

RESTRICTED

T D Combat In Tunisia



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TANK DESTROYER COMBAT IN TUNISIA

Part One: Gafsa and Sbeitla

Part Two: El Guettar

PART ONE

FOREWORD: In the initial stages of the Tunisian campaign, tank destroyer units were necessarily split up and assigned as separate companies and platoons over a wide front to meet current needs, contrary to accepted tank destroyer employment based on the battalion as the smallest tactical unit.

Despite the resultant reduction in concentrated fire power, tank destroyer units functioned successfully, fulfilling many roles aside from those primary and secondary missions for which they had been trained and equipped. Employment of tank destroyer units in the accomplishment of tasks other than those set forth in Training Circular 88 (Employment of Tank Destroyer Units, WD, 24 June 1943) and in Field Manual 18-5 (now under revision) is not advocated. However, attention is called to the leadership and initiative displayed by tank destroyer officers and men in accomplishing missions aside from those for which they had been trained. This is a prime requisite in modern warfare and therefore worthy of consideration.

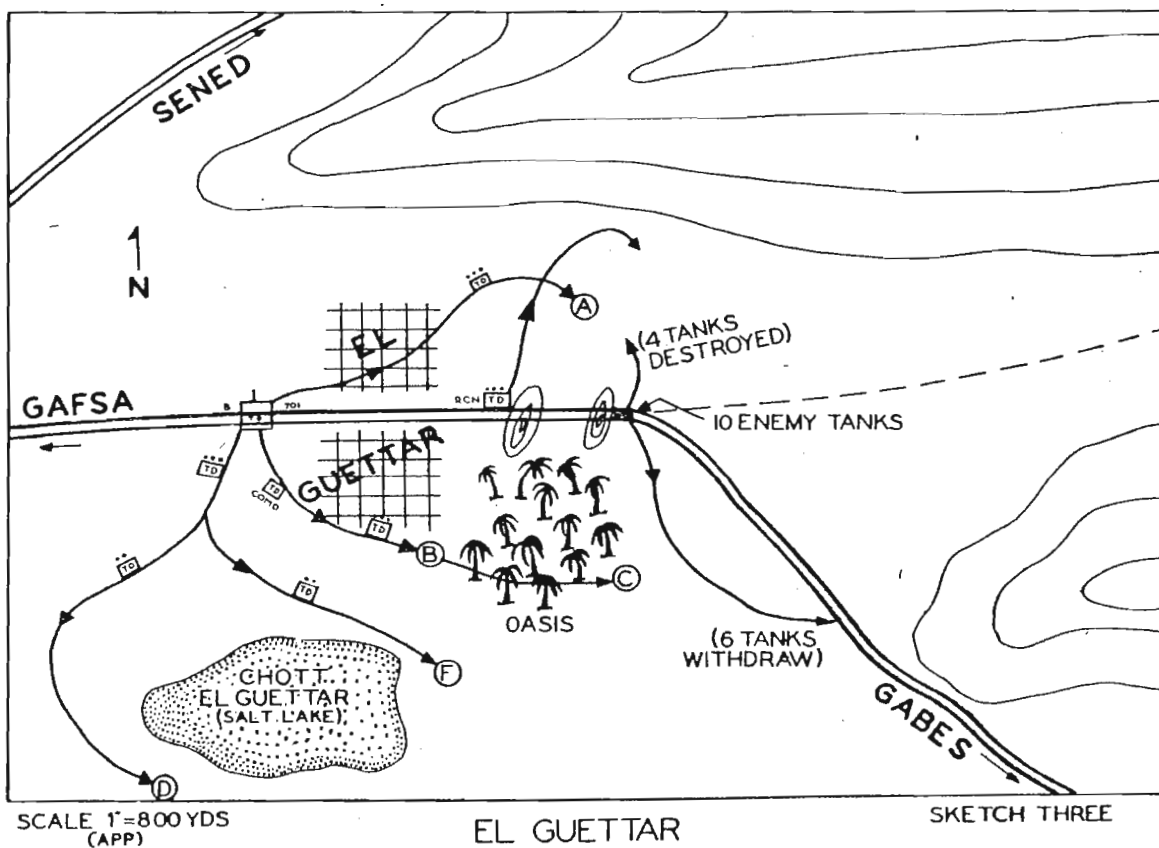
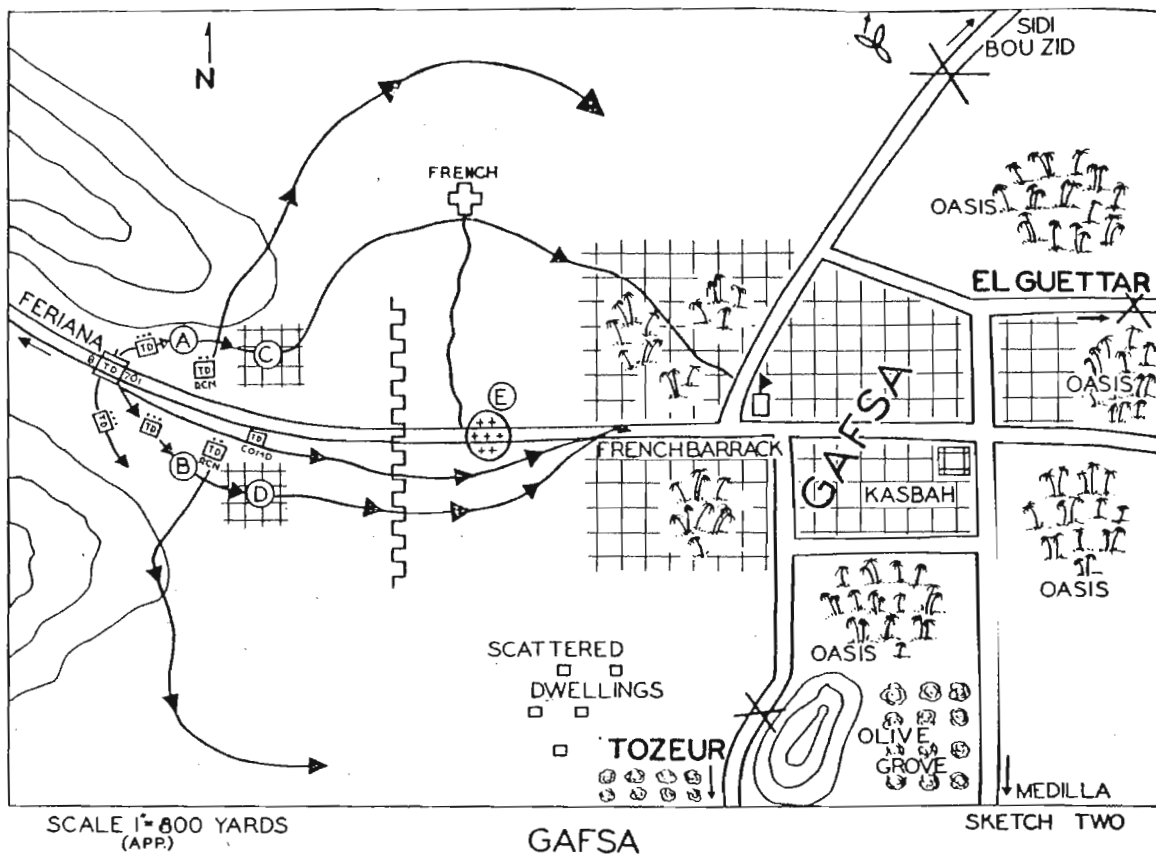
In the action at Gafsa and Sbeitla, the tank destroyer company was successful despite unorthodox employment. This success was due to favorable circumstances and aggressive leadership. We cannot expect to surprise the enemy often as was done at Sbeitla. Had the enemy not been surprised there the action might well have been disastrous. Tank Destroyers attacked without infantry support. This too, against an alert enemy could lead to disaster. Vigorous and aggressive leadership combined with enemy errors contributed to the success. Do not expect to use your tank destroyers in this manner and succeed in the majority of cases.

Part One, GAFSA and SBEITLA, concerns Company "B" of the 701st TD Battalion, the first tank destroyer company in Tunisia, which made its initial contact with the enemy on 21 November 1942 and continued

(1) TC 88, par. 5a. "Tank destroyer battalions should be employed as units. Employment by separate company or smaller unit seldom gives good results, and frequently fails."

in action throughout the campaign. This unit, with a reconnaissance platoon attached, functioned almost entirely as a separate company and even as separate platoons. Company "B" distinguished itself repeatedly, earning citations from both the French and Allied Force headquarters by whom it was employed. Missions performed outside of true tank destroyer actions included assault artillery, infantry support artillery, flank and rear guard (security against other than armored forces).²

(2) TC 88, par. 7f "Retrograde movement—The enemy will undoubtedly employ armored units to exploit his success.... Tank destroyers should be employed at maximum strength to delay, drive off, or destroy the hostile tanks." Company "B" as one of the tank destroyer units used as a rear guard at Sbeitla in February, covering the withdrawal to Kasserine Pass. The rear guards fought off all types of enemy troops.



GAFSA AND SBEITLA
Captain (now Major) Gilbert A. Ellman
Commanding Co. "B"
701st TD Battalion

Company "B" had traveled overland from the vicinity of Oran, Algiers, to Tunisia, through Constantine, Souk Ahras, and thence down to Feriana, a thousand-mile trip which we accomplished in six days of marching. We arrived at Feriana at night and learned that the Tunisian Task Force commander expected trouble from the southeast. I (the company commander) received orders to attack the enemy-held town of Gafsa at dawn (Sketch 1). We refueled and took advantage of a half-hour's rest before proceeding to our objective.³

The company was supported in this assault by two antiquated French armored cars and by two P-38's which strafed the town at dawn. We attacked right behind them, flanking the town generally with two heavy platoons (75-mm. M3 half track destroyer). I kept the light platoon (37-mm. SP) in reserve, just off the road. Their destroyers were vulnerable to ground fire, and we were not at all certain what sort of resistance we would meet.⁴ The terrain at Gafsa afforded no concealment. We made the best of a poor situation, where we were forced to use our destroyers as assault guns. I depended on the flanking movement and dispersion and speed of my destroyers to throw off enemy fire. The French armored cars stayed on the road as we advanced on the town, where one later hit a land mine, blowing all four wheels off (Sketch 2-E).

(3) TC 88, par. 3a. "Action of tank destroyers is characterized by an aggressive spirit. Their mobility permits them to be concentrated rapidly in an advantageous position."

(4) TC 88, par. 3d, 1. "The vulnerability of tank destroyers to hostile tanks, antitank, and artillery fire requires that every practicable measure be taken to ensure concealment. The most advantageous positions are those affording flanking fire."

The Germans had snipers in the outlying buildings (C and D). We cleaned these out with 75-mm. high explosive shells, one shot of which usually served to collapse a building entirely.⁵ The heavy platoons then moved from their initial positions in among the buildings and fired on some entrenchments that had been thrown up across the road. I took one platoon directly in paralleling the main road, while the other platoon hit from the side to bottle the enemy up. After the command group and the one platoon had figured out where the Germans were most likely to have their mine field and had passed the spot, we converged and entered the town.

We circled around inside the town and cleaned out the remaining snipers with the aid of a young French civilian who volunteered to point out their locations. Besides the Germans our prisoners included some three hundred Arabs who had been armed by the Germans. These had scattered through the groves and oasis where we chased them down. I looked the town over and placed my guns in the best defensive positions,⁶ on the roads leading to Sidi bou Zid, El Guettar, and Tozeur. (See Sketch 2). Mission Number One had been accomplished.

Mission Number Two was not far behind. Shortly after noon we received word that an enemy armored column was approaching Gafsa from the southeast, evidently with the mission of recapturing the town.⁷

(5) This same company commander later reported, "We really used high explosive ammunition" (during the entire Tunisian campaign). All TD units concurred in this report indicating that a much higher percentage of HE was carried and used than is called for in current allowances. Unless advance information indicates that an action will definitely be against enemy armor alone, a good percentage of high explosive should be carried.

(6) TC 88, par. 7d, 1. "A defensive situation usually permits thorough preparation and organization of tank destroyer firing positions and routes of access. The warning system can be perfected..."

(7) TC 88, par. 5f. "An efficient antitank warning service is essential. Information of hostile tanks is also obtained by liaison with higher headquarters and with other ground and air intelligence agencies."

After an inspection of our defenses, it was decided that the locality was not suitable for tank destroyer maneuver against armor. So, despite the need for rest, the company left Gafsa at 1430 and headed for El Guettar and the enemy column (Sketch 1). We hoped to be able to pick our ground and surprise the tanks.⁸ We traveled in our usual formation: reconnaissance platoon, one heavy platoon, command group, second heavy platoon, and the light platoon in reserve. This formation proved to be extremely efficient, both here and in later battles.

We approached El Guettar without alarm. The company was just entering the town when our reconnaissance quarter-tons ran over the brow of a small hill just east of town (Sketch 3). Facing them, over the brow of a second rise, were the enemy tanks. The reconnaissance dispersed immediately, reporting the range and the position of the enemy. One jeep turned off the road so quickly that it spilled over, dumping the three men in the ditch. They crawled back to safety.⁹

(8) TC 88, par. 3b, 2. "Tank destroyer action consists of repeated application of the following fundamentals: movement to firing positions so as to intercept hostile tanks, arriving in advance of the tanks sufficiently to permit proper emplacement and concealment of tank destroyers..." The time element involved in this second action did not allow for the emplacement and positioning of the destroyers prior to the arrival of the tanks. However, the TD's did gain the advantage of surprise and of better ground on which to meet the armor.

(9) "We never did recover that vehicle and wondered for months what had become of it. In February 1943 we found out. We were engaged in the big fight at Sidi bou Zid. A radio, using our frequency and an old code sign that had not been in effect since that day in El Guettar, broke in on the company net. The speaker attempted to direct one of my platoons into what later developments proved would have been a death trap. However, I was suspicious at once. Aside from the use of the old code sign, I could not recognize the voice and the accent was not quite right. Finally I cut in and said, "Get off the air, you German so-and-so." He kept mumbling but finally

The tanks opened fire immediately. As soon as I had my reconnaissance reports, I sent one heavy platoon to the left of the road and the other to the right, to the oasis.¹⁰ I accompanied this unit. We stopped and scouted the oasis for tanks (B). The destroyers on the left met the tanks (A) and got four at once. We moved through the oasis to its east edge (C) and attacked six tanks that tried to swing back to the south. They succeeded in escaping, and I sent the light platoon around the Chott el Guettar (a salt lake lying to the south) to prevent this group of panzers from flanking us.¹¹ However, they fled straight back toward Gabes and we picked them up several days later. They were out of fuel and had been damaged by our fire.

At 1700 I reformed the company and started back to Gafsa, planning on giving the men a rest period and doing some maintenance. But "The best laid plans...", etc. Reaching Gafsa, we found Mission Number Three awaiting us.

The town of Sbeitla, 120 miles to the north (Sketch 1), had been taken by the Germans. The report indicated that two companies of French infantry and considerable supplies and materiel had also been captured. The French general commanding that sector wanted

dropped off. I am sure that was our old recon jeep and the radio. The enemy like our jeeps so much that they grab them up whenever possible. Some of their advance guard must have picked it up two months before at El Guettar."--Commanding Officer, Co. B, 701st TD Battalion.

The 601st TD Battalion, during a heavy engagement at El Guettar in March, reported the Germans using an American jeep as an ammunition carrier to supply tanks on the battlefield.

(10) Note the use of the flanking movements by the tank destroyers in the absence of prepared, tenable positions. The unit commander's plans were characterized by aggressiveness and initiative.

(11) A logical move, since it is a well-established fact that German (and Japanese) armored force tactics usually call for a flanking attack if a frontal thrust has been held or delayed.

us to go up there and do something about it.¹² I guess by this time he thought we were a pretty handy bunch and was ready to send us any place to do anything.

I could see his point in being worried. The Germans could push from Sbeitla on down through Kasserine to Thelepte, cut us off at Gafsa, and circle around behind the British First Army. The Germans would have to be stopped and pushed back.

On the other hand, I disliked taking my outfit on another overnight march which would terminate in a battle against uncertain odds and perhaps in a type of mission which we had not been trained to accomplish. However, I also knew that there was no one else to call upon. So we refueled immediately and started for Feriana, leaving the light platoon to assist in the defense of Gafsa. We arrived at midnight and caught two hours of sleep before starting at dawn on the 76-mile trek through Kasserine to Sbeitla.

Our formation was similar to that used the day before at El Guettar. This became our Plan "A," from which we formed other plans to meet various possible situations.¹³ However, going into uncertain enemy-held territory with no support and with maps that later proved to be inaccurate, I staggered my vehicles so each would have a field of fire to the front. I also ordered the reconnaissance platoon to do a particularly thorough job. As a result

(12) This "indefinite" order was typical of those received by tank destroyer units during this early, uncertain period in Tunisia. No one seemed quite sure just what they were for, but were certain that they could do the job in question--another tribute to the training and initiative of these troops. It was, perhaps, a case of "Let 'Joe' do it."

(13) Preplanning and prepared plans of action are a necessity for fast-moving, quick-striking tank destroyer action, especially when enemy and terrain information is incomplete or inaccurate.

of our surprise meeting with the enemy at El Guettar, I moved one destroyer from the leading platoon up immediately behind the reconnaissance screen so that it could open fire as soon as the reconnaissance vehicles dispersed to the sides. This gun rode with a shell in the chamber, ready to fire.¹⁴

As we advanced, the reconnaissance platoon examined every possible bit of cover in the vicinity--bushes, tree clumps, woods, houses, farm buildings, defilade positions.¹⁵ I wanted to be sure that no enemy units were hiding out, waiting for us to appear so they could jump in behind and cut us off.

In this manner we arrived at Kasserine. No enemy was found in the vicinity, and the inhabitants informed us that enemy patrols had reached the town but had turned back to Sbeitla. That indicated that contact was almost certain between Kasserine and Sbeitla. We started on for Sbeitla.

Five miles out of Kasserine we came upon a stone road block, neatly placed between two high hill masks. We fully expected it to be defended or booby trapped, or both. The reconnaissance approached it cautiously, examined it, scouted the neighborhood, and found nothing whatsoever. A little pioneer work cleared a passage through the block, and the company proceeded.¹⁶

(14) This is the principle of the accompanying (artillery) gun with the advance guard, the function of the reconnaissance elements here. It is questionable whether a destroyer, slower, more vulnerable, and less easily replaced, should be placed up forward with the reconnaissance vehicles. However, as an emergency measure, it worked in this case and is worthy of note.

(15) TC 88, par. 5e. "Reconnaissance elements of tank destroyer battalions are essential for successful employment of battalions, and should not be detached for other purposes."

(16) FM 18-5, par. 123c. "When the (reconnaissance) platoon encounters a road block, dismounted reconnaissance is made to determine the nature and extent of the obstacle; whether it is isolated ...one of a series...defended, and if so, in what strength and by what type of weapons."

A light, cold rain had developed, limiting visibility. The men were eager to make contact, alert, and did everything possible to locate the enemy before he saw us.

Ten miles past the road block we encountered a blown-out bridge. It was a thorough job. The span that had bridged a deep canyon was completely destroyed. The reconnaissance fanned out, found a possible crossing, and we pushed on towards Sbeitla.¹⁷

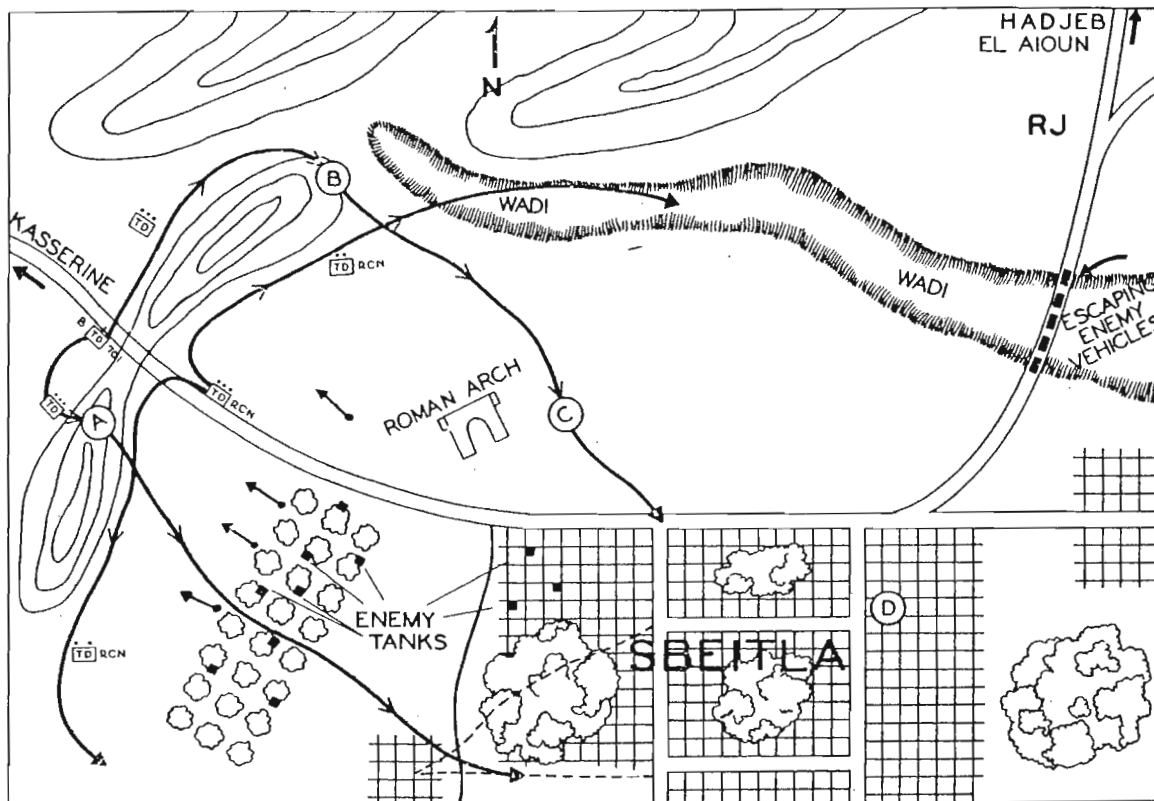
The reconnaissance platoon had three quarter-tons staggered out in front followed by the halftrack support gun and the platoon leader's halftrack, then motorcycles as connecting files. They proceeded as before, examining all cover even more closely, as we were now approaching Sbeitla itself.

Our maps showed the road approaching the town from the southwest. Actually, we approached from the northwest (Sketch 4). Consequently the reconnaissance jeeps ran over a rise in the terrain and unexpectedly saw the town lying out ahead of them.¹⁸

It was just noon, and, as we found out later, the enemy was messing. This probably explains their failure to spot our jeeps as they topped the rise.

(17) The functioning of the reconnaissance platoon at the road block and at the blown-out bridge is noteworthy. Mines and booby traps were considered, checks were made for enemy fire covering the obstacles, and the safety of the company insured without undue delay to the main body.

(18) Combat reports show that, in many instances, issue maps covering foreign territory are not entirely dependable. This is due, in part, to the recent road-building and construction program put into effect by the Axis powers especially. Measures to offset surprise contacts (as had been taken here) are thus of the utmost importance.



SCALE 1"=800 YDS
(APP)

SKETCH FOUR

SBEITLA

The reconnaissance halted and observed the edge of the town and the fringe of the orchards on the outskirts. At that distance, nothing was evident. The jeeps moved ahead and had covered about half the distance to the town when things broke loose.¹⁹

The reconnaissance boys spotted the enemy tanks at the same time the tankers saw them. The tanks were positioned in the orchards, all facing us, camouflaged and well-hidden. Between the tanks (Italian light mediums) were infantry lines, and machine gun nests had been dug in well in front of the tanks and infantry.

A tanker saw our vehicles, gave the alarm, and raced for his tank. The lead reconnaissance jeep halted and warned the company. The enemy opened up at once with machine guns and 47-mm. tank guns. Our three jeeps didn't wait to swing around but came tearing back in reverse, swerving, almost touching, and firing as they came. They retired out of range, and the platoon leader's halftrack returned the fire until the supporting destroyer opened up over the dispersed jeeps.²⁰

The reconnaissance pointed out the tanks with machine gun tracers which also served to keep the tanks buttoned up, limiting their vision. As soon as I had determined the disposition of the

(19) FM 17-10, par. 106f. "Reconnaissance of village.--In reconnoitering a village suspected of containing hostile troops, approach to the village from a flank or the rear is desirable. A detailed reconnaissance with field glasses is first made. This is followed by a mounted reconnaissance around the village where practicable..."

(20) Had the enemy been better prepared and more alert and if the attack had not been a complete surprise, these reconnaissance vehicles would not, in all likelihood, have escaped. However, the value of the one destroyer in support of the reconnaissance is shown here. Its fire enabled the unit commander to organize his attack before his reconnaissance vehicles had been nailed down by enemy fire.

tanks, I sent one heavy platoon to the left of the road (B) where it opened fire on the tanks. The reconnaissance platoon was split, one section accompanying the destroyers to the left where it used its machine guns to protect the destroyers against enemy infantry and machine gun fire. The second heavy platoon went to the right, accompanied by the other reconnaissance section, and dug in behind a hill mask (A). From there it took up the fire and drew attention from the left flank platoon which then moved by bounds around an old Roman arch on the left side of the town and took up a good position (C).²¹

Machine gun fire from the reconnaissance sections effectively silenced at least one machine gun nest and kept down the volume of small arms fire against the destroyers, allowing them to concentrate on the tanks.

The destroyers on the right knocked out all the tanks they could see at a range of 900 yards and forced the enemy infantry out of the orchards. They formed a cross fire with the platoon that had taken a position on the left flank, and no matter which way the tanks moved back through the town, they met our fire. We got eleven tanks altogether. A party of Germans, who had left the outer perimeter of defense to the Italians, evidently decided things were getting too hot and evacuated the town, making their escape in a number of supply trucks. They left the town through the rear gate taking the road to the northeast. The three tanks that were left tried the same maneuver. By this time one destroyer from the left platoon had moved around through heavy machine gun fire toward the rear of

(21) FM 18-5, par. 104a, 2. "Attack maneuver.—The first subordinate unit to meet the enemy halts in the nearest favorable position and engages the enemy with fire, while the remainder of the unit maneuvers to attack the enemy. The attack will be along a flank or along some covered line of approach, if one exists."

the town. This vehicle was immobilized there by the tank fire and could not prevent the tanks' escape.

I ordered the destroyers to close in slowly, firing heavily.²² The remnants of the enemy gave way to our superior fire power and surrendered, although we had to overrun machine guns at several street intersections as we entered the town.

The one destroyer that had been hit reported a man wounded and called for the company aid man. The medico started out on foot, jumping a wide ditch enroute. The ditch turned out to be full of Italian soldiers who immediately surrendered to the aid man, although he was unarmed.

Upon entering the town I sent one reconnaissance section and one destroyer platoon north to the road junction where the Germans and tanks had made their escape in order to prevent a counterattack while we were mopping up.²³

Nearly one hundred Italian prisoners were rounded up, searched, and sent to the rear. French materiel was found, along with quite an amount of enemy materiel. I sent a motorcycle messenger back to bring up a company of paratroopers who had followed us from Feriana.

(22) Assault with tank destroyers is not normally a TD function. However, in this situation and in the absence of supporting troops of other arms, the tank destroyers neutralized the tank fire with their fire. Then, in their armored vehicles (halftracks), they overran the enemy infantry position.

At least the commander can be commended for his application of paragraph 3 TC 88: "Action of TD's is characterized by an aggressive spirit."

(23) Tank destroyers have as their objective the destruction of enemy tanks. They do not have an actual physical objective, as the infantry or armored force do. Thus, tank destroyers are not trained in the taking and holding of a terrain objective. The measures taken here for the defense of the town, therefore, were the results of common sense, the prime requisite of any good soldier or commander.

They assisted in the mopping up. A check of our condition revealed that two vehicles had been slightly damaged and one man wounded in the chest.

We found several German trucks and a radio car that had been hit and abandoned, the makings of a spaghetti dinner, and even some cases of Italian soda pop piled neatly in a corner (D). Three dead civilians lay in the main street and others were found that had been wounded, either during our fight or during the battle of the night before when the enemy had taken the town. They had locked up the townspeople, men and women separately, in the east end of town, allowing the Arabs to go on a looting rampage. The children had been left to roam. We found three about three years of age that had been wounded by gun fire. They were huddled in the back of an abandoned German truck, scared to death and crying. We turned them over to a trustworthy town official when we had freed the inhabitants.

The French sent up an infantry company and a battery of artillery to take the town over, and we were ordered back to Kasserine where we got our first real sleep in the four days since leaving Constantine. In that time we had been in three actions and won them all, taken over four hundred prisoners and much enemy materiel, knocked out fifteen tanks, and traveled some four hundred miles.

PART TWO

El Guettar

FOREWORD: Part Two, EL GUETTAR, concerns the 601st Tank Destroyer Battalion during its attachment to the First Infantry Division in the push from Feriana through Gafsa and El Guettar to the northeast in March, 1943. This account of tank destroyer combat differs from that included in Part One in that the situation described is a fair example of theoretically correct TD employment. The battalion was employed by the division as a unit under centralized command; the tank destroyers were placed in a position of defense against armored attack, although unduly advanced and exposed to infantry attack; the terrain was ideal for the accomplishment of the primary mission; the battalion reconnaissance was employed to the fullest advantage.

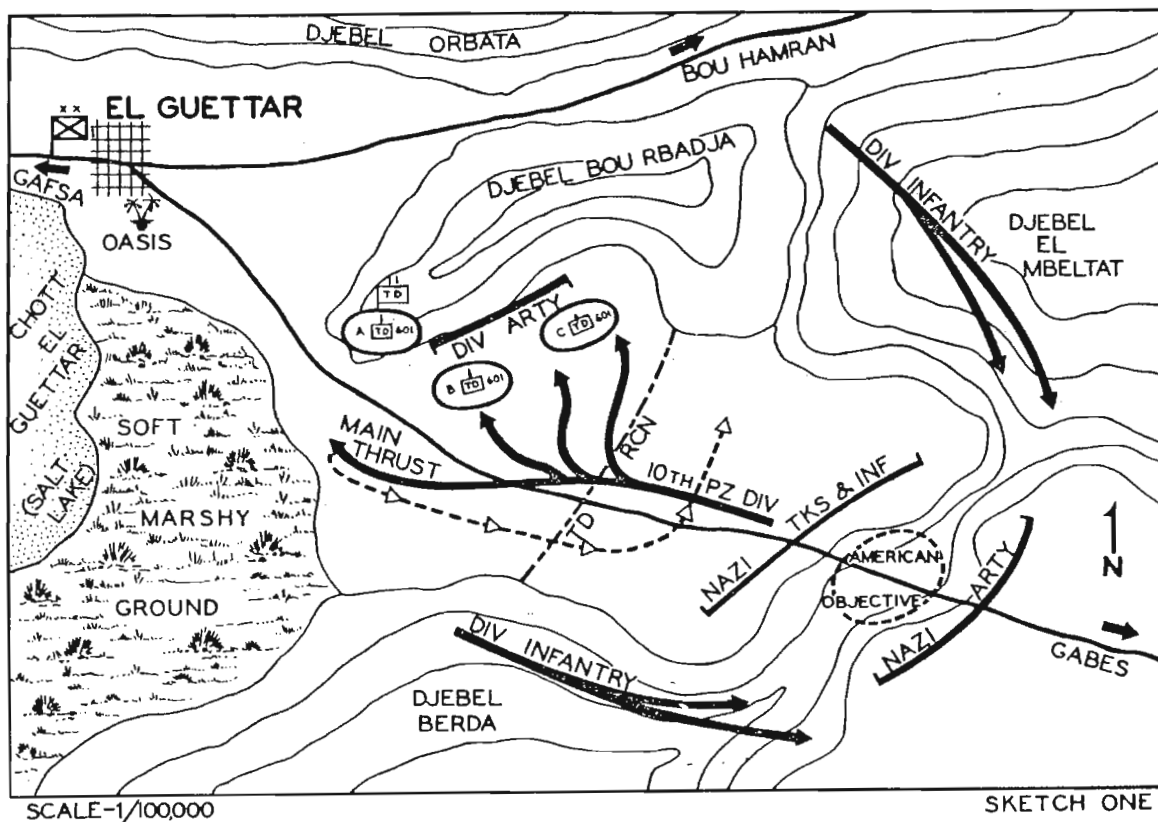
The 601st was the first entire tank destroyer battalion in Tunisia, arriving in mid-December. The action hereinafter described took place on 23 March 1943, when the division met heavy resistance nine miles southeast of El Guettar. The divisional plan called for an attack on the 23rd. The Nazi Tenth Panzer Division got in the first blow, attacking the First Infantry before dawn. The division repulsed the panzer thrust and dislodged the enemy from his strongly held position. General Terry Allen, commanding the First Infantry Division, credited the 601st Tank Destroyer Battalion with the defeat of the panzers and the preservation of the division defenses and supply lines.

EL GUETTAR

By Lt. Col. H. D. Baker,
Commanding, 601st TD Battalion

After taking Gafsa the division used the tank destroyer reconnaissance to keep on the enemy's tail as he retreated east toward El Guettar. The First Ranger Battalion pushed the Italian rear guards out of El Guettar, and the division captured a strong Italian position on Djebel Bou Rbadja, a mountain lying east of the town. Our advance was stopped on the 21st by a strong enemy defensive position between Djebel Berda and Djebel El Mbeltat (Sketch) nine miles southeast of El Guettar.

So far we had met only Italian rear guard forces. Now we contacted tough, well-seasoned Nazi veterans.



EL GUETTAR

Tank destroyer reconnaissance had followed the enemy's retreat southeast toward Gabes past the Djebel Bou Rbadja and into the broad valley beyond. Here they came under heavy fire from the east end of the valley. I called them back in, due to the enemy artillery, the open country, and the excellent natural observation afforded both sides.¹ Thereafter I used unarmored patrols only at night, to reconnoiter the valley against tank attacks. The division position behind Djebel Bou Rbadja was consolidated, and reconnaissance was continued until the night of the 22nd when the division commander issued a verbal attack order.

The attack was timed for the morning of the 23rd. During the night the division artillery was to move up and take positions just east of Djebel Bou Rbadja. The infantry was to execute a pincer movement, moving southeast through the hills that flanked the enemy position. The artillery was emplaced in the valley to enable it to support the enemy advance.

The division commander assigned the 601st TD a double mission.² We were to move up during the night³ and take positions out in front of the artillery and on the south flank of the mountain. From here, we were to protect the artillery against infantry attack. We

(1) FM 18-5, par 187d, "...The tank destroyer battalion commander, in employing portions of his reconnaissance company to execute these missions, must exercise rigid economy."

(2) TC 88, par. 8b. "The command of massed tank destroyers is usually best centralized, in order to secure flexibility and speed of employment."

(3) TC 88, par. 3b, 2. "...movement to firing position so as to intercept hostile tanks, and arriving in advance of the tanks sufficiently to permit proper emplacement and concealment of tank destroyers."

were also to protect the division supply lines back to Gafsa from armored thrusts.⁴ At this time, our G-2 reports indicated that there were perhaps fifteen or twenty enemy tanks in this sector.⁵

The 601st moved into reconnoitered positions (sketch) during the night of the 22nd and prepared for a defensive action.⁶ At this time, the battalion had thirty-one of its original thirty-six heavy destroyers (75-mm. on halftrack) and five light 37-mm. destroyers. Our armament and some personnel had been depleted in previous engagements at Pichon, Ousseltia, Sbeitla, and Kasserine Pass.

Companies "B" and "C" with one reconnaissance platoon, moved into position directly in front of the artillery (see sketch).⁷ Company "A," plus the other reconnaissance platoon, took its position on the west flank of the mountain. By prearranged plan, the two reconnaissance platoons moved out into the valley and by 0100 of the 23rd had established contact with the infantry advance on the right and left flanks. They dug themselves in generally across the valley and established outposts. Their orders were to report any enemy contact, fight a delaying action if necessary, and retire at

(4) TC 88, par. 7c. "When the enemy has armored forces, their employment in counterattack usually is the most serious threat to the success of our attack... Thus massed tank destroyers should be disposed with special reference to possible hostile counterattacks... especially on exposed flanks."

(5) TC 88, par. 4c, 3. "If the hostile armored strength is known reasonably well, massed tank destroyers can be distributed more definitely."

(6) TC 88, par. 7d, 1. "A defensive situation permits thorough preparation and organization of tank destroyer firing positions and routes of access."

(7) TC 88, par. 3d, 6. "...However, if positions are too advanced and exposed the tank destroyer themselves may be destroyed prematurely by hostile infantry and artillery."

daylight to reinforce "A" Company.⁸ To fight the delaying action, they had two heavy destroyers, some light (37-mm.) destroyers, machine guns, and small arms.

The division attack was ready, waiting for daylight before being launched on a full scale.

At this point, the Germans seized the initiative and launched a surprise attack before dawn.

At 0445 the tank destroyer reconnaissance captured a German motorcyclist who was evidently the point of an advance guard moving northwest on the road from Gabes and into our outposts. From the prisoner we learned that the Tenth Panzer Division was attacking at 0500. The panzers had made a forced march from the Gabes area and arrived in the valley at 0430 with orders from Rommel to wipe out the First Infantry. There was just time for TD battalion headquarters to alert the First Infantry Division.⁹

The entire situation had changed for the tank destroyer battalion. Whereas we had expected to repel small tank thrusts, we had taken our positions primarily with the idea of defending the artillery against infantry infiltration. Now, with the Tenth Panzer having anywhere from 100 to 150 tanks, we knew our main action would be against heavy odds of enemy armor.

(8) FM 18-5, par 124c. "In general, counterreconnaissance detachments will often be used to--

- (1) Prevent small hostile patrols from penetrating the zone of action or section assigned.
- (3) Locate and delay the advance of larger detachments.
- (7) Furnish information to the commander of the main body."

(9) TC 88, par. 5f. "An efficient antitank warning service is essential..." The tank warning was passed from the reconnaissance units to battalion headquarters by prearranged radio and telephone messages to all divisional units.

We made no change in our initial positions. The panzer thrust would probably come straight down the valley to our position where "B" and "C" Companies would meet them. The terrain there was rolling and well-fitted for tank destroyer action. On the west end of the mountain "A" Company had a good position. The tanks could not skirt the mountain and sweep through to El Guettar without coming under the concentrated fire of "A" and "B" Companies. The soft ground edging the Chott El Guettar, a salt lake lying south of the town, prevented the armor from skirting farther west and keeping out of range.¹⁰

Shortly after capturing the motorcyclist, the reconnaissance outposts heard the tanks approaching from the southeast. It was still dark, but a late moon aided visibility. The outposts finally discerned an advance guard of sixteen tanks bearing down on their positions, with two companies of infantry interspersed among them. The reconnaissance men held their fire until the tanks were within two hundred yards and then opened up with everything they had. Machine gun fire and 37-mm. cannister cut down the enemy infantry, but no evident damage was inflicted on the tanks which advanced steadily, searching out our armored vehicles with tracer fire.¹¹

(10) TC 88, par. 4c, 1. "In distributing tank destroyer units, due consideration should be given to terrain which is impassable to tanks. However, impassability should be determined conservatively.. The soft ground, in this case, had been tested by American jeeps and light tanks under cover of darkness, and was known to be impassable.

(11) In this action, and in a former action by Company "A," 601st TD, near Ousseltia, German tanks attacking at night fired tracer streams from their MG's. When the tracer hit armor and ricocheted, the machine gun fire was followed by fire from the heavy gun coaxially mounted.

During the afternoon we received word that the division G-2 had intercepted a Nazi radio message ordering another attack at 1600. A second interception set the attack for 1640. We thought that it might be another Nazi trick and that they had meant us to intercept.²¹ However, we prepared to meet the attack should it develop, and it did.

At 1640 to the minute two battalions of German infantry formed some four thousand yards to our front and moved on our positions. Their tanks formed behind them, as if to follow the infantry.²² However, the armor merely milled around and created dust and confusion. The tanks did not advance any farther, staying out of our effective range.

The infantry attacked in extended formation, generally abreast the Gabes road. The men walked upright, moved slowly, and made no attempt at concealment or maneuver. The tank destroyers held their fire and let the infantry come in standing up. Our silence apparently gave them confidence.²³

(21) "The Germans had failed in an attempt to trick us during the lull after 1200. They sent seven men in an American halftrack toward our positions. The vehicle towed a small gun. We held our fire, afraid that it might be an American party that had been cut off and was making a break for it. Within 400 yards of our position, the vehicle halted, and the Germans jumped out and started to set up the towed gun. A tank destroyer fired three rounds, killed five Germans, and burned the halftrack. The other two Germans were captured in a ditch nearby."--Commanding Officer, 601st TD Battalion.

(22) Having failed to crack through with tanks, it is probable that the Nazis hoped to silence the tank destroyers with infantry, then follow through with their armor.

(23) FM 18-5, par. 10c. "...tank destroyers are ill-suited to close combat against strong forces of hostile foot troops."

The defense of the divisional artillery against infantry had been an assigned tank destroyer mission, in this case.

We cut down on them at fifteen hundred yards. It was like mowing hay. The tank destroyers fired rapidly, employing all arms. The heavy-caliber high explosive shells were the most effective. One gun sergeant bracketed rapidly and fired as fast as he could, making 5-mil deflection changes. He dropped high explosive shells at 7-yard intervals across the German lines. Our division artillery also opened up with concentrations from 105- and 155-mm. guns.

The attack broke, and the Nazis fell back behind the ridge at the east end of the valley. They made no further effort to attack in that sector, abandoning their position and falling back toward Gabes. No further action occurred, and our night patrols verified the enemy's withdrawal.

Units of the tank destroyer battalion reported in during the evening and that night incident to reorganization. We found that twenty-one destroyers had been hit and disabled. Eight were repaired and put back into action at once. One 37-mm. gun was destroyed by fire, three M2 halftracks and one halftrack, personnel, M3 were total losses, eight 1/4-ton and one 3/4-ton trucks were destroyed or missing. Personnel casualties were lighter than expected. Fourteen men were listed as killed, despite the comparatively high number of hits on the lightly-armored destroyers.

The ammunition expenditure was large.²⁴ The battalion fired an estimated 2740 rounds of 75-mm. shell of which 1195 were armor-piercing, 1389 were high explosive, and 156 smoke; 170 rounds of

(24) "Ammunition supply was a difficult problem in this action. The battalion dump was located behind Djebel Bou Rbadja. Half-tracks and jeeps carrying ammunition to the advanced companies were exposed to heavy enemy fire as they crossed the open ground."--Commanding Officer, 601st TD Battalion.

Comparison of ammunition fired by 601st at El Guettar, with battalion total ammunition load according to tentative T/O and E 18-25, 27 January 1943.

	601st Expenditure	Tentative T/O
75-mm.	2,740	2,844 (3 in.)
37-mm.	170	600
50-mg.	33,395	95,000
30-mg.	12,050	112,750
45-mg.	3,690	26,320

37-mm. shell and cannister; 33,395 rounds of .50 caliber; 12,050 of .30 caliber; and 3,690 rounds of .45 caliber submachine gun.

To balance the losses and ammunition expenditure, the battalion was credited with a minimum estimate of thirty enemy tanks knocked out. This number was based on destroyed or abandoned tanks left on the field by the enemy. During the battle, one tank destroyer officer counted forty tanks disabled. Enemy tank losses were difficult to estimate, due to their system of battlefield recovery. Enemy tank crew losses ran high, plus an estimated two hundred German infantry casualties caused by tank destroyer fire.

We had destroyed three times our own losses by outmaneuvering and outshooting a superior force. The tank destroyers had given adequate protection to the division artillery and had fulfilled the primary mission of preventing a tank penetration of the divisional defenses and supply lines, performing double duty in a difficult situation.