enemy, and the strong right arm to the infantry!

Tank Destroyers, properly employed and with plenty of advanced planning and reconnaissance, have proved invaluable. No division which has had a battalion for even a month or two wants to give it up for any other unit.

They learn to "do or die" together.....

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