

# Panther vs Panzer

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*NOTE: The combat actions described herein are not necessarily in accordance with the latest tank destroyer doctrine, but resulted from the exigencies of the North African situation. Since then, many tank destroyer battalions have been equipped with weapons specifically developed for accomplishment of their primary employment in accordance with their doctrine, with successes that have amply justified their existence as a tactical force.—THE AUTHOR.*

THE "cry of the panther" in the jungle has at last been duplicated in the "cry of the panther" on the modern battlefield. Symbolically embodying in their basic tactics the stalking technique of their counterpart, "the black panther," the tank destroyers have further improved in seeking out their prey, the enemy armor; and, lying in wait for him, by use of surprise and massed fire, have been extremely successful in the accomplishment of their mission.

In the first months of the North African campaign, the need for antitank weapons was so great and the available tank destroyers so few that the tank destroyers were parcelled out to various units by platoons and companies. At no time during these early months was a tank destroyer battalion employed as such; however, employed on a piecemeal basis, they were called upon to perform many missions for which they were neither designed nor well suited, such as unsupported rear guard actions, direct assault against fortified towns, and as general assault artillery. Despite the resulting loss of concentrated fire power, tank destroyer units functioned successfully, fulfilling many roles aside from those primary and secondary missions set forth in Training Circular 88 (Employment of Tank Destroyer Units, WD, 24 June 1943).

Company "B," 701st TD Battalion, under the writer's command, was the first TD unit to see action against the enemy in Tunisia,

making initial contact on 22 November 1942 and continuing in action throughout the campaign. The company, with a reconnaissance platoon attached, functioned almost entirely as a separate unit, at times even being broken down into separate platoons.

The action of this tank destroyer company at Gafsa and Sbeitla are cited here as examples of successful though unorthodox employment, a success which was due to the combination of aggressive leadership and initiative on the part of platoon commanders,

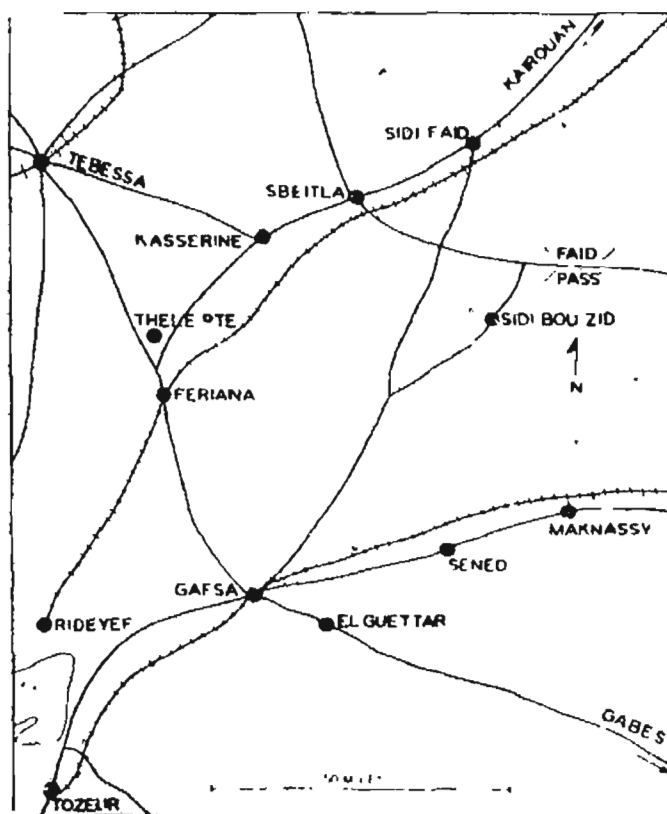


FIGURE 1.  
CENTRAL TUNISIA.

and to enemy errors. We attacked without infantry support, which, against an alert enemy, could have led to disaster; but we cannot expect to surprise the enemy as often as was done at Sbeitla, where our boldness was matched only by the enemy's utter disregard for the remotest pretense of local security.

So, lest we forget the early baptism of fire and the trials and errors, this article will

endeavor to give the reader a little insight into the early fighting by the tank destroyers in Tunisia.

After traveling overland for six days the company reached the little town of Feriana (Figure 1) at about 0230 on the morning of 22 November 1942, only to be told by the "Tunisian Task Force Command" there that

time to leave on the trip to Gafsa, forty-seven miles away.

The absolute absence of any information on the enemy forces made it wise to keep the light platoon (37-mm SP) in the rear of the column because of their vulnerability to small-arms fire, and thus with the two platoons of destroyers (75-mm M3 half-tracks)

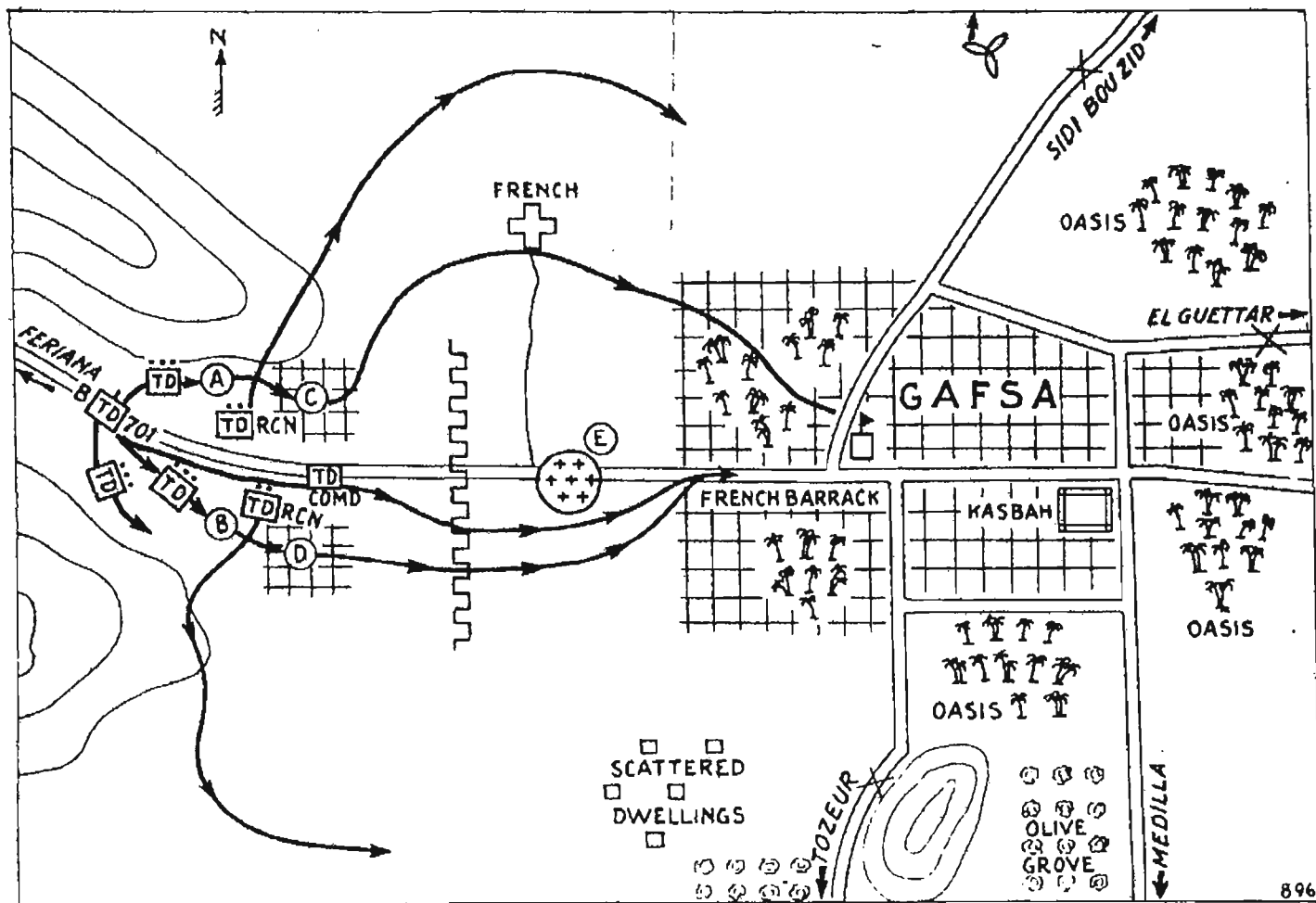


FIGURE 2.  
GAFSA.

it was to be prepared to attack the enemy-held town of Gafsa at daybreak. IP [initial point] time was 0300. Supporting troops totaled two antiquated French armored reconnaissance cars and two P-38's which were to strafe the town just before our attack. This, in retrospect, could have been much like a small boy stirring up a beehive with a stick just prior to attempting to capture the queen bee barehanded. However, after refueling and making ready for the trip into and against the unknown, everyone slept until

used as assault guns, the attack on Gafsa was begun (Figure 2).

To the reconnaissance platoon was given the mission of proceeding directly toward the town but off the road until the first hostile elements were encountered. Then, in order to avoid any enemy planned defensive fires, it was decided that only by a wide flanking movement by one platoon and a dispersed frontal attack by the other 75-mm platoon (A and B in Figure 2) could hope for success be possible. The reconnaissance platoon re-

ported first contact with the enemy and the agreed-upon plan of attack was immediately put into execution. Meanwhile the reconnaissance platoon divided into sections, one going out to either flank to warn us of any flanking attacks by the enemy. The French armored cars were lost to the attackers early, by running into a mine field (E in Figure 2)

with about 300 Arabs who had been armed by the Germans.

All-around defense was immediately established (X's in Figure 2) and the success of mission No. 1, though unorthodox, became an accomplished fact.

That same afternoon word was received through the French warning system that an

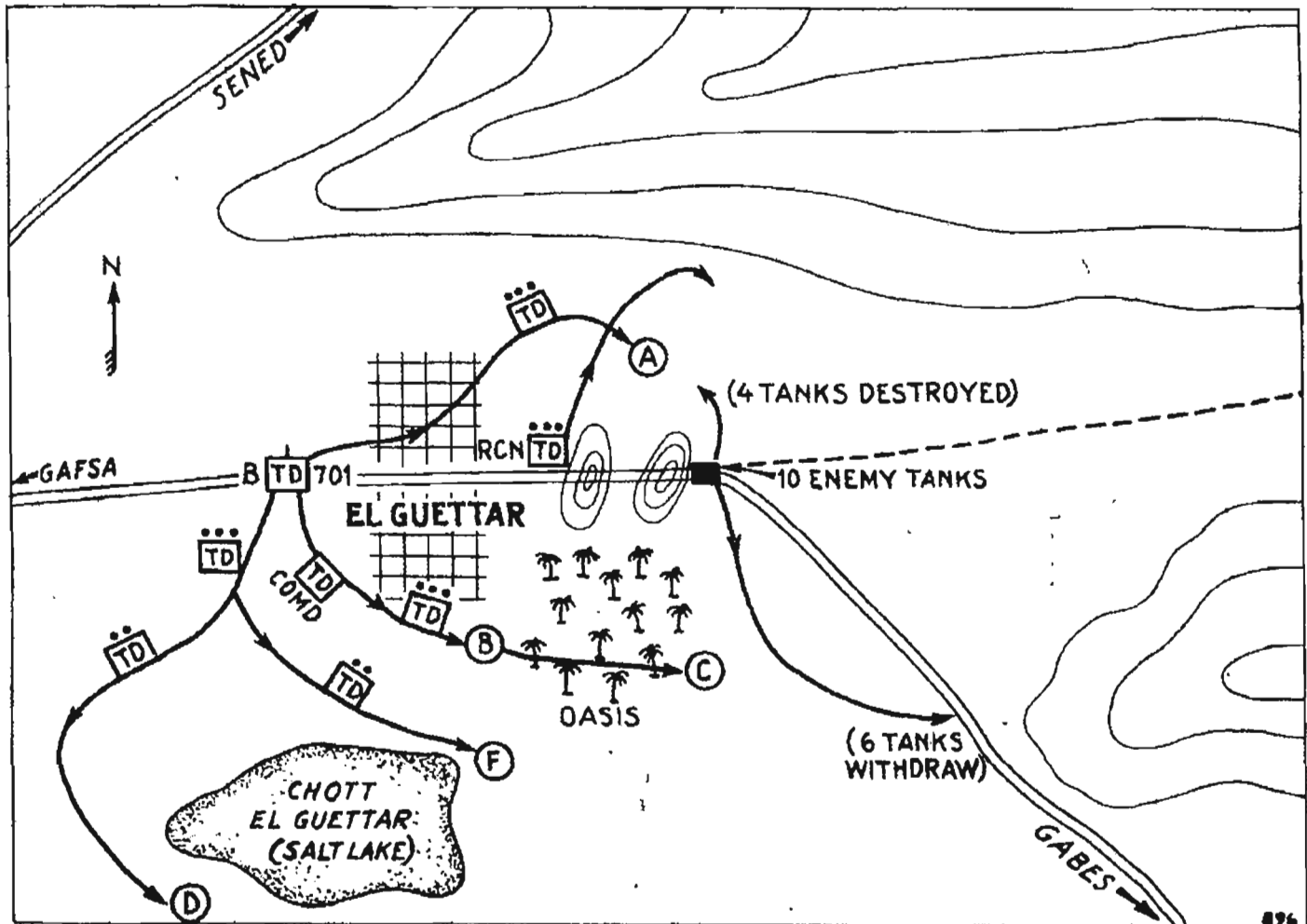


FIGURE 3.  
EL GUETTAR.

on the main road, one of them losing all four wheels.

After effectively eliminating the German snipers in the outlying buildings (C and D in Figure 2), using 75-mm high explosive, one platoon (A in Figure 2) made a flanking attack on the town while the other platoon (B in Figure 2), plus the command group, entered the town, and with the volunteered aid of a young French civilian, cleaned out the remaining German snipers together

enemy tank column was approaching Gafsa from Gabes, the enemy stronghold in the southeast, with the evident intention of retaking Gafsa (Figure 1). Despite the fact that everyone needed some sleep and rest, it was decided that the terrain around Gafsa afforded little opportunity for a successful battle against tanks, so at 1430 the company moved out in the following march order—reconnaissance platoon, one 75-mm SP platoon, command group, the second 75-mm SP

platoon, and followed by the 37-mm SP platoon. This formation was to prove very effective in this and later battles since it afforded initial fire power to support the reconnaissance platoon and at the same time the lead gun platoon also served as a base of fire, permitting the advantageous use of the second gun platoon for a flanking movement or any other appropriate maneuver.

The unit approached El Guettar in an atmosphere of complete serenity, wanting to pick good firing positions and then, by surprise and massed fire, achieve a quick victory.

The main body of the company was just entering El Guettar (Figure 3) and the 14-ton of the reconnaissance platoon were topping a rise just east of town when facing them over the top of a second rise were the enemy tanks.

Surprise at such an abrupt meeting did not stop the reconnaissance from reporting the tanks' position and range, even though one jeep driver spilled his passengers and overturned his jeep in his hurry to get some solid African dirt between him and the muzzle of the lead tank. The man managed to get back safely.

The fight was on. Based on the reconnaissance reports, the company commander sent one platoon (A in Figure 3) to the left of the road and accompanied the other (B in Figure 3) to the right. The left platoon got four tanks immediately while the right platoon scoured the oasis for any more that might be hidden there. Moving to the edge (C in Figure 3), they attacked six tanks that tried to swing south; none was knocked out, but all were later picked up, out of fuel and damaged, a short distance on the way back to Gabes.

During all this action the 37-mm SP platoon had been kept in reserve and was sent out around the salt lake south of the oasis (D in Figure 3) to prevent the company from being outflanked and also to act as rear guard.

At 1700 the company was reformed and went back to Gafsa.

In this last battle, again were violated the most recent doctrines of tank destroyer employment, namely - to go out and seek hostile

tanks. However, here it was necessary to meet a definite situation and it was necessary to pick out favorable ground. TD's, to assure their success, must of necessity have time to select and occupy positions favorable to them in advance of the arrival of the enemy.

Returning to Gafsa at about dusk with anticipation of much-needed sleep, the writer was met with the news that the Germans had captured Sbeitla (Figure 1) about 120 miles to the north, and along with it large quantities of French equipment. While the company's newly found importance to the capture of Tunisia was greatly appreciated when the French asked the TD's to go up there and do something about it, it was felt, too, that the men had already passed the point of human capabilities to go without sleep. However, it was known there was no one else to call upon, and with Sbeitla in enemy hands Gafsa would have been untenable, as was later borne out by the evacuation of Gafsa in February when it became impossible to hold Sbeitla against superior German panzer elements.

The 37-mm SP platoon was left behind to help hold Gafsa in support of one infantry company, part of the 1st Division, while the remainder of "B" company started back for Feriana at about 2230 that night and spent the few remaining hours before dawn preparing for the next mission and getting two hours' sleep.

Dawn on the 23d saw the company beginning its seventy-six mile march through Kasserine to Sbeitla, using the same formation as previously. This became known as Plan A. However, because of lack of further enemy information other than that he had come as far as Kasserine, and expecting to meet him coming toward Thelepte, the company traveled in staggered formation on the road so that each gun would have a field of fire to the front. The reconnaissance platoon had been given orders to do a particularly thorough job.

Because of the similarity between this march and the surprise meeting encountered at El Guettar, one 75-mm SP was placed up front in the column just behind the reconnaissance so that if they were surprised again the TD could open fire immediately. It

traveled with one shell in the chamber ready to fire.

It was learned, upon arrival at Kasserine, that the enemy had been there but had gone back in the direction of Sbeitla, so it was now certain that contact would be made between the two towns. Cautiously now the unit pro-

showed the road as entering Sbeitla from the southwest, all were again surprised when, approaching from the northwest and topping a rise, the reconnaissance saw the town lying out before them (Figure 4). However, no contact was made by the reconnaissance until the outskirts of Sbeitla were reached, later ex-

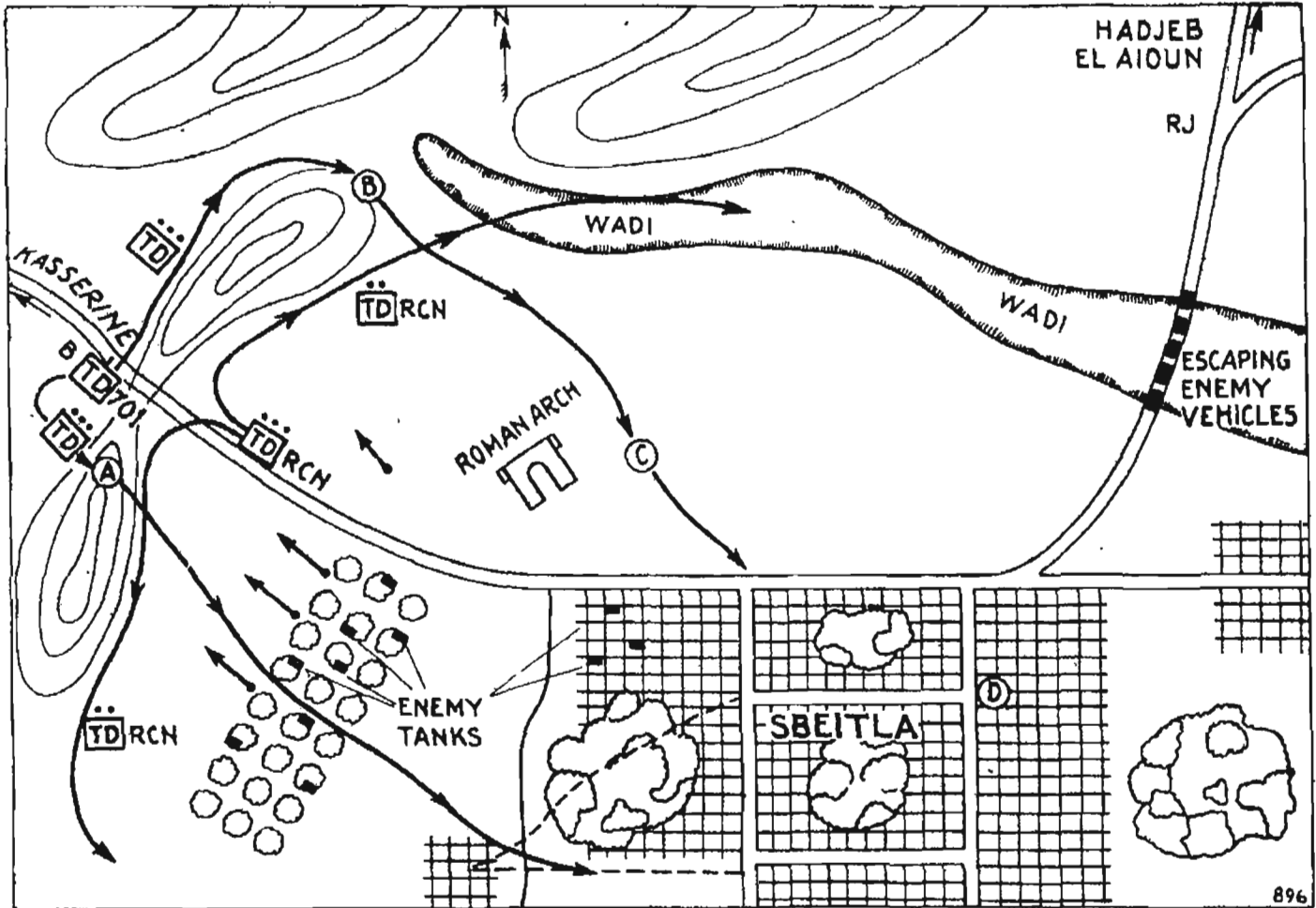


FIGURE 4  
SBEITLA.

ceeded on its way and about five miles out encountered a stone road block appropriately well placed in a defile. Anything was expected to happen at this point, but for some unknown reason it was neither booby-trapped nor defended. A little pioneer work soon cleared a passage and the company advanced.

At this point a light, cold rain developed and further strained the already taut nerves of the men who were eager and alert trying to catch sight of the enemy before he saw them. The odometers showed that the company was almost there.

Due to the inaccuracy of the maps which

plained by the fact that, it being noon, the enemy was eating.

The reconnaissance halted and observed the edge of town but saw nothing, then moved ahead and had covered about half the distance to the town proper when everything broke loose.

An enemy tanker saw the jeeps about the same time the reconnaissance spotted the tanks well hidden in an orchard and all facing them. The tanker gave the alarm and raced for his tank as the lead reconnaissance jeep warned the company.

A hot fight followed with the enemy open-

ing up with machine guns and 47-mm tank guns, and the lead destroyer firing over the dispersed jeeps as the commanding officer of the reconnaissance platoon marked targets with tracer .50 caliber. The jeeps also opened up with their .50 caliber machine guns to keep the tanks buttoned up.

As soon as the enemy position was definitely established, one platoon was sent to the left of the road (B in Figure 4) from where it opened fire on the tanks. The reconnaissance platoon was split, one section going to the left to help protect that platoon from enemy infantry, while the other section took up position with the other TD platoon behind a hill mask (A in Figure 4). From here, this platoon took up the fire fight, thus enabling the platoon on the left to flank wide to the left unobserved, where it took up a position near an old Roman arch (C in Figure 4).

With the platoon in these positions, a cross fire was formed, and no matter how the tanks moved they met the tank destroyers' fire. The destroyers knocked out eleven enemy tanks and had one of their destroyers hit, immobilizing it. It was only by this unlucky hit that several trucks and three tanks succeeded in escaping out of town the back way.

The destroyers were ordered to close in cautiously and to pour it on, and in this way, by firing heavily with high explosive and overrunning machine guns at several street corners, the company entered town.

The booty consisted of nearly a hundred prisoners, who were rounded up, searched, and sent to the rear, as well as quantities of equipment and supplies, including much captured French equipment.

Some paratroopers finally assisted in mopping up, and after the French sent in an infantry company and an artillery battery to take over, the company turned the town over to them.

A check of the tank destroyer company's condition turned up these facts: that in four days since leaving Constantine it had been in three actions, winning them all; taken over four hundred prisoners and much enemy material; knocked out fifteen tanks; and traveled some four hundred miles. The only casualties were one man wounded and two vehicles slightly damaged. And now it was going back to Kasserine for its first real sleep in four days.